Matt Koretke

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**The Presidency and the Cuban Missile Crisis**

**Introduction**

The Cold War was the long time standoff between the United States of America and the Soviet Union. Events such as the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and other conflicts throughout the half century standoff between the super powers all had important implications on the entire world, and possibly the end of the world as we knew it. The Cuban Missile Crisis was an incredibly unique event as the two powers came to the brink of nuclear destruction and the two leaders; President John F. Kennedy of the U.S. and the Soviet Union’s Premier Nikita Sergeyevich Khrushchev negotiated and frightened the world as they danced around the issue of national security and superiority in power. Pressures of domestic and international politics, the looming threat of nuclear destruction, and the world watching put these two leaders in the ring for a full fight that came down to a decision. The power of the presidency was challenged in this stressful event as President Kennedy used his roles as figurehead, Commander in Chief, and Chief Diplomat. Through his use of a committee of advisors, using the news, speeches and press conferences, his private contact with Premier Khrushchev, domestic and international pressures, and President Kennedy having the final say in decisions, the President was able to successfully maneuver the Cuban Missile Crisis and avoided a world war and/or nuclear destruction. Not only was President Kennedy under pressure to avoid nuclear holocaust and inevitable conventional warfare on a grand scale, but also as Hanson quotes Patton “‘Americans love a winner and will not tolerate a loser’” which gives the pressure of being an American hero or going down as the worst president in history (2010, 34).

**Committee**

U-2 missions were restricted by the White House after several incidents of the Russians shooting down the spy planes. In order, to avoid further embarrassment to the Russians the spy planes had been restricted from Cuban airspace and most of the Soviet Union according to Frankel (2004). Also, according to Frankel (2004) on October 9, the White House lifted the restraints on the missions over Cuba after being blind for nearly five weeks, and on October 14, a U-2 mission flew over Cuba for twelve minutes and its film is what made the United States aware of the crisis to come. The film showed missile sites being developed in Cuba that experts attested to being nuclear launch sites. The first way that Kennedy used his Presidency in dealing with the crisis was to create a committee to aid him in discussion and deliberation on decision making in the coming days of the crisis. As Khrushchev had secretly placed the missiles in Cuba while speaking against it internationally, Kennedy created his team in a similar fashion. As Frankel described “The team that Kennedy summoned to analyze the situation, therefore, was an informal, even disorderly group of relevant cabinet officers, their top deputies, and a few expert advisers” of which they held meetings ad hoc, and they constantly played out all the possibilities in the crisis (2004, 77). Kennedy called his group the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, or ExCom for short. The purpose of this group was to deliberate every possible scenario and allow Kennedy to talk his way through the best course of action so that he could make a decision as the final say as to how to approach the situation in Cuba and with the Soviet Union. Starting with the naval blockade of Cuba to prevent more missiles from making it there on Soviet ships, Excomm deliberated over every possible scenario and outcome for the coming days of the crisis. Excomm was an important tool to President Kennedy and similar committees are useful to assemble for the Presidency in order to deal with large issues such as this crisis.

**Publicity**

Even before the missiles made it to Cuba or more importantly before the missiles were discovered by the U-2 missions, President Kennedy took a tough stance on the issue. According to Guttieri, Wallace, and Suedfeld the president “in numerous public statements prior to the discovery of the missiles in October, Kennedy took the position that Soviet nuclear weapons would never be tolerated in Cuba” and this shows how publicly he set up the crisis that resulted when Khrushchev and the Soviets ignored Kennedy’s warnings (1995, 606). This is important, because as the voice of the United States President Kennedy issuing such statements, meant that when Soviet missiles were discovered in Cuba, he had no choice but to stand tough on the issue. While standing tough on the issue was necessary publicly, President Kennedy also had to juggle the risk of being too tough with the Soviets which could have caused panic and nuclear war. The instillation of the missiles in Cuba were according to Kahan and Long “disturbing, the Soviet government had ignored President Kennedy’s warning not to install offensive missiles in Cuba, while assuring the U.S. that it had every intention of complying, even going to the extreme of denying that missiles were being installed” which required a strong response by the President to avoid looking weak (1972, 572). To avoid backlashes of this defiance, in other parts of the world and at home, Kennedy had to project a strong image and as Kahan and Long put it:

President Kennedy cogently summed up the administration position in his public announcement: “This secret, swift, and extraordinary buildup of Communist missiles-in violation of Soviet assurances, and in defiance of American hemispheric policy-is a deliberately proactive and unjustified change in the status quo which cannot be accepted by this country if our courage and commitments are ever to be trusted again by either friend or foe” (1972, 572-573).

This shows his strength in sending a message to Khrushchev through the public sphere, but also in assuring the world that America, and more importantly he himself would not back down. Kennedy used public announcements throughout the crisis to send messages across the world that the Americans would not give into the Soviets in terms of missiles, negotiations, and assurance that America would not jeopardize the safety of its Allies. Kennedy rejected the use of nuclear weapons as a preemptive attack, and Kahan and Long show this as “in his talk on October 22, stressing the seriousness of the situation, President Kennedy warned that the U.S. would launch a ‘full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union’ if nuclear missiles were launched from Cuba” and that no matter where the missiles hit in the West, it would be considered as an attack against the United states (1972, 574). President Kennedy used his position as the figurehead of the United States and Commander in Chief to send this bold message of strategy and power to the world and in doing so reassured the American people, the heavily critical Republicans, and the Allies around the world. The messages heard across the world by Khrushchev and his constituents had to be powerful words that made the situation tenser as Kennedy threatened the support of the Soviets with confidence in the military superiority to not strike first, but to counter attack with great force. As part of this nuclear dance, his use of public announcements and addressing the people had to of been one of the most crucial components in the resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

**Communications**

Arguably the most crucial role that President Kennedy took on was his role as Chief Diplomat in his communications with the Soviet Premier Khrushchev both in direct negotiations between the two countries but also in their private communications and letters. This communication is important to President Kennedy’s use of his presidential power and being seen as the leader by the other countries. Even though he is not the General of a military branch he is the Commander in Chief which gives him the respect as a leader to control the military action of the United States. Kennedy and Khrushchev corresponded via letters and as Kahan and Long put it, “During the course of the crisis, once the blockade had been initiated, Khrushchev wrote a letter to Kennedy agreeing to withdraw the missiles from Cuba if Kennedy promised not to invade Cuba at any future date” showing one of their first negotiations in how to end the crisis (1972, 570). While this seems like a great compromise, Kennedy and his constituents in the Excomm were not ready to respond so diplomatically at this point, because Khrushchev had broken his word to not put missiles in Cuba in the first place. According to Kahan and Long (1972) the crisis had then reached a crucial point, in how to respond to this letter from Khrushchev as the missiles were becoming close to operational. Additionally Kahan and Long (1972) point out that the response letter, in which they gave the Soviets an ultimatum of either remove the missiles or the Americans would at the cost of lives from both countries. In addition, Kahan and Long (1972) add that with the ultimatum there was a secret dealing with Robert Kennedy and the Soviet Ambassador Dobryin that on the Presidents behalf, he offered to withdraw the missiles in Turkey after the crisis ended in order to give a concession to Khrushchev. This was strategically done to make President Kennedy look good at ending the crisis, but also to help Khruschev look good after the crisis so that he would still have a role in the Soviet Union and the relationship between him and the Kennedy Administration could continue. These letters between the two leaders, along with the communications and understandings of each other, were crucial in the crisis being averted and in maintaining the credibility of the Kennedy presidency.

**International and Domestic Pressures**

As Commander in Chief and Chief Diplomat of the United States President Kennedy had to maneuver domestic and international pressures throughout the crisis in order to come out on top without disaster. Domestic pressure came in the form of the political arena. As a Democrat Kennedy faced clear political opposition by the Republicans who naturally criticized his every move. Kohen and Long (1972) point to three domestic factors that forced President Kennedy to stand up to the Soviets in the realm of Cuba: “(1) The upcoming congressional elections, (2) the Republican announcements that Cuba would be the dominant issue of the 1962 campaign, and (3) their accusation that the president adhered to a do nothing policy toward Cuba” (p. 583). These factors all point to the political sphere of the Presidency that in spite of the position of doing what’s best for the country, the Presidency typically involves a period of time where decisions require thinking ahead to how it makes one look politically to the American people. Not only was the political pressure on President Kennedy for his future in politics, but the outcome of the crisis would have implications on the makeup of Congress in the coming elections. The main source of international pressure comes from the role the United States plays as the superpower of the western world. Much of the negotiation and the final result contained the removal of the Jupiter missiles in Turkey as part of the way to end the crisis. While this part of the deal was off the books and done so well after the crisis, Bernstein (1980) points to the world equating the missiles in Turkey, with those the Soviets were placing in Cuba. This made it dangerous for President Kennedy to jump on the deal at the risk of international embarrassment while duly being subject to domestic backlash of weakness framed by the Republicans. The other main international reasoning for the negotiations that took place during the crisis was according to Bernstein the question of “Would Western Allies Have Accepted a trade?” (1980, 112). Berstein insists that the concerns of removing the missiles from Turkey with the straight up deal between Khrushchev and Kennedy would have made Kennedy look like he sold out the Allies to protect American interests (1980). At this time, countries all over the world were relying on the help and protection of the United States, so in a hostile region in a time that followed World War II concerns about safety were at an all-time high. Also, Berstein (1980) highlights the concerns of countries in Europe, that giving up the missiles in Turkey leaves them vulnerable, especially in regards to Berlin and the history lesson of appeasing Hitler prior to World War II. This is easy to understand as the Soviets were trying to spread Communism only thirty years after Hitler and the Nazi regime. The world sees Khrushchev going against warnings from an international power and its similarity with power hungry Hitler.

**Final Say**

As leader of the Executive branch President Kennedy held the sole decision power throughout the crisis. He assembled Excomm to deliberate with and help shape his position but at the end of the crisis it was on him to resolve the situation. The destruction of the world or peaceful resolution put President Kennedy in the position to be the villain or the hero. Berstein describes this situation, between President Kennedy and his team of advisors as “the president, listening to their counsel and trying out his own notions, ultimately had the constitutional and actual power of decision. The vigorous disputes over strategy left him reasonably free to choose” (1980, 117). This shows that President Kennedy held all the chips to bet and see the result of the gambles of the crisis and either way he would be held responsible for the outcome. This power is unusual for democracies: to allow at a time where the decisions of one man will affect his whole country and the world around him. Against many opinions to invade Cuba, to run airstrikes to disable missile sites before they were capable, or to do both, Kennedy chose to avoid all due to the concerns of the resulting risks. Kahan and Long wrote: “the president kept U.S. actions tightly under control and tried to avoid decisions which would be likely to push the crisis past the point of no return” proving against heavy advice and other plans of action, the President knew he was the one who needed to carefully maneuver the crisis that was at hand (1972, 575). In a crisis situation like this, President Kennedy proved that as the head of state, commander in chief, and chief diplomat he held the decision power and the repercussions that follow as do all Presidents in such situations.

**Implications of Today**

It has now been just over fifty years since the Cuban Missile Crisis and lessons from the incident are still influencing the president’s and policy makers of today. Situations with Iran, North Korea and China all have lessons that can be applied from the presidency of Kennedy in the way to negotiate and make the right decisions to avoid catastrophe while keeping the safety of the United States and its allies in mind. According to Graham Allison the key lesson to be learned is that unless “the commander in chief has sufficient time and privacy to understand a situation, examine the evidence, explore various options, and reflect before choosing among them, poor decisions are likely” and this really sums up how President Kennedy avoided war with the Soviet Union (2012, 6). This is what it took for President Kennedy to make the decisions in which he did, and that lesson translates best over to the Presidents that have followed since and hopefully those in the future. In Iran there is a similar situation to the missile crisis, that is the option to acquiesce or use airstrikes however as it was in the past these options are still unpopular (Allison 2012). According to Allison (2012) the Kennedy like option with Iran is to have agreed upon constraints on the nuclear activities, to have transparency measures in place to prevent cheating on the constraints and a pledge to attack if the agreement should be violated. In regards to North Korea Allison suggests that the messages from the Cuban missile crisis are not being utilized correctly. That is with North Korea going against President Bush’s warning for sale of nuclear material when they sold a reactor to Syria and the Americans ignoring the incident to talk further with North Korea in the future is not the way to handle a situation like this. Allison suggests that you need “redlines” that would lead to set consequences if crossed and the key is to back it up so that North Korea gets the message (2012). In comparison with the Cuban missile crisis Kennedy used threats of military escalation and by doing things such as raising the national security warning he conveyed to his opponents that he was serious. China is compared by Allison to the Cold War with the Soviet Union, that a set of rules need to be set between the United States and China as superpowers in order to avoid the clash of the countries as the jockey for supremacy. Allison claims that small events and minute crisis are important to shaping the rules and the Cuban missile crisis was one of these events that allowed Kennedy to navigate to bring back the rules by defusing the situation (2012). Overall with each individually dangerous new crisis that President’s continue to face, we need the leader of our country to manage relationships with key foreign leaders, make sound informed decisions, and to do whatever it takes to diffuse a conflict to avoid casualties and escalation of problems in today’s complex world (Allison 2012).

**Conclusion**

Throughout the Cuban Missile Crisis President Kennedy remained in the hot seat as he navigated difficult decision after difficult decision. Kennedy utilized his roles as President of the United States of America with Commander in Chief, Chief Diplomat, and the Head of State. These different roles allowed him to threaten military force, to communicate with both domestic audiences and international audiences along with the main opponent Premier Khrushchev and to be the go to figure to represent the United States and the Allied forces around the World. Kennedy’s tough stance against the action of placing missiles in Cuba and careful maneuvering of negotiation ultimately led to the resolution of the crisis. Professor Ernest R May gets it right as he describes that “Kennedy and Khrushchev both recognized that, once blood had been spilled, it would be very hard to keep any crisis under control” (2010, 5).

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