

# Statecraft as Stagecraft

## *How JFK Managed the Cuban Missile Crisis*

Robert K. Landers

**T**his October marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Cold War's most dangerous confrontation, the Cuban Missile Crisis. It's now clear that the drama held challenges of diplomatic strategy and political calculation far more complex than the military reckoning of what was actually at stake. Indeed, at one point as the crisis unfolded, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara asserted that Moscow's placement of nuclear missiles in Cuba would have no effect, none "at all," on the strategic balance of power with the Soviet Union. But President John F. Kennedy disagreed. "It would have politically changed the balance of power," he commented after the crisis was over. "It would have appeared to, and appearances contribute to reality."

With that observation, as Gore Vidal later asserted in a 1967 essay about the Kennedys, JFK "summed up what might very well have been...his political philosophy." Kennedy was "obsessed" with appearances, Vidal wrote, a man "compulsively given to emphasizing, often with great charm, the division" between how things looked—or could be made to look—and how they really were. Kennedy's intense interest in appearances was only natural, for his very attractive political persona very much depended on certain appearances that were at some variance from reality.

The Kennedy whom Americans came to know when he ran for president in 1960 was an avowed liberal, but one who had been a war hero and—in unspoken contrast with the liberal champion, Adlai Stevenson—gave the impression that he would be suitably tough as president. Relatively young at forty-three, he exemplified good health and vigor (in unspoken contrast with the seventy-year-old incumbent, Dwight Eisenhower). A student of history, he had a Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Profiles in Courage*, to his credit. Movie-star handsome, he had a beautiful, intelligent wife and one child, with another on the way—the apotheosis of the happy American family. And he was, famously, a Catholic.

In the decades after Kennedy's assassination, Americans learned more about who he really was. Far from being healthy and vigorous, he had Addison's disease, severe back pain, and other ailments; only powerful drugs allowed him to simulate

good health. Far from the ideal family man, he was in reality a compulsive womanizer whose tawdry liaisons endangered his presidency. And though he was the superintending *author* of *Profiles in Courage*, he was not the *writer* of it (Ted Sorensen was), as Herbert S. Parmet showed in *Jack*. Even his wartime heroism was not quite as advertised, as Joan and Clay Blair Jr. showed in *The Search for JFK*. Through various errors of his own making, Kennedy himself helped to bring on the collision—the ramming of his nimble little PT boat by a big Japanese destroyer—that subsequently called forth his acts of genuine heroism.

The cultivation of illusions, in other words, was part and parcel of Kennedy's political success. And, as it turned out, his keen awareness of the power of appearances helped him (and the rest of us) get through the Cuban Missile Crisis without a nuclear war—and without seeming to yield to nuclear blackmail. Reading several excellent accounts of those famous thirteen days in the fall of 1962, I was struck by the way illusory appearances serve as a leitmotif in the crisis from its very beginning, when the presence of Soviet missiles "ninety miles from our shore" was discovered, to its end, when JFK emerged a triumphant hero, the embodiment of toughness and cool intelligence under pressure.

The run-up to the missile crisis involved some illusions conjured up, perhaps cynically, for political gain. During the 1960 campaign, Kennedy had charged—falsely—that the Eisenhower administration had allowed a "missile gap" to develop that favored the Soviet Union. In fact, there was a vast missile gap—but it favored the United States, which had four times as many intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) as its rival superpower. Still, the Soviets had plenty of medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs), with a reach of 1,000-plus miles, targeted on Europe, and once some of these were redeployed to Cuba, as journalist-historian Michael Dobbs observes in *One Minute to Midnight*, they were "magically transformed into strategic weapons," able to hit U.S. territory. Even so, the United States remained in an overwhelmingly superior position militarily, more than sufficient to withstand a Soviet first strike and still devastate the Soviet Union—which was Robert McNamara's point.

But if the nuclear missiles in Cuba would add little to the already existing threat posed by ICBMs based in the Soviet Union, their presence surely would loom large in the minds

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John F. Kennedy shakes hands with Nikita Khrushchev, June 3, 1961

of Americans. The appearance, illusory but unavoidable, that the missiles made a significant strategic difference would enhance the Soviet Union's political position in the world and strengthen Cuban leader Fidel Castro's efforts to export communism to other nations in the region—which was Kennedy's point. A month earlier, Kennedy had publicly warned the Soviets that the introduction of "offensive ground-to-ground missiles" in Cuba would raise "the gravest issues." Unbeknownst to him, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev had already ordered placement of the missiles. On October 16, after learning of the missiles and launch sites under construction, Kennedy wished he could step back the rhetoric, musing aloud that he "should have said that we don't care." Yet politically there was no escaping the fact that the missiles *appeared* to make a big difference. Doing nothing in response to Khrushchev's stealthy maneuver was never a realistic option.

Kennedy had contributed to the making of the crisis in other ways. At their June 1961 summit meeting in Vienna, he had given Khrushchev the impression of weakness, confirming a suspicion induced by the failed invasion at Cuba's Bay of Pigs in April. "The Kremlin leader was willing to gamble because he believed, especially after the Vienna summit, that Kennedy did not have the stomach for the ultimate conflict with the Soviet Union," historian Sheldon M. Stern notes in *Averting 'The Final Failure.'* Furthermore, Kennedy had angered the Soviet leader with his determined efforts to get rid of the Castro regime. After the Bay of Pigs disaster, he and his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, "pushed the CIA to use whatever [covert] means necessary—including probably assassination"—to accomplish that objective, historians Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali write in *'One Hell of a Gamble.'* Having publicly welcomed Castro's

Cuba as part of the Soviet bloc, Khrushchev viewed such efforts as "a grave challenge to [his own] personal authority."

Khrushchev made his own errors. In his mind, the missiles in Cuba were not meant to be used, but rather were "defensive," deployed in order to ward off an American invasion and to marginally reduce the Soviet missile gap. He planned to unveil their presence after U.S. congressional elections in November; Kennedy, he thought, would accept it as a *fait accompli*, just as the Kremlin had tolerated, however resentfully, the presence of U.S. nuclear missiles in Turkey. Rashly, Khrushchev assumed that the missiles and sites under construction in Cuba would remain hidden until the planned unveiling (as Soviet military "experts" assured him they would, Sheldon Stern reports). Compounding the mistake, he lacked a plan for what to do if the Americans discovered them first.

Which, of course, is what happened. When the missiles and sites were detected, Kennedy and his advisers viewed Khrushchev's secret move as unprovoked aggression, and were especially angry about the deceit involved. Ironically, Stern suggests, had Khrushchev taken Castro's advice and *openly* deployed the missiles "as a legitimate act of bilateral diplomacy (as the United States had done in Turkey and Italy)," Kennedy would have found the deployment far more difficult to thwart. In the event, Kennedy exposed the secret ploy and announced the blockade ("quarantine") of ships heading for Cuba in a television address to the nation on Monday, October 22.

**A**fter he spoke, Americans felt for the first time that nuclear war was more than just an abstract possibility. I was a junior at Brown that fall, and I recall the quiet dread evident everywhere I went in Providence. The

tension was palpable. On Saturday, October 27, as Michael Dobbs writes, “the hands of the metaphorical Doomsday Clock reached one minute to midnight.” This was the day when Fidel Castro urged Khrushchev to use his nuclear weapons, and when the Kennedy brothers secretly offered to get rid of U.S. missiles in Turkey in exchange for a Soviet withdrawal of the offensive weapons from Cuba. “In between these two events,” Dobbs recounts,

Soviet nuclear warheads were transported closer to Cuban missile sites, a U-2 spy plane was shot down over eastern Cuba, another U-2 strayed over the Soviet Union, a Soviet nuclear-armed submarine was forced to the surface by U.S. Navy depth charges, the Cubans began firing on low-flying U.S. reconnaissance aircraft, the Joint Chiefs of Staff finalized plans for an all-out invasion of Cuba, and the Soviets brought tactical nuclear weapons to within fifteen miles of the U.S. naval base at Guantánamo Bay. Any one of these incidents could have led to a nuclear exchange between the two superpowers.

Kennedy and his advisers strained to discern the intentions, and anticipate the responses, of the other side. Much was murky. But the night before, a diplomatic ray of light from Moscow had suddenly appeared: the White House received an impassioned, four-page letter from Khrushchev, insisting that the missiles were only defensive, meant to deter an invasion of Cuba, and asserting that the “knot” of nuclear war could be untied if the United States would pledge not to invade Cuba. In exchange, he seemed to suggest, the missiles would be removed. It was a startling offer. But was Khrushchev simply trying to stall for time while the missile sites were rushed to completion?

The next morning, Saturday, the Americans learned that, according to U.S. photo interpreters, most of the MRBM sites on Cuba were now fully operational. They had to assume that nuclear warheads for the missiles were available. Soon thereafter, via the news media, came a puzzling report that Khrushchev was sending another letter to Kennedy, this one offering removal of the weapons if the United States withdrew its missiles from Turkey. “Most people will regard this as not an *unreasonable* proposal,” Kennedy told his advisers on the Executive Committee of the National Security Council; in his view, he said, it would be “very difficult to explain why we are going to take hostile military action in Cuba, against these sites...when he’s saying, ‘If you get *yours* out of Turkey, we’ll get *ours* out of Cuba.’”

NATO had put the Jupiter missiles in Turkey to serve as a “nuclear trip wire, linking the security of Turkey and other NATO countries irrevocably to the security of the United States,” Dobbs explains. Though the missiles had been installed only recently, they were already obsolete. Deployed above ground, on unprotected sites, they needed to be fueled for at least fifteen minutes before being fired, and were “easy

targets for a preemptive strike.” A Polaris nuclear submarine, armed with ballistic missiles and stationed off the coast of Turkey, would be “a much more effective deterrent.” The Jupiters’ deficiencies were not news to Khrushchev, according to Fursenko and Naftali. He knew from KGB sources that NATO had little confidence in the missiles’ deterrent value and that they were expected to be replaced before long with Polaris subs. But removal of the Turkish missiles as a result of his now-foundering Cuban missile ploy would give him an accomplishment he could boast about to the world and to the Presidium of the Communist Party’s Central Committee. In Moscow as in the West, illusory appearances sometimes had their advantages.

That same illusion and its political and diplomatic consequences weighed heavily on Kennedy’s advisers. Though the Jupiter missiles were militarily useless, McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy’s national security adviser, warned that removing them now, in the middle of the Cuban crisis, would spark outrage among the NATO allies. Even talking about a trade, he said, would give the appearance “that we were trying to sell our allies for our interests.... It’s irrational and it’s crazy, but it’s a *terribly* powerful fact.” Instead, Bundy suggested—he was the first to do so, despite Robert Kennedy’s later attempt to take credit—that the United States answer Khrushchev’s Friday night letter calling for a no-invasion pledge, and ignore his Saturday proposal.

But Kennedy kept returning to the idea of a Cuba-Turkey trade. Though the quarantine had been effective—the Soviet ships had turned around—it could not get rid of the missiles already in Cuba, he pointed out. That could be accomplished only by negotiation or by military force: either “trade them out [or] go in and take them out.” And if the United States attacked Cuba, and Khrushchev retaliated with an attack on Turkey or Berlin, the NATO allies’ perception of a Cuba-Turkey trade would change dramatically, Kennedy said. “We all know how quickly everybody’s courage goes when the blood starts to flow.... When they start these things and they grab Berlin, everybody’s gonna say, ‘Well, that [Cuba-Turkey trade] was a pretty good proposition.’”

And so, in his written response to Khrushchev, Kennedy followed Bundy’s stratagem—but added a nod to the Cuba-Turkey deal. The letter proposed that once the Soviets had ceased work on the missile bases in Cuba and the weapons had been rendered inoperable under “appropriate United Nations observation and supervision,” then a “permanent” settlement, including a U.S. pledge not to invade Cuba, could be quickly worked out—followed by “a more general arrangement regarding ‘other armaments,’ as proposed in your second letter which you made public.”

The message was directly transmitted to Moscow that night. As the ExComm meeting broke up, Kennedy invited a select group of eight advisers—including McNamara, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and Bundy—into the Oval Office to consider what Robert Kennedy, who was to deliver

the formal letter to Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, should say to him. “The inner ExComm agreed,” Dobbs recounts, “that Bobby should warn the ambassador that time was running out and ‘further American action was unavoidable’ if Khrushchev rejected the terms outlined by the president.” But JFK also wanted his brother to say more to Dobrynin about a Cuba-Turkey trade. Rusk suggested that Bobby say that there could be no *public* deal, but assure Dobrynin *privately* that the president would withdraw the Jupiters soon after the Cuban crisis was resolved. However, if the Soviets made any reference to this assurance in public, it would be null and void. Rusk’s suggestion dissolved the conflict between the illusory appearance of betraying a NATO ally and the reality that the missiles in Turkey were hardly worth the risk of nuclear war. “The secretary of state’s ingenious attempt to square the circle quickly won unanimous support,” Dobbs notes. All present agreed to tell no one about the confidential assurance being offered to Khrushchev. And so Robert Kennedy went off on his mission.

JFK’s quest for a peaceful outcome did not end there. Later that evening, with his other advisers absent, Sheldon Stern writes, Kennedy “worked secretly with Dean Rusk, apparently at the secretary’s suggestion, to cobble together a fall-back plan.” Rusk would arrange it so that if Khrushchev rejected Kennedy’s terms, United Nations Secretary-General U Thant would publicly call for the two superpowers to remove their missiles from Cuba and Turkey. “JFK was prepared to gamble,” Stern says, “that if the United States publicly accepted the allegedly neutral plan, despite the domestic political risks, it would be very difficult, if not irrational, for the Soviets to reject it.”

Khrushchev’s acceptance of Kennedy’s offer the next morning, Sunday, October 28, obviated the need for JFK’s secret back-up plan. Worried that a U.S. invasion was in the offing, the Soviet premier had decided to accept Kennedy’s offer of a no-invasion pledge in return for removal of the Cuba missiles even before he received word of Robert Kennedy’s private assurance on the Turkish missiles. That assurance, Dobbs notes, “clearly sweetened the proposed deal.” “To save the world” and to ensure “Soviet power,” Khrushchev told his colleagues on the Presidium, “we must retreat.”

Behind the scenes, both Khrushchev and Kennedy had been looking for a way out. “They each had the power to blow up the world,” Dobbs writes, “but they were both horrified by the thought of nuclear Armageddon. They were rational, intelligent, decent men separated by an ocean of misunderstanding, fear, and ideological suspicion.” That appraisal goes too far in rehabilitating Khrushchev—a henchman of Stalin’s, after all, complicit in his murderous crimes. Still, humanity remains in Khrushchev’s debt for backing down from his rash scheme.

As for Kennedy, he emerged from the ordeal with his reputation greatly enhanced—and rightly so. Summing up the crisis in *A Thousand Days*, Kennedy’s court historian, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., praised his “combination of toughness

and restraint.” The restraint was as real as the toughness, and just as important. “The president consistently dug in his heels in the face of pressure [from the Joint Chiefs of Staff and other advisers] to bomb the missile sites or invade Cuba,” Stern notes. “He also repeatedly acted to prevent, postpone, or at least question the advisability of potentially provocative measures.” It was a superb performance, as the record of ExComm deliberations makes clear; and one wonders how many of those who followed Kennedy as president could have so coolly combined toughness and restraint with shrewd diplomacy to avoid what he ominously called “the final failure.”

**I**n the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis, challenges remained—including that of managing what today would be called the “spin.” The day after the crisis ended, Kennedy, ever conscious of appearances, told Schlesinger he feared people would wrongly conclude that in dealing with the Russians, sheer toughness sufficed. Yet his enhanced reputation for being tough with the Russians was politically useful, and he intended to use it—and not merely to help him win reelection in 1964. “He hoped that the near-disaster over Cuba would provide him with a second chance to effect the limited détente that Khrushchev had rejected in Vienna,” the historians Naftali and Fursenko write in *One Hell of a Gamble*.

Kennedy worried that his ability to attempt such an overture would be damaged if Americans discovered the secret deal he had made on the Turkish missiles. So when rumors surfaced in influential circles that there had been a Cuba-Turkey trade, he acted to squelch them, according to Naftali and Fursenko, by contriving to blame them on his United Nations ambassador, Adlai Stevenson. Two journalists were preparing an inside account of the missile crisis; one of them, Charles Bartlett, was a close Kennedy friend, and Kennedy authorized Bundy assistant Michael Forrestal to tell him that rumors of the Cuba-Turkey connection were “all Adlai’s fault.” Forrestal did so. Stevenson, he told Bartlett, had wanted the U.S. to pull out the Turkish missiles in exchange for removal of the Cuban missiles—but an angry Kennedy “had opposed the idea and later prevented Khrushchev from getting it.”

The article appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* of December 8, 1962, and quoted an anonymous official as saying that “Adlai wanted a Munich.” This charge—which Kennedy, who had read the article before publication, let stand—was grossly unfair to Stevenson. Kennedy knew it, and he asked Schlesinger to “tell Adlai that I never talked to Charlie or any other reporter about the Cuban crisis, and that this piece does not represent my views.”

Not his views, perhaps, but certainly his interests. The article caused a stir, embarrassed Stevenson, and—in a fitting coda to this game of shadows—it achieved Kennedy’s purpose, quashing rumors of a secret trade while preserving the illusory but useful appearance that in the moment of supreme crisis, the president had simply been *tough*. ■