

## The Cuban Missile Crisis: Reading the Lessons Correctly

RICHARD NED LEBOW

The "lessons" of the Cuban missile crisis occupy a central place both in United States foreign policy and in international relations theory. For policymakers, the crisis confirmed a number of tenets about the utility of power in a nuclear world and the ways in which relations with the Soviet Union should best be managed. Theoreticians have thoroughly examined the case for generalizations about crisis decision-making, bargaining theory, and the role of nuclear weapons in foreign policy. How valid are these lessons?

In recent years, a burgeoning revisionist literature has challenged the prevalent view that the crisis represented a necessary and successful response to a Soviet challenge of vital American interests.<sup>1</sup> John F. Kennedy has been charged with overreacting to the discovery of Soviet missiles in Cuba and even with provoking a confrontation with Moscow for domestic political reasons. Unfortunately, most of this literature is highly polemical and thus of little analytical value. There are some important exceptions, among them an article by James A. Nathan, "The Missile Crisis: His Finest Hour Now," which raises some interesting questions about the policy implications of the crisis.<sup>2</sup> Nathan's article

<sup>1</sup> Among the best critiques are: I.F. Stone, "The Brink," *New York Review of Books*, 14 April 1966; Ronald Steel, "End Game," *New York Review of Books*, 13 March 1969; James A. Nathan, "The Missile Crisis: His Finest Hour Now," *World Politics* 27 (1975):265-81; Barton J. Bernstein, "The Week We Almost Went to War," *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* 32 (1976):13-21; and Barton J. Bernstein, "The Cuban Missile Crisis: Trading the Jupiters in Turkey?" *Political Science Quarterly* 95 (1980): 97-125.

<sup>2</sup> Nathan, "The Missile Crisis," 265-81.

---

RICHARD NED LEBOW is professor of government at Cornell University. His most recent book is *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis*, and he is currently finishing a study of Soviet and American misconceptions of nuclear strategy.

serves as a useful reminder of the superficial and tenuous base on which national leaders sometimes build their most deeply held beliefs about foreign affairs.

The scholarly literature is open to the same kind of challenge as its policy counterpart. The literature has also created dogma or confirmed it when such confirmation may have been unwarranted based on the evidence. Two striking examples of this are the deeply entrenched and related beliefs in the efficacy of deterrence and in the ability of political leaders to steer their states through the shoals of nuclear crisis. Soviet policy before the missiles were discovered has been interpreted as consistent with the former belief, while the success of Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev in resolving the confrontation is often offered in support of the latter. The analysis of how these dogmas became accepted provides insight into the ways in which scholarship can be influenced both by cognitive predispositions and by emotional needs. Since such dogmas have important policy implications, the subject has more than just academic interest.

#### UNITED STATES WARNINGS AND SOVIET RESPONSES

Early in the fall of 1962, President Kennedy responded to reports that the Soviet Union was secretly deploying missiles in Cuba by issuing a series of stern warnings to Moscow. On September 4, he drew a distinction between "offensive" and "defensive" weapons and proclaimed that "the gravest issues" would arise if the United States acquired evidence of "offensive ground-to-ground missiles or of other significant offensive capability either in Cuban hands or under Soviet direction and guidance."<sup>3</sup> On September 7, he asked for and quickly received congressional approval for standby authority to call up 150,000 additional reservists.<sup>4</sup> Less than a week later, on September 13, he used a press conference to commit himself to action should his earlier warning go unheeded.<sup>5</sup>

President Kennedy's warnings were also communicated to Moscow through private channels in order to reinforce their salience and to dissuade the Soviets from interpreting them as mere campaign rhetoric. On September 4, Attorney General Robert Kennedy told Anatolii Dobrynin, the Soviet ambassador in Washington, that his brother would not tolerate the introduction of offensive weapons into Cuba.<sup>6</sup> Two days later, Theodore Sorensen repeated the message to Dobrynin, adding that in his judgment the November congressional elections would in no way inhibit the president's freedom of action abroad.<sup>7</sup> Chester

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of State Bulletin 47 (24 September 1962):450.

<sup>4</sup> New York Times, 8 September 1962.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of State Bulletin 47 (1 October 1962): 481-82.

<sup>6</sup> See Elie Abel, *The Missile Crisis* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1966), 19-10; and Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1969), 24-26.

<sup>7</sup> Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 667-68.

Bo  
be

int  
Ar  
pr  
tro  
ac  
So  
Do

1  
1  
s  
e  
1  
v  
s

t  
res  
fre  
ha  
int  
tali  
Bo  
cot  
For  
cap  
13,  
Bo  
Cu  
]  
rec  
onl  
resj

8,  
9 j  
10  
11  
12  
in th  
did r  
13

Bowles also conveyed Kennedy's resolve to the Soviet ambassador at a meeting between the two men on October 13.<sup>8</sup>

The Soviets gave every indication of sensitivity both to American strategic interests and to the president's political needs. In their September 4 meeting, Ambassador Dobrynin called on Robert Kennedy to relay a confidential promise from Chairman Khrushchev that the Soviet Union would not create any trouble for the United States during the election campaign.<sup>9</sup> Dobrynin read the actual message aloud to Sorensen two days later. To Sorensen's rejoinder that Soviet buildup in Cuba had already aggravated world and domestic tensions, Dobrynin replied

that he would report this conversation in full to the chairman and that he was aware himself of the political and press excitement regarding this matter . . . he repeated several times . . . that they had done nothing new or extraordinary in Cuba—that the events causing all the excitement had been taking place somewhat gradually and quietly over a long period of time—and that he stood by his assurances that all these steps were defensive in nature and did not represent any threat to the security of the United States.<sup>10</sup>

On September 11, the Soviet government issued an official statement in response to Kennedy's warnings. While not specifically promising to abstain from introducing surface-to-surface missiles in Cuba—something that would have appeared an act of abject submission—the statement communicated this intent by denying that there was any need for the Soviet Union to shift its retaliatory weapons to Cuba in order to defend it.<sup>11</sup> Shortly thereafter, Georgi Bolshakov, a Soviet official in Washington used by Khrushchev as his personal courier to the White House, conveyed a message directly from Khrushchev and Foreign Minister Anastas Mikoian. They assured Kennedy that “no missile capable of reaching the United States would be placed in Cuba.”<sup>12</sup> On October 13, Dobrynin reiterated the Soviet position. He denied emphatically to Chester Bowles that his government had any intention of putting such missiles into Cuba.<sup>13</sup>

The Soviet statements, both public and private, appeared to indicate Soviet recognition of the nature and the gravity of the American warning. They can only be interpreted as assurances to Kennedy that Moscow understood and respected American strategic and political interests in Cuba. Graham Allison

<sup>8</sup> Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 50.

<sup>9</sup> Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 24–26.

<sup>10</sup> Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 667–68.

<sup>11</sup> *New York Times*, 12 September 1962.

<sup>12</sup> See Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 554; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1965), 820. Sorensen noted that this message did not reach President Kennedy until after he became aware of the missiles in Cuba on 16 October.

<sup>13</sup> Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 50.

has offered the judgment that both parties acted according to the rules of responsible diplomacy. He wrote:

The United States formulated a policy stating precisely "what strategic transformations we prepared to resist." The Soviet Union acknowledged these vital interests and announced a strategy that entailed no basic conflict. This would also seem to be a model case of communication, or signalling, between the superpowers. By private messages and public statements, the United States committed itself to action should the Soviets cross an unambiguous line (by placing offensive missiles in Cuba). All responses indicated that the Soviets understood the signal and accepted the message.<sup>14</sup>

In retrospect, it is evident that Moscow had decided sometime in June to put missiles in Cuba. Their assurances to the contrary were designed to lull the Kennedy administration into inaction until the missiles were actually deployed. How could Soviet leaders have embarked upon such a course of action when it was almost certain to provoke a major confrontation with the United States whether or not the missiles were discovered before they became operational? More troubling still, why did Moscow continue to proceed with its strategic ruse even after Kennedy's several warnings, stepped-up American surveillance, and well-advertised military preparations clearly indicated that such a confrontation was a near certainty?

#### THE ANALYSTS COME TO KHRUSHCHEV'S RESCUE

A bewildering array of hypotheses has attempted to explain Soviet policy in the Cuban missile crisis. Remarkably, practically all of these explanations start with the premise that Khrushchev behaved rationally. Simple deductive logic suggests four generic explanations for Soviet policy that are congruent with rational decision-making. These assume that the gains justified the risks; that the gains justified the costs; that Khrushchev was deliberately misled by Kennedy; and that Khrushchev was inadvertently misled by Kennedy. Each of these explanations has in fact been advanced by at least one student of the crisis.<sup>15</sup>

#### *Gains that Justify the Risks*

According to this explanation, Khrushchev and the inner circle of Soviet policymakers fully realized the probability that their missiles in Cuba, if discovered,

<sup>14</sup> Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1971), 42. The same metaphor had previously been evoked by Denis Healey, former British defense minister, who exclaimed that Kennedy's handling of the crisis "could be cited as a model in any textbook of diplomacy." Quoted in Henry H. Pachter, *Collision Course: The Cuban Missile Crisis and Coexistence* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1963), 87.

<sup>15</sup> The Kennedy entrapment thesis is advanced in Leslie Dewart, "Goals in Conflict, Cuba, 1962," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 14 (1981):83-105. Space precludes treating his arguments, which, in any case, are the least convincing of all the various explanations of American and Soviet behavior.

wc  
th  
we  
  
ofl  
irr  
Th  
res  
ass  
do

v  
c  
v  
t  
n  
t  
t  
o  
c  
a  
ti

/  
to  
hov  
gen  
fur  
act  
lem  
esta  
arr  
Sov  
Am  
Am  
a n  
L

16  
York  
17  
18  
tion  
State  
lieve  
prop

would provoke a crisis with the United States. They accepted this risk because they expected to reap considerable political and strategic gains if the missiles were not detected until they became operational.

Adam Ulam, who adopted this viewpoint, has conjured up a possible payoff.<sup>16</sup> He argues that Soviet leaders in the spring of 1962 "were seized with an irresistible desire" to solve the most grueling dilemmas of Soviet foreign policy. The introduction of nuclear-tipped missiles into Cuba was a "bold stroke" to resolve all at once the German problem, the China problem, and the difficulties associated with Soviet strategic inferiority. Ulam described how this was to be done:

Once in Cuba, the missiles would become negotiable, their removal conditional upon the United States meeting Soviet conditions on the German peace treaty and other pressing international issues. Appearing in New York in November, Khrushchev would present to the world a dramatic package deal resolving the world's most momentous problems: the German peace treaty, containing an absolute prohibition against nuclear weapons for Bonn; and a similar proposal in reference to the Far East, where the Soviets would demand a nuclear free zone in the Pacific and, under this guise, extract a pledge from China not to manufacture atomic weapons. . . . In addition, part of the price the Americans would pay for the removal of the Soviet missiles in Cuba could well be the withdrawal of their protection from Formosa. This would add an almost irresistible incentive for the Chinese at least to postpone their atomic ambitions.<sup>17</sup>

As Ulam acknowledged, Soviet expectations that Peking could be induced not to manufacture nuclear weapons were not altogether realistic. He speculated, however, that Moscow counted not only on the Formosa concession but on the general "atmosphere" created by their proposal to bring the Chinese around. He further reasoned that Khrushchev "must have thought" the Americans would actually be grateful to him because his gambit would resolve the German problem, remove the threatening prospect of China having nuclear weapons, and establish the political preconditions for a far-reaching Soviet-American disarmament treaty. Admittedly, the entire scheme rested on the ability of the Soviets to install their missiles in Cuba without the missiles being detected by the Americans. This was a reasonable risk, according to Ulam, because even if the Americans found out about the weapons, they probably would not respond with a nuclear strike.<sup>18</sup>

Ulam's explanation of Soviet behavior seems as farfetched as it is imagina-

<sup>16</sup> Adam Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence: The History of Soviet Foreign Policy, 1917-67* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1968), 602-70, 661-71.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 669.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* Ulam argues that "of course there was bound to be a wild wave of excitement and indignation in the United States at the revelation that sixty-four atomic missiles were pointed at the United States from Cuba, but since Khrushchev thought that he would make this revelation, he also believed its effect would immediately be countered by his simultaneous generous and far-reaching proposals, for accession to which he would remove the deadly weapons" (p. 669).

tive. To sustain the thesis that expected gains balanced expected risks, he must postulate a potpourri of incentives that strain the reader's credulity, with regard both to their realism and to the likelihood that Soviet leaders would consider them as a coordinated package. Ulam claims—probably correctly—that “no other explanation . . . accounts for the risks undertaken by the Soviets at that precise moment.”<sup>19</sup> For this very reason one must question the fundamental assumption on which his entire argument rests.

#### *Gains that Justify the Costs*

The Soviet decision to put missiles into Cuba could also be considered rational if Moscow acted in full knowledge or expectation of the consequences. This would mean that the actual outcome of the crisis more or less represented the objective that Moscow sought from the outset. Khrushchev himself advanced this claim. He insisted his government had information that the United States was preparing another assault on Cuba and sent in missiles in order to extract a no-invasion pledge from President Kennedy. “We shipped our weapons to Cuba,” Khrushchev wrote afterwards, “precisely for the prevention of aggression against her! That is why the Soviet government reaffirmed its agreement to the removal of the ballistic rockets from Cuba.”<sup>20</sup> Khrushchev also denied that this aim-represented an ad hoc improvisation. Rather, he alleged, it was a policy that was “from the outset, worked out in the collective leadership.”<sup>21</sup>

At least two Western analysts have accepted Khrushchev's explanation at face value. One, Edward Crankshaw, wrote in his preface to Khrushchev's chapter on the Cuban confrontation:

It was clear at a very early date to most sensitive observers that Khrushchev's motives were more or less precisely as he describes them. In the West too much was made (though not by President Kennedy) of his humiliation in being forced to withdraw his missiles. The Chinese exploited this up to the hilt, and so did Khrushchev's adversaries at home. The fact remains that he achieved what he set out to do, though not quite in the manner he intended: he secured Castro's Cuba from the standing threat of invasion. And he achieved an understanding with President Kennedy, whose assassination was for him a profound and very personal misfortune.<sup>22</sup>

Most students of the crisis have dismissed Khrushchev's description of Soviet motivations as an unconvincing but understandable effort on his part to save

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 669–70.

<sup>20</sup> Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament*, trans. Strobe Talbott (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1974), 509–14. See also excerpts from Khrushchev's speech before the Supreme Soviet, 12 December 1962, as printed in *The Worker*, supplement, 488–505.

<sup>21</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, 498–99.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 488. See also Stuart Chase, “Two Worlds,” *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* 19 (1963): 18–20, who suggests that “it is not impossible” that Soviet willingness to withdraw their missiles from Cuba “was part of a plan, more political than military, to secure a pledge against invasion.”

fac  
tar  
cid  
va  
po  
nit  
Ur  
sil  
ra  
mi  
pa  
tr  
all  
sh  
dc  
th  
pc  
to  
fc  
U  
ha  
se  
dc  
tc  
n  
a  
a  
b  
S  
w  
tc  
B  
S  
L  
L  
F

face in the aftermath of a crushing foreign-policy defeat. Arnold Horelick has tartly observed that "to regard the outcome of the Cuban missile crisis as coinciding in any substantial way with Soviet intentions or interests is to mistake salvage of a shipwreck for brilliant navigation."<sup>23</sup>

Horelick and others have put forward a number of telling arguments in support of their view. First, they point to the obvious discrepancy between the magnitude of the means and the end that Khrushchev allegedly sought.<sup>24</sup> The Soviet Union sent Cuba at least 42 Ilyushin-28 bombers and an equal number of missiles. Soviet construction crews built nine missile sites, six of them for medium-range ballistic missiles and (MRBMs) and three for intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs). The latter were costly fixed installations; each had launch pads for four missiles together with their associated storage, fueling, and control facilities. Critics of Khrushchev's explanation find it difficult to believe that all of this was put into place with the avowed purpose of being abandoned shortly thereafter.

Second, the nature of the weapons systems that were introduced also casts doubt on Khrushchev's testimony.<sup>25</sup> The MRBMs had a range of 1,100 miles; the IRBMs, twice that. Between them, they could target almost any important population center or military installation in the United States. If a pledge not to invade Cuba was truly Khrushchev's goal, a less formidable strategic force—for example, one capable of hitting Miami or even parts of the southeastern United States—would have been preferable in every respect. The Soviets could have attained this capability with a limited number of MRBMs, which were semimobile missiles that were both less vulnerable than IRBMs and easier to deploy without detection.

Finally, there is the question of political cost. Despite Khrushchev's efforts to portray the crisis as something of a Soviet victory, other world leaders—notably communist leaders—concluded otherwise. The Chinese, Albanians, and, of course, the Cubans pointed out the utter meaninglessness of verbal assurances given by capitalist adversaries. They also criticized Khrushchev for both "capitulationism" and "adventurism." As a result of the Cuban fiasco, the Soviet Union lost prestige and influence within the communist camp at a time when Soviet leaders were particularly anxious to reassert their authority in order to counteract centrifugal forces at work within that bloc.

Furthermore, embarrassment abroad diminished Khrushchev's authority at

<sup>23</sup> Arnold L. Horelick, "The Cuban Missile Crisis: An Analysis of Soviet Calculations and Behavior," *World Politics* 16 (1964): 365.

<sup>24</sup> See Horelick, "Cuban Missile Crisis," 365-68. See also Arnold L. Horelick and Myron Rush, *Strategy Power and Soviet Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 125-38; Leon Lipson, "Castro on the Chessboard of the Cold War," in John Plank, ed., *Cuba and the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1967), 178-99; Allison, *Essence of Decision*, 43-45.

<sup>25</sup> This argument was put forward in Horelick, "Cuban Missile Crisis," 369-70; Horelick and Rush, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 128-33; and Allison, *Essence of Decision*, 44.

home. In all likelihood, the missile crisis was one of the contributing causes of his subsequent downfall.<sup>26</sup> Although Khrushchev could not have been expected to foresee with precision all of these costs, it is difficult to believe that he and other members of the Kremlin inner circle could have been completely blind to them. In this regard it is important to remember that Kennedy made every effort to allow Khrushchev to save what face he could — something that could not have been predicted with any degree of confidence in advance. Had Kennedy chosen instead to seek Khrushchev's humiliation, the embarrassment and loss of prestige suffered by the Soviet leader and his country would have been greater still.

The price of Soviet withdrawal of their missiles from Cuba was simply too great for Khrushchev knowingly and willingly to have accepted it in advance. For this reason, some analysts have suggested as Khrushchev's objective a more far-reaching trade-off. Speculation has centered on missile trade involving Cuba and Turkey, an American withdrawal from other foreign military bases threatening to the Soviet Union, and even an American capitulation in Berlin.<sup>27</sup> While these trade-offs would have resulted in a more favorable payoff for the Soviet Union, they are still open to the criticism that the means were either disproportionate or inappropriate to the ends. Leaving the Cuba-Turkey deal aside, there is no evidence that the Russians ever considered any of these exchanges as their objective. Even the Cuba-Turkey trade, which was mooted by Khrushchev and other officials during the crisis, seems more a belated effort to make the best possible bargain in a bad situation.<sup>28</sup>

#### *Was Khrushchev Inadvertently Misled?*

This explanation is far and away the most popular in the literature. Its advocates advance two parallel lines of argument. A few stress the cultural and political differences between the Soviet Union and the United States and the ways in which these differences could have distorted both Khrushchev's perception of American resolve and Kennedy's perception of Soviet willingness to take risks.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> See Michel Tatu, *Power in the Kremlin: From Khrushchev's Decline to Collective Leadership*, trans. Helen Katel (London: Collins, 1969), 273-80; Joseph L. Noguee and Robert H. Donaldson, *Soviet Foreign Policy Since World War II* (Elmsford, N.Y.: Pergamon Press, 1981), 124-27.

<sup>27</sup> The Executive Committee (ExCom), Kennedy's ad hoc crisis management group, considered the possibility that the Soviets sought a trade-off of missile bases or an American concession on Berlin. Tatu, *Power in the Kremlin*, 230-33, advocated the Berlin hypothesis. Pachter, *Collision Course*, 26-27, and Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 47-48, also gave this hypothesis some credence. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 667, rejected the notion of a trade-off, as do: Horelick, "Cuban Missile Crisis," 366-69; Horelick and Rush, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 128-34; Lipson, "Chessboard of the Cold War," 192-93; and Allison, *Essence of Decision*, 43-45.

<sup>28</sup> This case was put forward by Allison, *Essence of Decision*, 44-45. Blema S. Steinberg also argued that Western concessions on Berlin was Khrushchev's goal in "Goals in Conflict: Escalation, Cuba, 1962," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 14 (1981): 83-105.

<sup>29</sup> See Albert Wohlstetter and Roberta Wohlstetter, *Controlling the Risks in Cuba*, Adelphi

But  
ca  
  
de  
th  
Th  
cc  
re  
  
th  
ar  
A  
liq  
ui  
ch  
K  
be  
  
K  
ki  
G  
o

T  
n  
e  
e  
  
r  
  
-  
F  
V  
7  
  
4  
/



But more analysts argue that Kennedy's own behavior contributed to or even caused mistaken Soviet perceptions.<sup>30</sup>

Such efforts to explain Khrushchev's miscalculation begin with attempting to deny the credibility of Kennedy's several warnings. They do this by analyzing the political context in which Khrushchev would have assessed their meaning. Three aspects of this situation have been singled out as responsible for encouraging Khrushchev to doubt American resolve: Kennedy's personality; his record in office; and the peculiar characteristics of American electoral politics.

Americans display an extraordinary interest in the personal characteristics of their leaders. This seems attributable in part to their belief that the personality and character of the president have a decisive influence on national policy. Americans naturally assume that others view their political system in a similar light. For a number of American analysts, therefore, a natural starting point for understanding the events that led to the crisis is examining the personality and character of John F. Kennedy. What kind of impression had he made upon Khrushchev? In what ways did Khrushchev's judgment of him influence Soviet behavior?

There is a surprising consensus among American students of the crisis that Khrushchev underestimated Kennedy and that he believed the president was the kind of man who would shy away from hard decisions. According to Alexander George and Richard Smoke, among the most recent authors to echo this point of view:

It is often remarked that Khrushchev viewed Kennedy as weak, inexperienced, and irresolute—a judgment seemingly derived from, or fortified by, the President's comparative youth, his handling of the Bay of Pigs fiasco, and his performance in Vienna in June 1961. Nearly everyone who has examined the Cuban missile crisis argues that the Soviets were operating on an incorrect image of their opponent and were genuinely surprised when Kennedy reacted as firmly as he did. Clearly, this misestimate of their opponent could only strengthen their belief that the missile deployment would not entail excessive risks.<sup>31</sup>

The gravamina laid before Kennedy are his youth, performance at the Vienna meeting with Khrushchev, and the fiasco of the Bay of Pigs. Just what kind of evidence is there in support of the contention that these considerations influenced Khrushchev's assessment of Kennedy?

With respect to Kennedy's age, the contention rests with the second-hand report of an American visitor to Moscow to whom Khrushchev is alleged to

Paper, no. 17 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1965): 21-21, and Roberta Wohlstetter, "Cuba and Pearl Harbor: Hindsight and Foresight," *Foreign Affairs* 43 (1965): 691-707. See also Horelick, "Cuban Missile Crisis," 382.

<sup>30</sup> See Horelick, "Cuban Missile Crisis," 380-82; Horelick and Rush, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 142-43; Allison, *Essence of Decision*, 231-35; Alexander George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press), 1974.

<sup>31</sup> George and Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy*, 465.

have confessed that he was troubled by Kennedy's youth. Elie Abel has cited this encounter and inferred from it that Khrushchev doubted Kennedy's resolve.<sup>32</sup> Abel offered no justification for his conclusion but presumably might argue that Khrushchev, a relatively unsophisticated man of peasant stock, found it difficult to believe that someone young enough to be his son could stand up to him in a test of will.

There is another hypothesis to consider. If Kennedy's age bothered Khrushchev, it may have been for the opposite reason. Rightly or wrongly, the young are notorious for their rashness and willingness to take risks that their elders might abjure. Khrushchev might have viewed a young president as less predictable, less compromising, and overly concerned with proving his virility and making a reputation for himself.<sup>33</sup> Charles de Gaulle levelled such a charge at Kennedy. While officially supporting the president during the crisis, the French leader hinted that immaturity had led him to overreact to the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba.<sup>34</sup> Khrushchev himself seemed concerned that Kennedy would underestimate him because of his advanced age. Arthur Schlesinger reported that the Soviet leader confided to Kennedy over lunch in Vienna that "he envied the President his youth . . . if he were as young, he would be devoting even more energy to the cause but at the age of sixty-seven he was still not renouncing the competition."<sup>35</sup> This comment, Schlesinger noted, was made at a relatively unguarded moment during an otherwise tense summit meeting when the Soviet leader was "rambling on." As such, the comment seems at least as convincing a revelation of Khrushchev's feelings as the report that Abel cited, a report moreover, that equally supports this interpretation.

As for the Vienna meeting, the story that Khrushchev took Kennedy's measure and found him wanting originated with James Reston of the *New York Times*. Reston had the opportunity to observe Kennedy ten minutes after his final session with Khrushchev. Three and a half years later, he described his recollection of this encounter.

He [the president] came into a dim room in the American embassy shaken and angry. He had tried, as always, to be calm and rational with Khrushchev, to get him to define what the Soviet Union would and would not do, and Khrushchev had bullied him and threatened him with war over Berlin.

We will have to know much more about that confrontation between Kennedy and

<sup>32</sup> Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 37. Unfortunately, Abel did not identify the source. James Reston, admittedly on the basis of no evidence, also speculated that Khrushchev might have been influenced by Kennedy's age. See *New York Times Magazine*, 15 November 1964. George and Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy*, 464, repeated Reston's charge.

<sup>33</sup> See Dispatch, Ambassador Charles Bohlen to Secretary of State, No. 1970, 27 October 1962, VP Security File: Cuba, Folder VI, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas. Quoted in Bernstein, "Cuban Missile Crisis," 114.

<sup>34</sup> See Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 362.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

tion  
an  
his  
on  
tio  
spe  
Sai  
ing  
ha  
Kh  
the  
car  
wa  
lik  
tal  
der  
Kh

3  
3  
3  
Ox  
Co.  
off  
cha  
on  
of  
Co.  
Da  
88;  
3  
4

Khrushchev, one now deprived of his life and the other of power, before we can be sure, but Kennedy said just enough in that room in the embassy to convince me of the following:

Khrushchev had studied the events of the Bay of Pigs; he would have understood if Kennedy had left [Fidel] Castro alone or destroyed him; but when Kennedy was rash enough to strike at Cuba but not bold enough to finish the job, Khrushchev decided that he was dealing with an inexperienced young leader who could be intimidated and blackmailed. The communist decision to put offensive missiles into Cuba was the final gamble of this assumption.<sup>36</sup>

Clearly, Reston was careful to describe his analysis as unconfirmed speculation. Abel and some others, however, have seized upon it as if it were gospel and cited it as evidence in support of their contention that Khrushchev doubted his resolve.<sup>37</sup> Once again, Abel's judgment seems questionable.

Reston's account of the Vienna summit is the only one that suggests weakness on Kennedy's part. As Robin Edmonds has observed, all the eyewitness descriptions of the actual conversations between the two leaders indicate only plain speaking with neither man giving any ground.<sup>38</sup> Schlesinger, Sorensen, and Salinger all provide rather full accounts of the summit. According to Schlesinger, the conversations the first morning were "civil but tough. . . . Khrushchev had not given way before Kennedy's reasonableness, nor Kennedy before Khrushchev's intransigence."<sup>39</sup> On the second day, the more confrontational of the two, Kennedy was impressed by Khrushchev's vitality, debating skill, and candor but dismayed by his dogmatic approach. Schlesinger reported that afterwards the president asked Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson if it was always like this. Thompson replied: "Par for the course."<sup>40</sup>

Sorensen's account of the summit is similar. He confirmed that the grimmest talks concerned Germany and Berlin. Kennedy told journalists of Khrushchev's demands and of his own determination not to give in.<sup>41</sup> According to Sorensen, Khrushchev told reporters at the time that Kennedy was tough, especially on the

<sup>36</sup> *New York Times Magazine*, 15 November 1964.

<sup>37</sup> Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 37; George and Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy*, 465.

<sup>38</sup> Robin Edmonds, *Soviet Foreign Policy, 1962-1973: The Paradox of Soviet Power* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), 24-25. The Reston-Abel thesis is also questioned by Pachter, *Collision Course*, 64. He argued that Khrushchev would not have conducted his subsequent offensive in Berlin so cautiously if he had underestimated Kennedy at Vienna. Roger Hilsman challenged the thesis as well, arguing that "it seems more likely that the Soviet decision depended on more than one man's estimate of another, and that the cause of their failure to foresee the level of the American reaction runs much deeper." See Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1967), 191-92. For first-hand accounts of the Vienna meeting, see Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 543-50; Pierre Salinger, *With Kennedy* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1966), 175-88; Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, 491-98.

<sup>39</sup> Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 361.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 365.

<sup>41</sup> See Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 549.

question of Berlin. Khrushchev volunteered that "he liked the President personally, his frankness, and his sense of humor—but Eisenhower had been more reasonable . . . and, until the U-2 incident, easier to get along with."<sup>42</sup>

The objection can be raised that the memoirs of the Kennedy inner circle, written after both the missile crisis and the assassination, may not be unbiased recollections. Khrushchev himself, however, confirmed their accounts in his own memoirs. Not only do his descriptions of the Vienna talks mesh nicely with the portrayals of Schlesinger, Sorensen, and Salinger, but so do his recollections of Kennedy's performance. He was impressed by Kennedy's preparation and grasp of international issues and above all by his frankness. In this regard, he found Kennedy a refreshing change from Dwight D. Eisenhower, even though their policy positions, especially on Germany and Berlin, were barely distinguishable. Kennedy, he reported, wanted him to agree to respect the political status quo in the Third World, something Khrushchev insisted flew in the face of reality and was in any case unacceptable to a good communist. Kennedy nevertheless pressed his case with verve. "This was to his credit," Khrushchev confided, "and he rose in my estimation at once. . . . He was, so to speak, both my partner and my adversary."<sup>43</sup>

Kennedy intimates reported that the president's somber state of mind was the result of his concern that the deadlock in Vienna meant a "cold winter" in Berlin and elsewhere. Be that as it may, they and Khrushchev are still in complete agreement that Kennedy, although taken aback by Khrushchev's vehemence, parried the chairman's verbal thrusts with skill and conviction and conveyed the impression of being a firm but thoughtful leader.

The third and most common charge raised against Kennedy is that his refusal to commit American troops to the faltering Bay of Pigs invasion undermined his credibility in Khrushchev's eyes. Henry H. Pachter asserted that this "compromised America's good-will abroad and . . . discredited her will power." As the seriousness of Kennedy's purpose became suspect, "the credibility of the American deterrent was jeopardized."<sup>44</sup> Abel drew an odious analogy between Cuba and Hungary: "Now Kennedy had not lifted a finger to crush Castro, whose regime must have been every bit as repugnant to Kennedy as the [Imre] Nagy regime had been repugnant to Khrushchev. Khrushchev may have reflected: the Americans certainly possess overwhelming power—but they have forgotten how a great power must behave."<sup>45</sup> Horelick reached the same conclusion:

The ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion attempt of April 1961, while it may have demonstrated the depths of US hostility toward Castro, may also have suggested to Soviet leaders that US reluctance to engage its own forces directly in military action against

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 550.

<sup>43</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, 491–98.

<sup>44</sup> Pachter, *Collision Course*, 83–84.

<sup>45</sup> Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 36.

Cuba was so great that even the emplacement of Soviet strategic weapons on the island would be tolerated, or at least resisted by means short of the direct use of US armed forces. At the same time, the fact that the United States had attempted, even though ineffectually, . . . to overthrow Castro, both increased Castro's desire for Soviet military assistance and made such assistance seem legitimate to many third countries.<sup>46</sup>

This argument does have a certain appeal. However, it is only one of several possible interpretations of the impact of the Bay of Pigs fiasco on Kennedy's resolve and Khrushchev's perception of it. It is not necessarily the most convincing one. There is at least as much reason to believe the Bay of Pigs should have enhanced the Soviets' perception of Kennedy's resolve to face any challenge emanating from Cuba in the future.

The failure at the Bay of Pigs, for which Kennedy took full personal responsibility, had made Cuba, as Sorensen wrote, "the political Achilles' heel" of the administration.<sup>47</sup> Public opinion polls revealed considerable frustration and even anger at Castro's durability and the concomitant growth of Soviet influence in the Caribbean. Critics of Kennedy assailed his apparent inability to deal with Castro and, sensing a good issue, the Republican Senatorial and House Campaign Committees announced that Cuba would be "the dominant issue of the 1962 campaign."<sup>48</sup> Kennedy was, of course, aware of the political dangers posed by Cuba and for this reason sought to counter the charges of Senator Kenneth Keating and others that Soviet surface-to-surface missiles had been introduced on the island. Kennedy labelled these accusations irresponsible, but promised at his news conference of August 29 "to watch what happens in Cuba with the closest attention."<sup>49</sup>

By all accounts, the political dimension of Cuba stiffened Kennedy's resolve both before and after the discovery of the missiles. Sorensen commented: "Once he had taken his stand on this issue, his public pledge to act thereafter was irrevocable."<sup>50</sup> Robert Kennedy offered a revealing vignette to this effect. During the blockade, he reported, his brother asked him why they were risking war with the Soviet Union. "I just don't think there was any choice," he replied, "and not only that, if you hadn't you would have been impeached." "That's what I think," the president agreed, "I would have been impeached."<sup>51</sup>

The real question here is not Kennedy's resolve but the extent to which the Soviet leadership was sensitive to the president's domestic political problem and how it was almost certain to stiffen his resolve on any question having to do

<sup>46</sup> Horelick, "Cuban Missile Crisis," 383. A number of authors advance their own variations on this hypothesis. See Horelick and Rush, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 142-43; Allison, *Essence of Decision*, 231; and George and Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy*, 465-67.

<sup>47</sup> Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 670.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 674.

<sup>51</sup> Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 67.

with Cuba. Alexander L. George volunteered the judgment that "the kind of personal and political humiliation that the covert deployment of missiles would inflict upon the president could hardly have escaped Khrushchev's attention altogether when he planned and carried it out."<sup>52</sup> Not everyone concurs.

Roberta Wohlstetter speculated that Khrushchev "may not have been aware that the alarm expressed by the Republicans was something President Kennedy could not ignore."<sup>53</sup> Arnold Horelick suggested that Soviet leaders might have believed that "the Administration would be reluctant to expose the Soviet Union publicly on the eve of national elections out of concern for the unfavorable domestic political repercussions that might be expected if the elections were held with the missiles still in Cuba and no Soviet commitment to withdraw them."<sup>54</sup> Graham Allison straddled the issue. He admitted that Kennedy's public statements should have indicated "a strong personal commitment that he would not likely be inclined, or able, to escape." But he quickly added an assertion that a rational Soviet official could have drawn the opposite conclusion:

His argument could have been that the Kennedy administration was reacting to the provocations of domestic critics, that these statements were aimed at Republican opponents rather than at the Soviet Union, that American campaigns included numerous promises and statements that had no substance, and thus after the election, the administration would find some way to accommodate a Soviet fait accompli.<sup>55</sup>

These arguments ignore the fact that Kennedy reiterated and clarified his commitment through private channels, which he was hardly likely to have done if his real audience had been the American electorate. Nor would campaign oratory have been backed up by extensive naval and aerial reconnaissance, something the Cubans and Russians knew about. Above all, Kennedy was highly specific about the nature of his commitment. He almost certainly would have avoided specifics in a campaign promise that he had no intention of honoring. Instead, he took great care to state unequivocally and in public that he would not tolerate missiles capable of striking at the United States. It remains very difficult to believe that Ambassador Dobrynin and Moscow's experts on the United States were so ignorant and misinformed about American politics as to dismiss Kennedy's pledge as a meaningless campaign promise. It seems more likely that their advice was not solicited or that it was ignored.

<sup>52</sup> Alexander L. George, "The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962," in Alexander L. George, David Hall, and William E. Simons, *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy: Laos, Cuba, Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1971), 90.

<sup>53</sup> Roberta Wohlstetter, "Cuba and Pearl Harbor," 701. This argument is also made in Klaus Knorr, "Failures in National Intelligence Estimates: The Case of the Cuban Missiles," *World Politics* 16 (1964): 455-67.

<sup>54</sup> Horelick, "Cuban Missile Crisis," 382. Of course, the opposite and probably more realistic conclusion might also have been drawn—that a full-blown international crisis on the eve of a national election was bound to assist the president at the polls, thus giving him a political incentive to expose the missiles.

<sup>55</sup> Allison, *Essence of Decision*, 235-37.

Judging from his memoirs, Khrushchev appeared to have had a highly sophisticated understanding of American politics. While denying that elections made any real difference in policy, he acknowledged that public opinion is critical to their outcome. Concerning the 1960 election, Khrushchev reported that he knew perfectly well that any endorsement from the Soviet Union would serve as a disadvantage for a candidate. This fact did not stop the Americans from trying to use the Soviets to affect the election's outcome. He told of being asked by the White House to release U-2 pilot Gary Francis Powers just before election day. Khrushchev expressed his opinion on this to the USSR Central Committee:

The United States Government has asked us to release Powers. Now is not the time to do it because the two presidential candidates are both trying to cash in on an improvement in relations. If we release Powers now it will be to Richard M. Nixon's advantage. Judging from the press, I think the two candidates are at a stalemate. If we give the slightest boost to Nixon it will be interpreted as an expression of our willingness to see him in the White House. This would be a mistake . . . Therefore, let's hold off on taking the final step of releasing Powers.<sup>56</sup>

This is hardly the argument of a man who would have been unaware in an election year, as Roberta Wohlstetter claimed Khrushchev was, "that the alarm expressed by the Republicans (about Cuba) was something President Kennedy could not ignore."<sup>57</sup>

Perhaps Khrushchev's most telling revelation in this regard is that Henry Cabot Lodge sought him out in Moscow during the 1960 campaign to relay assurances the U.S.-Soviet relations would not suffer if Nixon was elected:

He said Nixon was not really the sort of man he deliberately appeared to be at election rallies. "Mr. Khrushchev," said Lodge, "don't pay any attention to the campaign speeches. Remember, they're just political statements. Once Mr. Nixon is in the White House I'm sure—I'm absolutely certain—he'll take a position of preserving and perhaps even improving our relations."<sup>58</sup>

Khrushchev wrote that he was not convinced, and that the candidate's speeches did in fact reflect a "substantial difference in the shading of their political characters."<sup>59</sup> Khrushchev's obvious concern for the differences between the candidates as revealed by their speeches casts doubt on the hypothesis that he would have dismissed Kennedy's highly specific warnings as mere political rhetoric. If he refused to interpret Nixon's speeches in this light—even after being asked to do so by an emissary from the candidate—why would he do this with Kennedy's

<sup>56</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, 487-90. Khrushchev later told Kennedy that the Soviet Union had voted for him "by waiting until after the election to return the pilots." Kennedy laughed and said, "You're right." *Ibid.*, 491.

<sup>57</sup> Robert Wohlstetter, "Cuba and Pearl Harbor."

<sup>58</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, 489-90.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 488-89.

statements when all the private communications he received from the president's emissaries emphasized the seriousness of his intent?

There is a further point to consider about the Bay of Pigs. The assumption of some analysts is that because Kennedy "faltered" once, he encouraged Khrushchev to believe that he would do so again. This is very simplistic psychology. One need have no knowledge of American politics, only of human nature, to realize that people who undergo one humiliation generally do their best to avoid a repetition of that experience. They are sometimes driven to the point of overreaction to guard against it. Some of the analysts who believe that the Bay of Pigs damaged Kennedy's credibility use this same argument in a different context—to explain the Soviet strategic buildup in the 1960s and 1970s. They reason that, having been humiliated in the missile crisis, the Soviets acquired a potent strategic arsenal in order to ensure that they would never have to back down again out of weakness. Accordingly, if this principle holds true for one superpower it should be equally applicable to the other.

There is also no reason to believe that Soviet leaders should have been any less sensitive than American leaders to the implications of a bruised ego. Russian history in the twentieth century might even have been expected to make them particularly aware of the problem. All Russian schoolchildren learn that World War I began because their country mobilized instead of acquiescing in Austria-Hungary's destruction of Serbia. Russia did so because five years before it had been humiliated by Austria-Hungary in the Bosnian annexation crisis. To suffer a second such defeat in the Balkans, Russian leaders reasoned, would not only risk revolution at home but would be tantamount to renouncing their empire's status as a great power. Why should American leaders have felt any less indignant about the prospect of another humiliation in Cuba?

The analysis to this point has attempted to show that Kennedy's youth, the Vienna summit, and the Bay of Pigs cannot convincingly be invoked to explain Khrushchev's miscalculation. There exists no real evidence to support the contention that these factors led Khrushchev to question Kennedy's resolve. Moreover, arguments to the reverse effect—that these considerations should have enhanced Soviet respect for Kennedy's resolve—are equally if not more compelling on the face of their logic. The other set of possible explanations for Soviet miscalculation, those based on the distorting effects of political and cultural differences, have not been developed into full-fledged arguments by the authors who incline towards them. With one exception, they have been mooted in passing without further elaboration.<sup>60</sup> The exception is the hypothesis that the

<sup>60</sup> Knorr, "Failures in National Intelligence Estimates," 464–65, and Albert and Roberta Wohlstetter, *Controlling the Risks*, 21–22, speculate that the Soviets might not have been able to understand the strong domestic pressures on Kennedy to act. Wohlstetter, "Cuba and Pearl Harbor," tries to argue that Kennedy's warnings were perceived by the Russians as ambiguous, as does Allison, *Essence of Decision*, 234–35. Wohlstetter, "Cuba and Pearl Harbor," 21, also suggests that since Khrushchev had issued and then retracted ultimatums on Berlin, he expected that Kennedy could do the same with regard to Cuba. Bernstein, "Cuban Missile Crisis," 114, cites an



Soviet failure to comprehend the democratic process encouraged them to interpret Kennedy's several warnings as mere campaign promises.

The marginal appeal to American analysts of cultural and political explanations for Soviet miscalculation is both striking and significant. It almost certainly reflects the American predilection, already noted, to explain policy decisions in terms of the personalities involved. However, the avowed goals of the analysts are to put themselves in Khrushchev's shoes and to see the world through his eyes. Is there any reason to believe that Khrushchev and other Soviet leaders would also have been so inclined to emphasize the role of personality in foreign policy?

Marxist theory would suggest not, since it minimizes the role of the individual in history and stresses instead the decisive influence of class. Class differences, not personal idiosyncracies or free will, are said to determine political differences among policymakers. Leaders from the same class background can be expected to behave in more or less the same way. To the extent that the world views of Khrushchev and his colleagues were conditioned by Marxism, they would have analyzed foreign policy—including the question of an adversary's resolve—from quite different perspectives than their American counterparts.

Khrushchev gave every indication of having such a Marxist orientation. Twice in his chapter on the Vienna summit he noted with apparent amusement the tendency of the bourgeois press "to play up personalities" and to explain foreign policy in terms of them.<sup>61</sup> Too much, of course, can be made of the operational distinctions between the Marxist and liberal analysis of foreign policy formulation. Khrushchev was not so much an ideologue to ignore the differences among American leaders, nor are Western analysts altogether insensitive to the influence of impersonal economic and social forces on a leader's policies. But it would be fatuous to deny that these different perspectives do exist and have affected the ways Soviet and American policymakers view the world. By attempting to explain Soviet miscalculations in Cuba almost entirely in terms of their judgment of John Kennedy's character, many American analysts reveal a certain cognitive innocence. They can fairly be charged with projecting their own cultural bias onto the Soviets and of interpreting Soviet policy in terms of it.

Attention to the impression that Kennedy as an individual made on Khrushchev appears to derive from another source, one that has more disturbing implications. James Reston and Elie Abel, the two commentators primarily responsible for focusing analytical attention on Kennedy's youth, his performance in Vienna, and his handling of the Bay of Pigs operation, did not conceive this emphasis on their own. They were put on this track by Kennedy himself. At a book and author lunch, Abel recounted the story of visiting the president in

---

observation by de Gaulle that the United States, never having lived with direct threats to its security, overreacted to the Soviet placement of missiles in Cuba. The implicit argument here is that Khrushchev, as a European, failed to realize American sensitivity on this point.

<sup>61</sup> Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, 489-90.

September 1961, shortly after the Bay of Pigs and the construction of the Berlin Wall. He told Kennedy of his interest in writing a book about the president's first year in office. "Who would want to read about disasters?" Kennedy asked in a despondent tone of voice. He confessed to Abel his fear that in light of these two debacles Khrushchev would think him a "pushover."<sup>62</sup> Kennedy had voiced the same concern to James Wechsler of the *New York Post* in a lengthy conversation during the Berlin crisis. What worried Kennedy, Wechsler reported, "was that Khrushchev might interpret his reluctance to wage nuclear war as a symptom of an American loss of nerve." The time might come, Kennedy speculated, when he would have to run the supreme risk to convince Khrushchev that conciliation did not mean humiliation. "If Khrushchev wants to rub my nose in the dirt," he confided, "it's all over."<sup>63</sup>

Kennedy's concern for his credibility dominated his dealings with Khrushchev as well as those of his Executive Committee (Ex Com). Sorensen reports that the first theory of the Ex Com to explain why Khrushchev put missiles into Cuba was that it was to test American will:

Khrushchev believed that the American people were too timid to risk nuclear war and too concerned with legalisms to justify any distinction between our overseas missile bases and his—that once we were actually confronted with the missiles we would do nothing but protest—that we would thereby appear weak and irresolute to the world, causing our allies to doubt our word and to seek accommodations with the Soviets, and permitting increased communist sway in Latin America in particular.<sup>64</sup>

Kennedy himself told the American people in his television address that the missiles in Cuba represented a challenge that had to be answered "if our courage and commitments are ever to be trusted again by friend or foe."<sup>65</sup> Barton Bernstein, who has studied the most recently declassified materials on the crisis, has confirmed that for most of Kennedy's advisers the "courage and commitment" thesis remained the most convincing explanation of Soviet behavior.<sup>66</sup>

The Kennedy administration's postmortem of the crisis strengthened their view that Khrushchev had acted so brazenly because he had doubted American resolve. Arthur Schlesinger wrote:

In a general sense the decision obviously represented the supreme probe of American intentions. No doubt a "total victory" faction in Moscow had long been denouncing the government's "no win" policy and arguing that the Soviet Union could safely use the utmost nuclear pressure against the United States because the Americans were too rich or too soft or liberal to fight.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>62</sup> *New York Herald-Tribune*, 16 March 1966; Stone, "The Brink."

<sup>63</sup> Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 391.

<sup>64</sup> Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 676.

<sup>65</sup> *U.S. Department of State Bulletin* 47 (12 November 1962):715-20.

<sup>66</sup> Bernstein, "The Week We Almost Went to War," 16, citing Sorensen memoranda of the Executive Committee deliberations.

<sup>67</sup> Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 796.

Theodore Sorensen reached the same conclusion—that the missile crisis was a test of the premise that the United States lacked the will to risk all-out war in defense of its vital interests. That premise having been proven wrong, “he [Khrushchev] was less likely to underestimate our will again.”<sup>68</sup> Kennedy had stood firm, his courage had been vindicated, and the danger of war arising from insufficient Soviet respect for American resolve had been reduced. “Nuclear blackmail,” Sorensen concluded, “was no longer an effective weapon in Berlin or anywhere else.”<sup>69</sup>

However, the concern of Kennedy and his advisers for American credibility strikes the present author as extremely exaggerated. Here were the leaders of the world’s most powerful nation, a nation that had faced down the Chinese in Korea and the Soviets in Berlin and was spending huge sums on a new generation of strategic weapons, fearful that their adversary had no respect for their resolve. The ostensible causes for their concern was Kennedy’s failure at the Bay of Pigs and his acceptance of the Berlin Wall. But some members of the administration traced the problem even further back than this. Elie Abel has relayed the opinions of John McCone, a Kennedy intimate.

[According to McCone,] . . . the United States led the Russians into that frame of mind by a whole series of things it had done—or failed to do. Kennedy, for example, let them get away with building the Berlin Wall. He allowed the Bay of Pigs landing to fail. McCone blames not only the Kennedy Administration but also the Eisenhower Administration before it for creating a “climate of inaction.”<sup>70</sup>

Clearly, it would have required a strange cast of mind—and a certain arrogance as well—for the Kennedy administration to see the Berlin Wall as a test of United States resolve rather than a desperate measure to stop the exodus of millions of people from East Germany. Were the Americans really seen as weak by Khrushchev because they had failed to order their outnumbered and unreinforced garrison in West Berlin to attempt to tear the wall down?

More bizarre still is the degree of “selective attention” revealed by the comments of Kennedy and his inner circle. Granted, there had been some major Soviet initiatives, like the Hungarian invasion and the Berlin Wall, that the United States felt constrained to tolerate, and even some outright policy failures, like the Bay of Pigs operation. But there was also a series of foreign policy successes in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia that stretched back to the opening days of the cold war. The most recent of these had been in Berlin where, according to most observers, American steadfastness had made Khrushchev back down. Horelick and Rush declared that “the USSR could discover the West’s will to resist only by testing it. During the course of the Berlin campaign and probably by the end of 1961, the Soviet leaders became

<sup>68</sup> Sorensen, *Kennedy*, 724.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Abel, *Missile Crisis*, 35.

sufficiently convinced of the quality of the West's will to resist."<sup>71</sup> Michel Tatu and Graham Allison have concurred.<sup>72</sup> Allison cited Robert McNamara, who publicly stated on more than one occasion that the Soviet Union had no need to probe the firmness of American intentions after the strong American stand in Berlin in 1961.<sup>73</sup>

Kennedy and most of his foreign policy advisers ignored the Berlin crisis and the impression that American resolve during the episode might have made on the Soviet Union. They acted as if there had been one failure after another between the Bay of Pigs and the missile crisis. So, for that matter, have most analysts. Taking their cue from the Kennedy administration, they arbitrarily overlook the success of Berlin in favor of the "failure" of Cuba. They cite this "failure" and Kennedy's alleged weakness in Vienna—the latter based on Reston's unsubstantiated surmise—to justify Khrushchev's gamble as reasonably conceived.

The most disturbing aspect of this "courage and commitment" thesis is the tautological nature of its confirmation. According to the thesis, Kennedy, a man seemingly consumed with the ideal of courage and deeply affected by his humiliation at the Bay of Pigs, appears to have projected his own feelings of inadequacy onto the nation's bargaining reputation. Khrushchev's missile ploy, which was open to a variety of possible interpretations, was then taken by him as a clear confirmation of his worst forebodings. Kennedy's view of the matter spread to the journalists around him, who adopted it in their analysis of the crisis. Academic analysts in turn accepted it uncritically because it helped to explain behavior that otherwise would have appeared irrational.

Without a shred of hard evidence to back it up, the "courage and commitment" thesis has become one of the most entrenched shibboleths of the confrontation. In turn, the thesis has provided the justification for the most enduring policy lesson of the crisis. For the corollary to the belief that questionable resolve invites challenge is the belief that unquestioned resolve deters it. This belief encouraged subsequent policymakers to view every foreign upheaval as a possible test of American will. It provided the most important strategic incentive for intervention in Vietnam and the willingness of more recent American leaders to take up the "Soviet challenge" in Africa and the Persian Gulf. It has helped to enshrine as dogma what Barton Bernstein calls the "potentially fatal paradox"—the belief that the United States might have to go to war to affirm the very credibility that is supposed to make war unnecessary.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Horelick and Rush, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 126.

<sup>72</sup> Tatu, *Power in the Kremlin*, 231–35, speculates that Khrushchev switched the focus of confrontation to Cuba precisely because of Kennedy's demonstrated resolve with regard to Berlin.

<sup>73</sup> Allison, *Essence of Decision*, 52.

<sup>74</sup> Bernstein, "The Week We Almost Went to War," 21.

## AN ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION OF BRINKSMANSHIP

All the theories about Soviet policy examined here maintain that Soviet leaders behaved rationally. In other words, they acted in accord with either Soviet national interests, their own political interests, or a combination of the two. Starting from this premise, they elaborate one of four generic explanations congruent with this assumption to explain why Khrushchev and those around him accepted the risks associated with introducing Soviet missiles into Cuba. None of these explanations is particularly convincing. Their failure is certainly not attributable to any lack of imagination or diligence on the part of the analysts; indeed both characteristics typify so many of their efforts to reconstruct a rationale for Khrushchev's behavior. The problem lies instead with the assumption of rationality, which simply cannot be reconciled with Khrushchev's policy.

An alternative explanation should accordingly be based upon the assumption that Khrushchev had no plausible reasons for questioning Kennedy's commitment to keep offensive weapons out of Cuba. Such an approach immediately suggests a different line of analysis. Instead of trying to explain away the credibility of Kennedy's carefully worded warnings, the principal stumbling block of the explanations discussed here, an alternative explanation should show why and how Khrushchev convinced himself in the face of all the indications to the contrary that he could successfully put Soviet missiles into Cuba. This is also a formidable analytical obstacle, but one that may prove less difficult to overcome.

The present author's comparative research into international crises suggests a hypothesis that might clarify the mystery of Soviet policy in the Cuban missile crisis.<sup>75</sup> The origins of thirteen "brinkmanship" crises—confrontations in which a state challenges an important commitment of an adversary in the expectation that the adversary will back down—were studied to determine why policymakers pursued policies that risked war. The finding was that almost without exception, these crises could most readily be traced to grave foreign and domestic threats that leaders believed could only be overcome through an aggressive foreign policy.

The most important external threat was the expectation of a dramatic shift in the balance of power. In seven of the thirteen cases, brinkmanship was preceded by the widely shared perception among policymakers that a dramatic, unfavorable shift in the balance of power was imminent.<sup>76</sup> Brinkmanship in these cases was conceived as a forceful response to acute and impending danger, as a means of preventing or even redressing the shift in the balance of power before time ran out and such a response became unrealistic.

<sup>75</sup> Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

<sup>76</sup> The crises were Korea (1903-4), First Morocco (1905-6), Bosnia (1908-9), Agadir (1911), July (1914), Berlin (1948), and Cuba (1962).

A second motivation for an aggressive foreign policy derived from the weakness of a state's political system. In four of the cases—Korea (1903–4), Bosnia (1908–9), July (1914), and Arab-Israeli (1967)—domestic political instability or the fragility of the state itself appeared instrumental in convincing leaders to provoke a confrontation. They resorted to the time-honored technique of attempting to offset discontent at home by diplomatic success abroad.

The political weakness of leaders as distinct from the instability of the political system as a whole provided a third incentive for brinkmanship, as individual leaders sought success abroad in order to buttress their domestic positions. Political weakness can also lead to confrontations because leaders feel too insecure to oppose policies they know to be highly risky or otherwise ill-conceived. One or the other of these manifestations of political weakness appears to have played a role in the origins of ten of the brinkmanship challenges.<sup>77</sup>

A fourth incentive for brinkmanship is associated with intrastate competition for power. This was a primary cause of three brinkmanship crises and probably a secondary cause of several others. A bureaucratic subunit or political coalition can engineer a confrontation with a foreign power in the expectation that it will enhance its domestic influence or undermine those of its adversaries. Intrastate competition can also induce actors to pursue policies calculated to advance their domestic interests even though these policies have the side effect of provoking a crisis with another state. The Fashoda crisis (1898) is an example of the former and the Russo-Japanese crisis in Korea (1903–4) of the latter.

In practice, the expectation that an adversary would back down when challenged has often proved unwarranted. The cases revealed that most brinkmanship challenges were initiated without any good evidence that the adversaries in question lacked the resolve to defend their commitment; on the contrary, available indications most often pointed to the opposite conclusion. The commitments at stake appeared to have met the four conditions normally associated with successful deterrence: they were clearly defined; their existence was communicated to possible adversaries; the states making them possessed the means to defend them; and these states made reasonable efforts to demonstrate their resolve to do so. In only five cases—First Morocco (1903–4), Bosnia (1905–6), Rhineland (1936), Munich (1938), and Berlin (1948)—did the leaders of the state challenging a commitment have compelling reasons to suspect that their adversaries would back down. Even so, in two of these cases states had to drop their challenge because of the opposition they encountered. In every other case, the initiators had to back down or face war.

These findings indicate that a vulnerable commitment is not a precondition for brinkmanship. What counts is the initiator's perception—often faulty—that a vulnerable commitment exists. The cases also suggested the hypothesis that such poor judgment was related to the perceived need to pursue a brinkmanship

<sup>77</sup> The crises were Fashoda (1898), Korea (1903–4), First Morocco (1905–6), Bosnia (1908–9), Agadir (1911), July (1914), Korea (1915), Sino-Indian (1962), Cuba (1962), Arab-Israeli (1967).

chall  
speci  
tives

Th  
Sino  
pelle  
polit  
obje  
were  
to de  
vict

Gi  
desp  
reso  
term  
deni  
that  
Neh  
that  
tion.  
diss  
lead  
of th  
that  
leas

T  
By a  
tive:  
actio  
tegi  
aut  
had  
bell  
Stat  
vuln  
fore  
pen

T  
part  
rew

78  
Tatu  
Geo

challenge. When policymakers became convinced of the necessity of achieving specific foreign policy objectives, they became predisposed to see these objectives as attainable.

The study documented this assertion in the July (1914), Korea (1950), and Sino-Indian (1962) crises. In all three confrontations, political leaders felt compelled to pursue aggressive foreign policies in response to strategic and domestic political imperatives. They convinced themselves that they could achieve their objectives without provoking war. Because they knew the extent to which they were powerless to back down, they expected that their adversaries would have to do so. Some leaders also took comfort in the illusion that they would emerge victorious at little cost to themselves if war developed.

German, American, and Indian policymakers maintained these beliefs, despite much evidence to the contrary both before and during the crisis. They resorted to elaborate personal and institutional defenses to avoid coming to terms with this information. The most prevalent defense mechanism was denial. Kaiser Wilhelm II and those around him used denial to discredit reports that Britain would intervene in a continental war. Dean Acheson, Jawaharlal Nehru, and their respective advisers resorted to denial to discount the possibility that their policies would provoke Chinese military responses. On an institutional level, denial took the form of structuring feedback channels to filter out dissonant information and to reinforce the preconceived notions of political leaders. In such a closed environment, events did little to disabuse policymakers of their unrealistic expectations. These cases point to the pessimistic hypothesis that policymakers with the greatest need to learn from external reality are the least likely to do so.

The Cuban missile crisis appears to conform, at least in part, to this pattern. By all American accounts, Soviet leaders had strong—even compelling—incentives to put missiles into Cuba. The most widely accepted interpretations of their action attributed Soviet policymakers' action to their need to redress the strategic balance.<sup>78</sup> As is well known, the Kennedy administration decided in the autumn of 1961 to tell the Soviets that it knew that their first-generation ICBM had proven a failure. This was done in the hope of moderating Khrushchev's bellicosity over Berlin. However, it put the Soviets on notice that the United States, through its satellite reconnaissance, realized the full extent of Soviet vulnerability to a first strike. Soviet deployment of missiles in Cuba are therefore said by many analysts to have been conceived of as a "quick fix" to compensate in the short term for Soviet strategic inferiority.

The other cases of brinkmanship revealed a multiplicity of motives on the part of the initiator. Collectively, these cases held out the promise of sufficient rewards to make policymakers more willing to run whatever risks involved with

<sup>78</sup> See Horelick and Rush, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 141; Hilsman, *To Move a Nation*, 200-202; Tatu, *Power in the Kremlin*, 231; Steel, "End Game," 229; Allison, *Essence of Decision*, 52-56; George and Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy*, 461-62.

a policy of brinkmanship. This may also have been true for Soviet leaders. Graham Allison has suggested that the missiles could have been perceived as the solution to a number of different problems confronted by influential groups within the Soviet hierarchy. In addition to offering a readily available means of coping with American strategic superiority, putting missiles in Cuba could have appealed to the foreign ministry as a way of dramatizing Soviet support for Castro and of demonstrating Soviet resolve to Peking, then contesting Moscow's leadership of the communist "movement." The missiles promised to achieve strategic goals inexpensively, freeing more funds for the industrial sector. If the ploy was successful, it would also give Khrushchev more "chips" to play in negotiations over Berlin. Finally, an aggressive policy promised to advance Khrushchev's political interests and those of his supporters, who must certainly have felt the need for a major success after the failure of their two Berlin offensives and their domestic agricultural programs. For all of these reasons, Allison suggested, a powerful coalition may have developed in favor of putting missiles into Cuba, a coalition composed of political leaders and bureaucrats who envisaged the move as the solution to their particular problems.<sup>79</sup>

To the extent that Khrushchev and those around him felt the need to deploy Soviet missiles in Cuba, they also had a need to believe that they could do so successfully. Perhaps many of the explanations that have been offered to account for Moscow's misjudgment are better understood as rationalizations that may have been invoked by Soviet leaders to justify their decision and to dispel whatever anxiety they may have harbored about the risks it entailed. Subsequent to making their decision, they can have been expected to have become even less sensitive to information that suggested their policy would not succeed.

The timing of the Soviet decision is probably very important in this regard. All the available evidence points to the decision having been made sometime in the late spring or early summer of 1962, before any of Kennedy's warnings. Commitments, once made, influence receptivity to warnings.<sup>80</sup> In Korea, for example, the American commitment to unify the peninsula appears to have conditioned policymakers in Washington to dismiss Chinese threats of intervention as bluff because, if believed, the threats would have compelled a reversal in policy and with it a serious loss of prestige.<sup>81</sup> The same phenomenon may have occurred in the case of Cuba.

<sup>79</sup> Allison, *Essence of Decision*, 237-44.

<sup>80</sup> For a discussion of the literature supporting this view, see the following: Joseph de Rivera, *The Psychological Dimensions of Foreign Policy* (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill Co., 1968), 146; Irving L. Janis and Leon Mann, *Decision Making: A Psychological Analysis of Conflict, Choice, and Commitment* (New York: Free Press, 1977), 56.

<sup>81</sup> This argument is made in the following sources: Richard Neustadt, *Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1960), 133-36; de Rivera, *Psychological Dimensions*, 143-44; George and Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy*, 196-98, 463-64;



By September 4, when Kennedy issued his first specific warning, the Soviets had already embarked on a clear course of action. They had secured Castro's approval for the missiles, had shipped men, building materials, and weapons to Cuba, and were well advanced with the construction of the actual missile sites. To have backed down at this point would almost certainly have endangered relations with Castro. If word of the fiasco leaked out, as it almost certainly would have, the Soviet Union would have also lost face with China, which had already charged Moscow with undue timidity. In addition, a withdrawal would have caused a serious conflict within the Soviet leadership. Khrushchev would have been pilloried by his enemies for embarking upon a harebrained scheme and then losing nerve in the course of its execution. Khrushchev could easily have reasoned that all of this might have been sufficient to result in his loss of power. But he must have realized that to persevere if Kennedy meant what he said held out the prospect of a full-fledged confrontation with the United States.

This is precisely the kind of decisional conflict that encourages what Irving L. Janis and Leon Mann have called "defensive avoidance."<sup>82</sup> Policymakers who perceive that serious risks are inherent in their current policies, but upon reflection are unable to identify an acceptable alternative, experience psychological stress. They become emotionally aroused and preoccupied with finding a less risky but nevertheless feasible policy alternative. If, after further investigation, they conclude that it is unrealistic to hope for a better strategy, they will terminate their search for one, despite continuing dissatisfaction with the available option. This results in a pattern of "defensive avoidance," characterized by efforts to avoid fear-arousing warnings.

Soviet leaders, being no more or less human than the rest of us, may well have responded to their decisional dilemma by "bolstering" the policy to which they were committed. If so, they could easily have exaggerated to themselves the positive consequences of successfully deploying their missiles in Cuba. At the same time, they would have minimized the chance of any serious American reaction and would have made every effort to reinterpret or discredit information that suggested otherwise. In this regard, Ambassador Dobrynin, known by reputation as a man reluctant to challenge the prevailing orthodoxy in Moscow, may have facilitated their task by watering down the impact of the private warnings he received from members of the Kennedy administration so as not to offend or upset his political superiors. Soviet leaders could therefore have maintained their comforting illusions until reality rudely intervened in the form of Kennedy's announcement of the blockade. Fortunately for everyone, they possessed the psychological resources to recognize their miscalculation and respond with adaptive behavior.

---

Lebow, *Between Peace and War*, 176-78. Graham Allison has speculated that the fact that Kennedy's warnings came after the Soviet commitment may have had some effect on Soviet perception of them. See Allison, *Essence of Decision*, 234.

<sup>82</sup> See Janis and Mann, *Decision Making*, 48-57, 74, 107-33.

## CONCLUSION

The first conclusion that must be drawn from this analysis of Soviet policy-makers is that American analysts really do not know how Soviet leaders assessed the risks associated with deploying missiles in Cuba or why they decided to accept these risks. Many of the theories offered in explanation are simply not credible. Others build their case from data that are equally supportive of quite contradictory inferences. All, including the present author's own explanation, lack evidential support. They are, at best, clever speculations about Soviet behavior consistent with the few established facts.

Although it was beyond the scope of this article to do so, it would have been relatively easy to demonstrate that American analysts' lack of knowledge extends to just about every other aspect of Soviet decision-making in the Cuban missile crisis. If this is true of Cuba, an event that took place almost twenty years ago and that has been extensively studied, how much truer it is of more recent Soviet initiatives, whose understanding benefits from neither the meager documentary evidence available on the missile crisis nor from the greater analytical detachment that develops in the fullness of time. In effect, imaginative analysts can readily devise an explanation consonant with their own intellectual or ideological orientation. When these interpretations gain sufficient acceptance, they are used to validate academic dogmas or actual foreign policies. Such a process occurred with Kennedy's "courage and commitment" thesis. It may be happening again with regard to interpretations of Moscow's projection of influence into Africa and its invasion of Afghanistan. Those, like Zbigniew Brzezinski and Richard Pipes, who recommended policies based on what these developments "reveal" about Soviet goals and risk taking, ought to show more respect for the tenuous nature of the West's understanding of Soviet foreign policy.

Second, none of the authors discussed here were prepared to consider that Khrushchev may have lacked plausible reasons for believing that Kennedy would fail to act in defense of his commitment. It nevertheless seems likely that Khrushchev, like so many national leaders before and since, engaged in wishful thinking—that he convinced himself that what he wanted to happen would despite the evidence to the contrary. The present author aside, only Howard Dinerstein has advocated this interpretation.<sup>83</sup>

The assumption of rationality on Khrushchev's part is all the more puzzling given the prevailing assessment of Khrushchev's personality. No major author has suggested that Khrushchev was a prudent man. He was attracted to grand gestures and acted impulsively. He gambled, often with little apparent chance of success. Cuba fits perfectly with this pattern of behavior. It should be seen in the same light as his bluff about the potency of Soviet strategic forces, his Berlin challenges, and his virgin lands program. Along with Cuba, these initia-

<sup>83</sup> Herbert S. Dinerstein, *The Making of a Missile Crisis: October 1962* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 152-53.

tives were probably the "harebrained schemes" that his politburo colleagues referred to at the time of his dismissal. Western analysts are therefore in the odd position of defending the behavior of a Soviet leader, a man who the Soviets themselves ridicule for his lack of judgment.

What accounts for this compulsion to portray Soviet policy as rational? Philosophers of science have observed that scientists tend to fit data into existing frameworks even if the framework does not do justice to the facts. Investigators deduce evidence in support of theory. Theory, once accepted, determines to which facts they pay attention. According to Thomas Kuhn, the several fields of science are each dominated by a "paradigm," an accepted body of related concepts that establishes the framework for research.<sup>84</sup> The paradigm determines the phenomena that are important and what kinds of explanations "make sense." It also dictates the kinds of facts and explanations that are to be ignored because they are outside the paradigm or not relevant to the problems the paradigm has defined as important. Paradigms condition investigators to reject evidence that contradicts their expectations, to misunderstand it, to twist its meaning to make it consistent, to explain it away, to deny it, or simply to ignore it.

Since 1950, deterrence theory has been widely accepted by political scientists. In a 1979 article on the subject, Robert Jervis called it "probably the most influential school of thought in the American study of international relations."<sup>85</sup> Put simply, deterrence consists of manipulating other actors' assessment of their interests and seeks to prevent a specified action by convincing the actor who might contemplate it that its costs exceed its rewards. Individuals or states who employ deterrence identify their interests and commit themselves to their defense. By demonstrating their ability and willingness to do so, they attempt to convince others that it is not in their interests to challenge these commitments. When these efforts succeed, the commitments in question are said to be credible.

Deterrence theory is based on the premise that policymakers behave in terms of a rational calculus that maximizes payoffs and minimizes costs. It therefore assumes that credible commitments will not be challenged unless an adversary does so deliberately to provoke a conflict. When deterrence "fails," analysts do not blame the theory, but the policymakers who attempted to implement it—somehow they did not succeed in imparting sufficient credibility to their commitment. Perhaps this explains what has happened with regard to the Cuban missile crisis. Analysts, working within the dominant paradigm, have gone to great lengths to make the case consistent with the theory. As a result, the paradigm has drawn their attention away from what may be a more interesting and important question about the crisis: Why and how were Khrushchev and other Soviet leaders so blind to reality? 17

<sup>84</sup> See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

<sup>85</sup> Robert Jervis, "Deterrence Theory Revisited," *World Politics* 31 (1979): 289-324.

There is another explanation worth considering for this phenomenon. Deterrence is the major intellectual and policy bulwark against nuclear war. It is based on the comforting assumption that nuclear adversaries are so horrified by the devastating consequences of nuclear war that they will behave prudently toward one another. For this reason, the definition and communication of truly vital commitments can be expected to function as a reasonably efficacious strategy of conflict avoidance. To recognize that the one acute thermonuclear crisis to date was brought about by the irresponsible and irrational judgments of the leader of a nuclear superpower—perhaps by the entire inner circle of its foreign policymaking elite—would call into question the most fundamental assumption of deterrence. It may be that this is why so many investigators have sought to lay the onus for Khrushchev's miscalculation at Kennedy's feet by arguing that Kennedy's actions undercut the credibility of his commitment. By doing so, analysts have attempted to preserve intact the theory of deterrence and with it their emotional composure.

The way in which students of the crisis have exaggerated Kennedy's skill in managing the crisis offers some corroboration of the suspicion that Cuba has been used to shore up emotional defenses against nuclear war. As this author has tried to demonstrate elsewhere, analysts have studiously ignored the "group think" and other deviations from "open decision-making" that in fact characterized Kennedy's management of that confrontation. Their interpretations are reassuring because they imply that leaders can still act coolly and skillfully when subjected to the kind of stress generated by a nuclear crisis.<sup>86</sup>

One of the first serious analyses of the Cuban missile crisis was Albert and Roberta Wohlstetter's *Controlling the Risks in Cuba*, published in 1965.<sup>87</sup> In this landmark study, the Wohlstetters contended that Khrushchev's and Kennedy's performance provided a stunning counterexample to the pessimistic predictions of nuclear holocaust made by so many behavioral scientists up to that time. They also propagated the view that the crisis had come about because of miscalculations that were both understandable and correctable. The real problem, the Wohlstetters insisted, was that "each side in short tended to project its own psychology or certain stereotypes about the behavior of the other."<sup>88</sup> The review of the literature here suggests that this is even truer of the analysts; their interpretations of the crisis tell us at least as much about themselves as they do about Khrushchev and Kennedy. The Cuban missile crisis might be likened to a Rorschach test: the ink blots that constitute the few facts reveal little that is conclusive about Soviet policymaking, but the responses of political scientists to them say a lot about their anxiety concerning nuclear war. Unfortunately, the attempt by the analysts to deny the strong strain of irrationality that runs through even the most momentous policy decisions will not make such a war any less likely.

<sup>86</sup> Lebow, *Between Peace and War*, 291-305.

<sup>87</sup> See Albert Wohlstetter and Roberta Wohlstetter, *Controlling the Risks*.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-21.

stat  
wes  
cha  
arg  
of t  
and  
tion  
the  
tics

1  
127  
2

the  
stat  
cier

3

this  
pai  
on  
by  
all  
(Er

or

—

M/

ten

me

Prof