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Too Close to Nuclear Conflict

The article "Cuban Missile Crisis More Volatile Than Thought" [front page, Jan. 14] states that former defense secretary Robert S. McNamara now believes "the presence of ***hitherto unknown*** [emphasis added] Soviet short-range atomic weapons in Cuba at the time [indicates] that the two nations were much closer to nuclear conflict than was previously realized." The implication is that the intelligence community failed to recognize and report those weapons. Rather, its McNamara's faulty memory that should be questioned.

When the two medium-range SS-4 ballistic missile sites were photographed Oct. 14, 1962, in a U-2 reconnaissance mission, the president authorized that Cuba be completely covered by other U-2 missions. From those missions, the National Photographic Interpretation Center discovered four additional medium-range ballistic sites, three intermediate-range ballistic missile sites under construction and four highly mobile armored task groups at Remedios, Holguin, Santiago de Las Vegas and Artemisa. Free Rocket Over Ground short-range missiles were found and reported at those installations. The Department of Defense at the time had evaluated the FROG as capable of firing both a conventional and a nuclear round.

The Soviets made no attempt to hide the fact that these garrisons were Soviet. At the Santiago de Las Vegas garrison on Oct. 25, they proudly displayed in flagstone and flowers the symbols of Soviet motorized rifle, infantry and airborne units along with the Elite Guards Badge, the Russian equivalent of the U.S. Presidential Unit Citation.

In a special Cuba press and TV briefing conducted by McNamara and his special assistant, John Hughes, on Feb. 5, 1963, Hughes discussed the highly mobile armored groups in depth and described the various weapons they possessed: "In addition to finding modern tanks and mortars at these Soviet ground force garrison areas, each of which had anywhere from 1,000 to 1,250 men, more modern ground-force fighting equipment was also observed. This photo [no. 81] was taken in Moscow on 7 November 1962. This is the Kremlin wall, and here the Soviets proudly display their FROG 3 and 4. . . . In Cuba, on 25 October, our low-altitude aircraft found the same weapons deployed. Here is the launcher [no. 82] and the FROG at Remedios. Here is the re-fire missile and the missile transporter. . . . The FROG missile transporter and launchers, once our low-altitude reconnaissance began, were carefully hidden by the Soviets. They secured them behind fences, as shown by this particular photo [no. 83], and they either camouflaged them or placed them under clumps of trees, as shown by this particular photograph. Note the six missile transporters tucked away beneath the trees but still discernible on low-altitude photography. In addition to the tactical FROG rocket launcher, which could reach ranges no greater than 25 miles, the Soviets also deployed in Cuba an anti-tank weapon that was fairly modern and a new one, nicknamed the Snapper."

Later in the press conference, McNamara was specifically asked:

"Do the FROG missiles, some of which are still in Cuba, have a nuclear capability?"

McNamara replied: "The FROG are almost certainly capable of nuclear and non-nuclear fire."

In the past, McNamara has publicly stated that we were not close to war, but now apparently he believes we were. In testimony before a congressional committee in February 1963, however, he was emphatic: "Khrushchev knew without any question whatsoever that he faced the full military power of the United States, including its nuclear weapons. We faced that night [Oct. 27] the possibility of launching nuclear weapons and Khrushchev knew it, and that is the reason, the only reason, why he withdrew those weapons."

Memories fade in 30 years, but facts captured on aerial photography do not.

—Dino A. Brugioni

The writer is a former reconnaissance and photo interpretation specialist for the CIA.

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If Kennedy had not been killed . . .

By Gerald D. McKnight

Mr. McKnight teaches history at Hood College.

Frederick, Md. — John F. Kennedy has been in the news more than at any time since the 25th anniversary of his assassination. Controversy continues to swirl around "JFK," the Oliver Stone film that has reignited conspiracy theories.

And the release of letters between Mr. Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev during the height of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis shows the young president as more than a match for his older Russian counterpart.

From all this media attention, there arises a compelling need to reflect on the ramifications of Mr. Kennedy's death. What if he had lived to complete two terms? Would much have been different in American life since then?

In the aftermath of the missile crisis, Mr. Kennedy began a dramatic shift away from his previous Cold Warrior posturings and policies.

To appreciate this change, it is useful to compare the text of his inaugural address, harsh and bellicose, with the conciliatory and peace-oriented language of his speech at American University in June 1963.

Two months later, when he reminded the American people that "we are all mortal," the United States and the Soviet Union signed a partial nuclear test ban treaty.

Other similar initiatives were set into motion in the final months before Dallas. Mr. Kennedy was serious about extending diplomatic recognition to the People's Republic of China, and he authorized back-channel discussions with representatives of Fidel Castro's Cuba with the possible view of normalizing relations.

Mr. Kennedy showed every outward sign during his last 18 months that he was open to new perspectives and was not afraid to change his mind.

However, looming in the background and threatening to spike these hopeful goals, was the intractable problem of Vietnam. All of Mr. Kennedy's efforts to reduce Cold War tensions and minimize the risks of future nuclear confrontations hinged on some hard choices he faced with this Southeast Asian nation.

By 1963, the president had committed more than 16,000 military advisers to South Vietnam to prevent its conquest by the Communists of the North.

By autumn, it was apparent that the "adviser war" was not working. Some of the president's top aides were urging that he escalate U.S. involvement by introducing combat units. Instead, on Oct. 5, 1963, Mr. Kennedy authorized the withdrawal of 1,000 U.S. troops from Vietnam. On Oct. 11, he signed the then top secret National Security Memorandum 263, which authorized increased training of South Vietnamese forces so they could shoulder the duties of U.S. soldiers.

Nov. 22, 1963: John F. Kennedy is shot in Dallas. The Associated Press

Was this the beginning of a U.S. disengagement from Vietnam? Some close members of the Kennedy circle insist that Mr. Kennedy was on the verge of changing his Vietnam policy before the trip to Dallas.

If Mr. Kennedy had resolved not to expand the war by committing U.S. ground troops and was looking for a way out of Vietnam, then Dallas changed history.

The events that immediately followed Dallas are telling. On Sunday, Nov. 24, in a private briefing session at the White House, President Lyndon B. Johnson made the first of a series of fateful decisions: to find a military solution to the war.

The first casualties of this Nov. 24 decision were the cancellation of the withdrawal of the 1,000 troops and the failure to implement plans for a speed-up of more withdrawal of forces. All of Mr. Kennedy's other initiatives, including any prospects of strengthening detente with the Soviet Union, were either scrapped outright or pushed aside as the war planners in Washington searched for the right combination of military measures to win in Vietnam.

In time, Mr. Johnson learned that America could not simultaneously wage a foreign war and carry out social reform at home.

To be sure, the economic and social issues that surfaced in the 1960s were independent of the Vietnam War, but had Mr. Kennedy lived, been re-elected and ended our involvement in Vietnam, the political system could have faced these home-front challenges in a more compassionate and gentler political atmosphere.

1968 could have been a year of comparative domestic tranquillity. Instead, the nation was subjected to hammer blow after hammer blow — the war in the streets, the "Days of Rage" in Chicago and a spate of sickening political assassinations.

It is painful to recall that in 1968, before they, too, were cut down by assassins' bullets, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy urged America to unbind her sons from Asia and begin to bind her wounds at home.

The death of Bobby Kennedy robbed the American people of a chance to vote for a genuine peace candidate. Instead, we got Richard M. Nixon, and four more years of war.

The ultimate legacy of Dallas is chilling: If a president can be gunned down in public and his foreign-policy initiatives quickly repudiated, and if our government of laws failed in its duty to faithfully investigate this highest form of treason, then that political system invited the massive abuse of presidential powers that history books now refer to as "Watergate." □

1/25/92

Dear Sol,

Thnks for thr Lukas story from the Times on the Havana meeting between those of both sides involved in the 1962 Cuba missile crisis. If he had not had the long-time Times interest in Castro-bashing he could have been more informative. He'd have had much more space for reporting and information in any event.

To the degree possible for me I've been trying to be informed about these meetings, now five.

After finishing my first book I did not plan further JFK assassination writing. I did plan and research "Tiger to Ride: the Untold Story of the Cuba Missile Crisis." And then continued assassination work.

In the midst of that crisis, while still farming but liquidating the farming, I made a contemporaneous analysis that was substantially correct. The first Wednesday of that crisis (Wednesday was my delivery day) I discussed my analysis with the then foreign editor of the Washington Post, named something like Thornbury, and the then National Symphony ~~and~~ manager, H. Robert Rogers, who had been the Click editor when I was its Washington correspondent. I do not now recall whether I then had the time to make and file any notes on this.

The essense of my analysis was that Khruschev put those medium-range missiles in Cuba not with the intent of using them but only to give JFK his own "Tiger to Ride," to give JFK the choice between war and peace, the Cubans, as Lukas does not say, fearing another U.S. or U.S.-sponsored invasion, having invoked its "mutual" assistance pact with the USSR.

The Post had come to the same tentative conclusion and then abandoned it and did not report it!

From what has been reported from thes meetings I may well have been wrong on some of the details but I was essentially correct. I did not know that the 30 mile range missiles were there. But they had only defensive capabilities. I also then did not believe that any evidence of the nuclear warheads for the larger missiles existed in what the US disclosed. But basically I was correct and Khruschev did accomplish what he set out to accomplish -end the invasion danger without war and turn the world toward peace.

Any examination of JFK's record after that also confirms this in many ways. Two are his initiating and getting the limited test-ban agreement and his one-world speech at American University.

What has been disclosed makes it clear that JFK also learned that he could not depend on his advisers, all but two of him gave him bad advice until Khruschev offered the proposal Bobby was first to grab. Adlai Stevenson understood the situation correctly, as John McCone, then CIA director, also did initially. McCone was then talked out of it by his associates. Many thanks and best to you all,

Harold