

Meg Greenfield

W Post 9/15/87

## Time to Recall This Model?

This is the fall in which we commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Cuban missile crisis. Already the festivities have begun, with the publication of some revisionist memoirs about what President Kennedy and his aides were thinking during those tense days when the United States set up a naval blockade to prevent the delivery of further Soviet weapons to Castro. Reputations are being somewhat altered and events put in a slightly different context. Though a real grinch myself on the larger issue of "anniversaryism"—the promiscuous and mindless tendency of people in this country to celebrate, at set, cuckoo-clocklike intervals, practically every public event that ever occurred—this anniversary is different. People are always saying that Vietnam and Watergate are the defining episodes in our contemporary politics, the experiences from which all else flows. But I would put the Cuban missile crisis right up there. Nothing, in my view, has had so strong or lasting or (in many ways) distorting an effect on the way we think about things as that couple of weeks in the fall of 1962 when we and the Russians faced off over the issue of the Russians' secret emplacement of missiles in Cuba.

Those weeks became, almost overnight, the stuff of a romantic legend, of folk heroics. True, there were people, mainly on the left, who believed Kennedy had been reckless and much too warlike, and others, mainly on the right, who believed he settled

---

*We still seek periodically to replay the great 'staring down' triumph of the Cuban crisis.*

too cheap and let the Russians keep far too much in Cuba. And there are people who still hold these views. But within a couple of years the conventional wisdom was holding the Cuban missile crisis to be the very model of a successful enterprise, one that had brought out the best in our leaders, seen the wiser among them prevail and demonstrated the wisdom and efficacy of being tough in a controlled, nonprovocative, rational way. Secretary of State Dean Rusk's famous summation ("We were eyeball to eyeball, and I think the other fellow just blinked") said it all: we had *stared down* the adversary.

A lot has been written since then pointing out that, given this country's overwhelming military superiority at that time, the Soviets would have been mad to start something when their ships approached ours, mad not to pause and then turn back, as they did. But this overwhelming superiority no longer exists; nor have subsequent crises taken place in circumstances so conveniently to our advantage as those of the Cuban conflict. But all this tends to get left out of the equation as American governments seek periodically to replay the great "staring down" triumph of 1962.

Some Americans involved in dealing with that encounter have said they were really not at all certain of what we would do next if the Soviets did not back down and were quite terrified of the possible outcome. I don't know how terrified their counterparts in Washington now may be about the possible outcome in the Persian Gulf, but there is something about our action there that seems to me to trace directly back to the Cuban-missile model: American warships sent as a show of strength and an earnest of resolve, courting danger—without its being clear whether the government that sent them has (1) a precise idea of what it will do if their presence fails to impress or (2) a genuine commitment to the kind of action that presence implies.

The lore, in other words, has it that the naval show of resolve—firm, but not wildly firing, bloody or aggressive—did the deed, leaving out the conclusive influence of our disproportionate military advantage. I am not trying to suggest in saying this that we *should* have taken more violent action then or even that we should have done so in the various crises that have followed, including the current one, in which we have tried once

again to do the "staring down" trick: I am only trying to suggest that prevailing in these conflicts is not nearly so easy and painless as it has been made to look by the misapplication of the Cuban-missile-crisis model.

The model has had its effect on how we think about policymaking, too—or "crisis management," as we say of dealing with events like those of 1962. That phrase tells you a lot, I think, redolent as it is of sweet reason and cool temper. The implication is that there is a sensible, detached, pragmatic way to "handle" stormy events and menacing people in this world and that it will be discernible to those who know how to measure and calculate, as distinct from those inclined to heed their emotions or loyalties or intuitions or instincts about when to fight, when to run and when to make a deal. It is forgotten now that although the terms "dove" and "hawk" came into use after the Cuban missile crisis, the preferred animal was decided to be the "dawk," a kind of middle-ground combination of the two. We dawked our way into Vietnam, through it and out of it, did we not?

I came to Washington about a year before the Cuban missile crisis, and I have sensed in governments ever since some effort to replicate the manner in which the Kennedys addressed that crisis. The story has been told and retold around our campfires in Washington as to how the group met and who said what and how wisdom and (to a degree) consensus

were eventually forged from the ordeal, how the system, in effect, worked. Much that has happened since then, that has come out of similar meetings, has seemed to me to produce terribly flawed results—compromises that combined the worst of alternatives, that added just enough of Option A to Option B to vitiate both and ensure that neither would have a chance to work. In both the Carter administration and the Reagan administration this has been true, especially in the Middle East, but also elsewhere. In both, the impression that consensus has been reached and a workable compromise hammered out has often proved to be a comfortable illusion—comfortable, that is, until the various policymakers start fighting each other over it and the policy itself comes to grief.

The press too has over the past quarter century tended again and again to seek the Cuban-missile-crisis model in the Washington events it is covering, looking for the hawks and doves and the outcomes of those general meetings thought to be the fount of wisdom, as distinct from less rational and deliberate influences: accident, one man's strength of will, another's folly. By now we too should have learned the lesson. Jack Kennedy came out well in 1962. An awful lot has not since then. Some things don't get resolved right, or even resolved at all, in meetings.

©1987, Newsweek, Inc.  
Reprinted by permission; all rights reserved.