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It Isn't the Cuban Missile Crisis

By THEODORE C. SORENSEN

The Naval quarantine proclaimed by President Kennedy during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 was, like President Nixon's mining of North Vietnamese harbors, an interdiction of Soviet shipping that risked the nightmare of nuclear war. There all resemblance ends.

The sudden secret delivery of long-range nuclear weapons only ninety miles from our shores posed a very different kind of threat to this nation than does the open delivery of conventional weapons nearly 9,000 miles away. In 1962 Soviet equipment and combat units in Cuba sought to transform that country into a strategic nuclear base capable of striking any city in the United States and Western Hemisphere. In 1972 Soviet equipment (with almost no personnel) in Indochina has no mission beyond those borders. In contrast with the deliberately false statements made about the missile shipments to Cuba, the Kremlin has openly acknowledged its determination to supply its allies in Hanoi with at least a fraction of what our own country is supplying its allies in Saigon.

President Kennedy, advised that Moscow as well as our maritime allies would be concerned with legalities, obtained a unanimous vote in the Organization of American States authorizing his action and the participation of Latin-American vessels in the blockade. He invoked the Treaty of Rio as well as a new and specific joint resolution of Congress. President Nixon prefers to act alone, without authorization or participation by either allies or Congress.

Although both Chief Executives were criticized by Congressional leaders for their actions, the criticism in Mr. Kennedy's case accused him of not going far enough. But President Kennedy deliberately sought to maintain a degree of discretion and flexibility that this



President Kennedy speaking on T.V. Oct. 22, 1962, on the Cuban situation.

latest interdiction fails to offer. Military developments in the neighboring Caribbean were then far more subject to our control than are events today in the Gulf of Tonkin and South China Sea.

U.S. picket ships, unlike mines, could be (and were) instructed from Washington to let certain vessels pass. Prohibited vessels were to be turned back or taken into custody—not blown up. The ban applied only to those ships carrying offensive weapons. The Russian blockade of West Berlin in 1948, Mr. Kennedy noted, had kept out food, petroleum, medicine, the necessities of life, everything; but this the United States would not do. This week it did. Yet the interdiction of Soviet ship-

ping in 1962 was far more focused on the immediate threat that gave rise to it than is the interdiction initiated by President Nixon. Nuclear missiles and rocket launchers needed to complete the sites then being prepared on Cuba could reach that island only by sea; and the quarantine was to last only until that specific threat had been removed. But halting all Soviet deliveries to North Vietnam now, even if feasible, would not halt Hanoi's present offensive in the South, nor make impossible its indefinite waging of guerrilla war with supplies coming overland as they did during Lyndon Johnson's bombardment of rail lines.

President Nixon, moreover, has tied

his interdiction not to the withdrawal of Soviet military equipment but to an end of the war itself.

By more carefully limiting his aims and holding his fire, President Kennedy used the 1962 quarantine to pave the way for an early negotiated settlement of the missile crisis. But mines that sink every incoming and outgoing vessel, regardless of their cargo or identity or the opening of negotiations, are likely to produce confrontations between two nuclear powers before an alternative solution can be found. If as predicted they accomplish little inside Vietnam itself but a hardening in Hanoi's will, President Nixon's own words will then require him to seek still higher steps up the ladder of escalation.

We all had reason to be fearful in 1962. But the Soviets are comparatively stronger today than they were then, in both naval and nuclear power in particular. Their leadership, less free-wheeling than Khrushchev's, may be more reluctant to change courses as quickly. Nor is world opinion arrayed behind the United States as it was then. Finally, and frankly, we may not be as lucky this time as we were in 1962.

But however reckless the President's brinkmanship appears to be, his critics can take no comfort from a Soviet reply in kind. Instead, before it is too late, if it is not already too late, both sides must be urged to get back on the 1962 track: secret negotiations and communications, contacts at the United Nations, more cautious rhetoric in public, and above all the exercise of military restraint. One mistake is all it takes; and saying one's face is not worth losing our planet.

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