

Effective Diplomacy vs. Ineffective Pre-emptive Action

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The Cuban Missile Crisis is one of the most analyzed foreign policy decisions in American history. The Caribbean Crisis to Russians and the October Crisis to Cubans, it was the closest the world ever came to nuclear war, so naturally everyone from students to political figures to psychologists and sociologists want to understand the techniques used as well as the philosophies and personalities of all involved. Given the data and declassification of Kennedy's documents, a research paper may explore any number of avenues. Since President George W. Bush has used one of JFK's statements as a historical precedent for the Iraq invasion, this paper will discuss how theoretical and empirical analysis shows that while majority opinion was for military preemptive action, JFK's combined use of the rational actor and small group decision making models allowed for power, security and political concerns to be addressed tempered with consideration and humanitarian deliberation.

Sheldon Stern from Boston.com in an October 19, 2003 article titled The Wrong Model for Iraq War explains that when President Bush justified his decision by quoting JFK from October 1962: "We no longer live in a world where only the actual firing of weapons represents a sufficient challenge to a nations security," he "failed...to grasp the larger context of Kennedy's remarks." It is important to understand that as noted by May and Zelikow in the summary of The Kennedy Tapes that even though "the contrary pulls of detail on one hand and belief (or conviction and ideology) on the other" is similar to the Iraq dilemma, the outcome was completely dependent upon JFK's character. A

president's worldview and style, as Hastedt states in American Foreign Policy: Past, Present and Future is "heavily influenced by...most important component...character, which develops in childhood. Character is the way the individual orients himself...toward life..." With analysis by highly skilled interpreters, quotes from declassified documents and personal understanding, this paper will attempt to answer the question why, based on empirical data the Cuban Missile Crisis is not the proper tool for a person with the character of George W. Bush to use as a model for war. That it was not effective preemptive action but in fact effective diplomacy.

Even though the media involvement was at a minimum in comparison to present day coverage and the American public was unaware of the situation until publicly informed by JFK, he was still under immense pressure to get it right. Cuba was identified as a major issue in the upcoming elections because of the disastrous Bay of Pigs. Consequently, not only was he faced with American politics and the idea that Khrushchev saw him as soft, being the Massachusetts liberal that he was, he was also confronted with the dire prospect of nuclear annihilation. None of which were easy hurdles to overcome. To fail on any front was not an option. The situation demanded calm and levelheaded consideration of conflicting data and strong opinions of his trusted cabinet. May and Zelikow, in the summary of the Kennedy Tapes says, "Kennedy did not make any impulsive decisions during the crisis." Moreover, the final decisions were made completely by Kennedy himself. This is supported by the data that all suggestions from the ad hoc ExCom group were for a full-blown military strike. Hastedt states that ExCom was given a "narrow mandate", that "any consideration of either acquiescence to the Soviet move or diplomacy" was out of the question. It is my opinion that this is because

JFK could analyze and consider those options himself. What he needed from ExCom was the unknown military data and options. Once he had all available information, he was able to make an informed decision and that decision was diplomacy.

Documents show that as early as January of 1961, Soviet arms were strengthening Castro. By April of 1961 he had: 125 tanks, 167,000 rifles, 7,250 machine guns, as well as anti-aircraft and anti-tank equipment (Freedman, pg. 128). Before Kennedy took office, President Eisenhower had begun plans for a Cuban invasion. Lawrence Freedman in Kennedy's Wars states: "The ideological message was clear-the continent was to be transformed into a vast crucible of revolutionary ideas and efforts-a tribute to the power of the creative energies of free men and women-an example to all the world that liberty and progress walk hand in hand (pg. 124). Kennedy agreed with this theory when he lent support to Cuban revolutionaries during the Bay of Pigs, however, when failure was evident unless he committed full United States military support he said, "there will not be, under any conditions, an intervention in Cuba by US armed forces...understood and shared by anti-Castro exiles...in this country (pg. 140). He understood then, and later, that an all out invasion of Cuba could set the world on a path of retaliatory destruction. When the ultimate "quick fix" option of assassination was presented, Kennedy exhibited the character that would later help save the world from devastation when he said, "We cannot, as a free nation, compete with our adversaries in tactics of terror, assassination, false promises, counterfeit mobs and crisis" (Freedman, pg. 152).

The situation and the subsequent handling of it may have been quite different in today's world of immediate media visibility. The world may have known before the White House that in April there was an approved shipment of 180 SA2 missiles and a

battery of cruise missiles, and that in August there were “substantial deliveries of men and equipment from the USSR” (Freedman, pg. 161) to Cuba. Most assuredly, McGeorge Bundy, the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, would not have appeared before the American people on October 14, 1962 and said, “I *know* there is no evidence and I think there is no present likelihood that the Cubans and the Cuban government and the Soviet government would in combination attempt to install a major offensive capability” (Freedman, pg. 169). It is fortunate that CNN was not available to support the information from CIA agents that was earlier dismissed as rumor, yet later supported by U2 spy plane photography reviewed the same day as Bundy’s speech. This gave Kennedy and his staff ample time to coordinate strategies, such as the development of ExCom, to consider options, and communicate with the USSR before going public on October 22. In this way, the outcome was determined between the leaders of two countries, not in public, media or polls.

The *small group decision making model* of Excom was comprised of Kennedy’s top advisors including, but not limited to, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, US Representative to the UN Adlai Stevenson, Special Council Theodore Sorenson, and Assistant Secretary (ISA) Paul Nitze. They first met on October 16, 1962. Several options surfaced, however, by the end of the day Kennedy narrowed the choices to three, 1) surgical air strikes, 2) naval blockade and 3) invasion. Even though the “conversations were free-wheeling and conducted without obvious respect for hierarchy” (Freedman, pg. 170); even though declassified information shows that the Air Force was negligent in its design, and that the Navy “did not tailor its plans to meet ExComm’s needs” (Hastedt, pg. 266); Freedman

states in Kennedy's Wars that "however chaotic the process of policy formation, there is no question that ExCom did shift opinions and help the President ensure that all points of view were exposed and a consensus forged around his preferred opinion" (pg. 170). This clearly contained the "two ways of carrying out a rational actor analysis of policy making" as stated by Hastedt (pg. 248). One is inductive: "the objective being to appreciate the situation as the government sees it and to understand the logic of the situation" (Hastedt, pg. 248). The other way is deductive: "rather than relying on actual events...relies on logical and mathematical formulations of how states should (rationally) behave under given conditions" (Hastedt, pg. 248).

It is in the development of his own preferred opinion where Kennedy sets himself apart from our current administration by moral character and dignity through the *rational actor model* for decision-making. He gathered all data, listened to all suggestions, communicated with Khrushchev, albeit in secret, and made a diplomatic decision that allowed Khrushchev to save face while complying with Kennedy's demands. Rather than rush headlong into nuclear destruction to prove righteousness and might, he illustrated open preparedness while working behind the scenes to choose compromise and resulting world peace. In the summary of Kennedy's Tapes, under the category of **Kennedy's Role in Management**, May and Zelikow state, "By the second and third day he (*Kennedy*) is shaping discussions and thinking aloud. On October 19, he takes on the weight of all arguments (*mainly for military force*) and begins making up his mind. By October 22, Kennedy is dominating the meetings (pg. 440)(parenthetical emphasis is authors). On October 25, 1962, a standoff was agreed on both sides.

When, on October 29, “low-level reconnaissance appeared to detect continued construction” (May, Zelikow, pg. 411), Kennedy continued diplomacy. There are several hypotheses for why Khrushchev sent missiles to Cuba, yet even in his own biography none are clearly revealed. It is difficult to determine the meaning of an October 26 KGB report that stated, “a lead resource on Khrushchev’s desk...was a statement in the New York Herald Tribune by a US journalist, Warren Rogers, expressing his own personal opinion that a US attack on Cuba was “prepared to the last detail” and “could happen at any moment” (May, Zelikow, pg. 433). Oftentimes, as this clearly demonstrates, the *show of might* is more of a deterrent than the act itself.

In conclusion, all the data and declassified information proves that the Cuban Missile Crisis was solved by effective diplomacy. Yes, as Max Boot of the Council on Foreign Relations says, the key point is that Kennedy “chose to do something” (npr.org), and that something was not military force but compromise and diplomacy. “Historian John Lewis Gaddis says the key point about the crisis is what Kennedy did **not** do—and the example should guide the current debate about “pre-emptive” action...” (npr.org). Finally, in the summary of Kennedy’s Tapes, May and Zelikow state it better than any. “The outcome of Khrushchev’s gambit would in all likelihood have been very different – perhaps inconceivable different – if someone else had been president” (pg. 447).

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