

NU alum remembers Cuban missile crisis

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Soviet deployment. Because Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev gave several explanations for the action in later years, no one will ever know for sure why the Soviets placed missiles in Cuba, Sorensen said.

One reason might have been a desire by Khrushchev to demonstrate the Soviet Union's political might, Sorensen said.

"He thought, 'We can show them we could match them. We'll see how they like it. We'll put missiles in Cuba.'"

In 1962, the crisis over the divided city of Berlin provided an ongoing test of will for both superpowers. By placing nuclear missiles in the back yard of the United States, some speculated, the Soviets were trying to flex their muscles and weaken U.S. resolve to defend West Berlin, the free sector of the East German city miles behind the Iron Curtain.

Along with a show of political strength, the Soviet action may have been a desperate attempt to achieve nuclear parity with the United States, Sorensen said.

"The Soviets were behind; the missile gap was actually the other way around," he said. "Putting intermediate range missiles into Cuba, which could reach any part of the United States — virtually any part — was a way of closing that gap."

During the 1960 presidential campaign, Kennedy had insisted the United States faced a "missile gap." Supposedly the Soviet Union was achieving greater missile capability than the United States.

As Sorensen acknowledged, this turned out to be bunk.

But through its missile deployment in Cuba, the Soviet Union doubled the missile power it could use to strike the United States, expanded its missiles' range and sharply decreased the warning time the United States would have in a nuclear strike.

The reason for the Soviet deployment given most frequently by Khrushchev — that the Soviets were defending the new Cuban communist regime of Fidel Castro against an American invasion — was disingenuous,

Sorensen said.

"I think it was really more of an excuse that gave him an opportunity; it gave him a rationale, but I don't think that was the primary reason," he said.

Regardless of the Soviet motivation, the missiles in Cuba were now a *fait accompli*. The Ex Comm had to decide upon a response.

One adviser, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, argued during the opening meeting that the Cuban missiles did not cause a significant change in the strategic balance between the superpowers.

The Soviet Union already could strike the United States with missiles fired within Soviet borders. Given the destructive capacity of even one nuclear missile, McNamara argued, it did not matter that the Soviet Union suddenly had several more missiles to fire at the United States.

But Kennedy faced political pressures, both foreign and domestic, that necessitated a response regardless of any argument that the missiles were strategically insignificant. As Sorensen said, Kennedy may have suffered severe international political damage had he not responded to the Soviet provocation.

"In the world of that time, perceived power can be real power," he said. "The whole balance of power was based upon the credibility of an American response to a Soviet attack on Europe."

"If we wouldn't respond to Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba, nobody believed we would respond to a Soviet action in Europe. That's why we had to respond."

Kennedy also had to keep his promise to eject Soviet nuclear missiles from Cuba. He had to fight criticisms launched by congressmen who said Kennedy was being soft on Cuba.

Initially, most of Kennedy's advisers favored airstrikes on Cuba to remove the missiles. The group soon split, however, between those who favored air strikes and those who wanted to start with a less aggressive response.

McNamara and Kennedy's brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, began to favor a blockade to prevent Soviet ships from reaching Cuba. This course had the advantage of being a slow escalation of the crisis, unlikely to provoke nuclear war.

Other advisers, including former Secretary of State Dean Acheson and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, favored air strikes to remove the threat immediately. A blockade, they argued, did not address the central problem of Soviet nuclear missiles already in Cuba that were approaching readiness.

The Joint Chiefs believed, however, that "surgical," or limited, airstrikes could not guarantee removal of the missile installations. Any airstrike would have to be massive and probably followed by a land invasion.

Blockade proponents countered

strikes, an invasion of Cuba, which we now know — we didn't know for certain at the time, but we now know — that the Soviets would have responded with tactical nuclear weapons which they had on the island," Sorensen said.

"We would have been obligated, when our forces were devastated by nuclear weapons, to respond with nuclear weapons, and the ladder of escalation goes up very sharply after that."

In the end, Kennedy and his advisers had chosen a middle course they believed was both a firm and cautious response. As Sorensen made clear, the risk of nuclear escalation required careful decision making.

After several tense hours of anticipation on the morning of Oct. 24, Soviet ships turned back, deciding not to challenge the blockade.

Four days later, the United States and the Soviet Union reached an agreement ending the crisis. Khrushchev stated publicly that he would remove the missiles from Cuba, while the United States would lift the blockade and

pledge not to invade Cuba.

Neither side mentioned one crucial private aspect of the deal. In a decision not made public until about 10 years after the crisis, Kennedy also had agreed to remove U.S. Jupiter missiles from Turkey.

Sorensen said it was essential that the agreement on the Turkish missiles be kept secret to minimize international political fallout. The United States could not be perceived as selling out allies to protect its own security or making concessions "with a gun to our heads," as he put it.

Sorensen said Kennedy was determined to prevent nuclear war. This was a determination that would have been severely tested if Khrushchev had not agreed to remove the Cuban missiles.

Had the Soviets held out longer, Sorensen said, Kennedy may have sought a peaceful solution through the United Nations. He also may have tightened the blockade or employed other military actions short of an air strike or invasion, he said.

"I think he felt nuclear war would have been a failure, a negation of everything he stood for, everything he had tried to do, and he was determined to avoid it if at all possible," he said.

Sorensen acknowledged this position might have become untenable in an extended crisis. With the Soviet missile installations approaching readiness, patience among the public, the Congress and Kennedy's Cabinet might have worn thin.

Would Kennedy ever have agreed to order an air strike?

"Never say never," he said. "If the time came when the Soviets were clearly determined to move ahead and build these missiles and military might to bring Kennedy and the United States of America and the Western Allies to look foolish and weak, and his administration as well as his military chiefs turned against him and said this is what you must do, it's hard to see any president saying, 'No matter what happens, we're not going to take military action.'"

"So I don't want to say there are no circumstances under which (military action) was possible. All I'm saying is that I think (Kennedy) was going to do everything possible not to take that kind of action."

Lloyd Ambrosius, history professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, said that although Kennedy pursued a course of action that avoided nuclear war in October 1962, the crisis must be understood in the context of Kennedy's earlier campaign statements and foreign policy decisions.

In the 1960 presidential election, Kennedy faced Vice President Richard Nixon, a committed anti-communist.

Nixon was sure to attack Kennedy for being soft on communism if at all possible.

Kennedy wanted to show that he too was a tough anti-communist, decrying the supposed missile gap.

In whatever way Kennedy's statements may have helped him win the election, they also helped "perpetuate the almost paranoid fears of the Cold War from the 1950s" and ensured the Cold War would continue, Ambrosius said.

"Kennedy had campaigned alleging a missile gap," he said. "He could and should have known that was not true. But having used that issue, Kennedy had helped escalate the rhetoric of the Cold War, which had both Cold War and domestic implications."

"In a sense, Kennedy was caught exposed because of his earlier Cold War rhetoric. Given the tough talk, if he did nothing, it would have raised doubts. It was kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy: If you said something was an important issue, it was important because you said it was."

Kennedy's previous Cuban policies also must be considered, Ambrosius said.

In particular, the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion of April 1961 had further soured U.S. relations with the Soviet Union and Castro's Cuba. After organizing an invasion of Cuba by anti-Castro Cuban exiles, Kennedy had failed to authorize sufficient air cover to ensure the invasion's success.

After the Bay of Pigs, the CIA instituted a covert plan called Operation Mongoose to attempt the overthrow and assassination of Castro.

As Sorensen mentioned, the defense of Cuba may not have been Khrushchev's primary motivation for deploying the missiles. After all, the deployment was much larger than was needed to defend against a U.S. invasion.

Sorensen said the failure at the Bay of Pigs taught Kennedy "not to be heady, cocky, confident, certain that the United States and its interests would always prevail."

But given the Kennedy administration's clear disdain for the Castro regime, legitimate Soviet and Cuban fears of an invasion may have contributed to the Cuban missile crisis, Ambrosius said.

"Looked at from the Soviet or Cuban point of view, there was no reason to assume (Kennedy) wouldn't invade if he had half a chance," Ambrosius said.

Ambrosius said Kennedy wanted history to record that he had stood firm against nuclear blackmail and prevailed. Given the secrecy of the U.S. withdrawal of Jupiter missiles from Turkey, and the toppling of Khrushchev by the Soviet Presidium in 1964, this view was accepted for a while.

"He wanted to create an impression that he had been a strong leader who had stood tough and tall and made Khrushchev back down, when in fact he had made real concessions from a Soviet point of view," Ambrosius said.

The Cuban missile crisis was the closest the United States and the Soviet Union came to a direct nuclear confrontation. After that, the Cold War was waged mostly through wars on the periphery — as was the case in Vietnam — and covert operations around the world.

Ambrosius said the close call of October 1962 led to these developments because thereafter, leaders of both superpowers were reluctant to risk direct Soviet-American confrontations. The strategic doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction — designed to deter either side from a nuclear strike by ensuring the other side could mount an unacceptably destructive response — and later arms control agreements were part of this legacy, he said.

"I think the Cuban missile crisis left a legacy in terms of some real restraint which all subsequent presidents showed," he said. "They were far more reluctant to press any nuclear issue right up to the brink."

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THODORE SORENSEN
former special council to John Kennedy

that the Soviets might respond to an air strike by launching intermediate range ballistic missiles at the United States. If ground troops landed in Cuba, the Soviets might fire battlefield nuclear weapons at the invading force.

Sorensen sided with the blockade proponents, who prevailed. On Oct. 22, President Kennedy delivered a televised address announcing the discovery of the missiles and the retaliatory blockade.

According to "One Hell of a Gamble": Khrushchev, Castro and Kennedy 1958-1964," a 1997 book by Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, the Soviet Union had prepared orders to fire tactical nuclear weapons at invading U.S. troops. Although the order was never delivered, it was ready in case events necessitated it.

"The chiefs wanted bombing, air

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