

# **Kennedy's Slows and Bush's Runs** **Confronting a Nuclear Crisis**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Recently, my work has caused me to travel abroad, both to Europe and Africa. Wherever, I went, I met people who asked the same question in regards to the US government's desire to start a pre-emptive unilateral war with Iraq, "Is Bush out of his mind?"

No, he's not crazy, I told my foreign friends, he's merely what Yale said he was: a C+ student who apparently paid far more attention to the boozing rituals of Skull and Bones than he did to his poli-sci finals. And the country is in precisely the shape I would expect it to be in if a c+ student was running the place.

However, the doctrine of pre-emptive unilateral war, which Bush is witlessly pursuing, surely *is* one of the screwiest ideas of the past 40 years. In fact, it is *so* crazy that its merits do not deserve to be debated and I will not do so here. For truly, there are many such crazy ideas in the world, like wearing a *burqa*, pursuing cold fusion, or believing creationism, and if we wasted our breath trying to refute them, we wouldn't have any time left over to craft real solutions to real problems.

And in the minds of nearly the entire world, and from the pens of people as different as Henry Kissinger and Ralph Nader, the Bush-pushed doctrine of pre-emptive unilateralism (which I will abbreviate

from now on as P-U) is being dismissed. In fact P-U could be fairly characterized as one more example of the delusional, magical thinking of a cult. And like all cultists, Bush and his comrades actually think their delusions are true, rationally formulated and will not tolerate anyone throwing cold water on their beliefs.

Things were rather different exactly 40 years ago today, when the ancestors of today's chicken hawks (men like Bush who advocate war but are too scared to do the fighting themselves) were far removed from the center of political discourse during the Cuban Missile Crisis. I'd like to briefly discuss what happened then. It is extraordinary: the actual rhetoric being bandied about by the allegedly conservative Bush administration was in fact used, almost verbatim by the far right wing of Kennedy's time, men who no one in power took seriously because their ideas were so bizarre.

Indeed, when looked at through the lens of the Missile Crisis and the spread of political opinions back then, Bush and his comrades are clearly not conservatives. Rather, they are exposed as far right extremists, who, by hijacking the rubric of "conservative" impugn the philosophy and politics of people like Colin Powell, who I most certainly disagree with, but who all but the most ideologically opposed would agree are in the mainstream of American politics.

A slight, obligatory digression. All anti-war talk must include the following disclaimer: "Of course, I realize that Saddam is a menace to world security and peace." But I will now add the following clause, "and I don't need men the caliber of George Bush and Paul Wolfowitz to repeat the obvious to me." Instead, I need my government to devise real world solutions to real world problems that we face, something the Bush regime, as their failed responses to terrorism and the economy, to name just two areas, is incapable of providing.

## **THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS: DAYS AWAY FROM OBLIVION**

Those of us who are old enough to remember 1962, and I was 10 back then, remember a terrible time. The clothes were awful, the haircuts worse, the music stinky, the food all canned and nauseating. The Beatles were still playing strip teases in Hamburg and we children were playing duck and cover to protect ourselves from atomic attack.

It was also the year in which even the most levelheaded commentators agree that the human race came as close to extinction as it has ever come. Prior, that is, to a second Bush/Iraq war. It was the year the bombs, the big ones, nearly fell. It was, I think, a far more dangerous time than 9/11, both for the U.S. and the world.

In the summer of '62, the U.S. government, which at that time actually had a working intelligence service, albeit already a corrupt one, began to pick up chatter that the evil Soviet Empire may have placed medium range ballistic missiles in Cuba, some 90 miles or so off Florida. If true, this broke every assurance we had received from the Soviets that no aggressive weapons had been given to the Cubans. If true, this was a cause for war.

It was true. On October 14, a spy plane photographed the missiles and on the 15th, 40 years ago today, the U.S. Government realized that at least a third of the continental United States could be in danger of nuclear attack within 3 months, the estimated time it would take to make the weapons operational.

President Kennedy was immediately told and formed a team called EXCOMM to deal with the crisis. Unbeknownst to everyone except for Attorney General Robert Kennedy, he secretly taped the discussions of EXCOMM, which have been released as The Kennedy Tapes, which I've brought along today. It reads like the most terrifying thriller imaginable. In the space of two weeks here's briefly what happened. As I go through the timeline, keep in mind the dreadful rapidity of developments, and the lack of modern communication technology.

Kennedy could not call Soviet Premier Khrushchev directly for example. They could only wire each other. The famous hotline was installed in response to the crisis.

### **CHRONOLOGY OF THE MISSILE CRISIS**

**October 16** – Kennedy received incontrovertible evidence that easily led to the conclusion that the Soviet Union was preparing a pre-emptive nuclear strike on the US including Washington.

**October 17** – More nuclear missiles are found

**October 18** – Kennedy meets with the Soviet ambassador who lies through his teeth and says there are only defensive capabilities in Cuba. Kennedy knows he's lying.

**October 21** – Evidence comes in that bombers, cruise missile sites, and fighter planes are being rapidly assembled on the northern shore of Cuba

**October 23** – Kennedy receives an ominous, threatening letter from Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev.

**October 24** – Soviet ships with suspicious cargo are stopped en route to Cuba. One ship refuses to stop.

**October 26** – The CIA says that there has been no halt to the buildup of nuclear missiles in Cuba but now they are trying to camouflage the missiles. Khrushchev sends the first of two strange letters.

**October 27** – The crisis reaches near-breaking point. Another strange letter from Khrushchev arrives. An American U2 is shot down over Cuba and the pilot killed. Another U2 accidentally wanders into Soviet airspace and is intercepted by Soviet fighters.

Let's stop for now and sum up the world on October 27, 1962. There was no question, in the minds of EXCOMM that the world was on the brink of

a nuclear world war. Castro, who was quite hysterical, was begging the Soviets to launch the missiles. Skirmishes had already started, both over Cuba and the USSR and it appeared as if Khrushchev might have lost control of his bellicose generals. With the missiles still considered not operational, this was the perfect time for a pre-emptive, unilateral strike.

That was *exactly* what the chicken hawks' predecessors called for: Here's Senator Richard Russell, Democrat of Georgia:

**"Mr. President, it seems to me we are at a crossroads. We're either a first class power or we're not. You have warned these people time and again...that's what would happen if there was an offensive capability... They can't say they're not on notice.**

**...You have told them not to do this thing and they have done it. And I think we should assemble as speedily as possible an adequate force and clean out that situation... (emphasis added)**

Or there's General Curtis Lemay (p177):

**"...we don't have any choice except direct military action. If we do this blockade that's proposed, a political action, the first thing that's going to happen is [their] missiles are going to disappear into the woods particularly [the] mobile ones. Now, we can't find them, regardless of what we do, and then we're going to take some damage if we try to do anything later on...**

**I see no other solution...political action I see leading into war. I don't see any other solution.**

**It will lead right into war. This is almost as bad as the appeasement at Munich...**

**...I just don't see any other solution except direct military intervention right now."**  
(emphasis added)

These calls for pre-emptive war against another country where there was clear evidence of aggressive intent sound identical indeed *are* identical to Bush administration rhetoric against Iraq. The case they make for pre-emptive unilateral attack is rather compelling given the extraordinary provocations of the Soviets. But there was a big difference. Both Senator Russell and General Lemay were bit players in the terrible drama of the crisis. They had little political power because they were considered right wing extremists who saw a commie under every pillow, who opposed all attempts for civil rights legislation, whose response to the fears and uncertainties of the world was the now clearly obsolete World War II solution of immediate, catastrophic bombing, be it China, North Korea, or Cuba.

It is apparent from the Kennedy tapes that President Kennedy barely listened to them and their supporters. Instead, Kennedy was crystal clear: he would not be a president who would be provoked or goaded into war. If there was a war, and Kennedy certainly thought there might be, it would have to be a coldly rational decision that would not be rushed. Nor did wildly inaccurate comparisons with the appeasement of Hitler mean much to him. In short, Kennedy ignored the right wing extremists whose only proposal was a pre-emptive rush war.

What did Kennedy do? He ordered a blockade, which was called a "quarantine" for legal purposes. It was the *least* he could do in response to the aggression and that's what Kennedy did: *the least that could be done*.

And then, after the first, threatening letter from Khrushchev, Kennedy *didn't* tighten the quarantine, let alone initiate a war. He actually *loosened* the quarantine by 500 miles to give Khrushchev more time. Even as evidence came in that the quarantine was being breached, he

***refused* to raise the ante. Even when a plane was shot down, he did not retaliate. When another plane wandered off course, he did not take advantage, although some generals urged him to. When the two strange letters from Khrushchev came, he ignored the second and concentrated on the slight, small wisps of hope in the first.**

**Most important, he made the clear, damning evidence of the Cuban Missile Crisis public. To the UN. The photographs were shown and explained. The world knew the seriousness of the danger. And the world was shown perfectly legitimate reasons for a pre-emptive immediate strike, a strike Kennedy *still* refused to make.**

**Furthermore, Kennedy actively sought, without prodding, the advice of the Congress, the UN, other countries, and various supra-governmental organizations. He got it and then *refused* to go to war.**

**Finally, he grasped at and accepted an offer he and all his staff had sworn *never* to accept, a secret swap to remove US nuclear missiles in Turkey in exchange for the Soviets getting the missiles out of Cuba. The crisis ended.**

**Kennedy was not only a skillful leader who averted war. He was also, of course, incredibly lucky.**

**Today we are not so lucky. Gone are the moderate voices, both conservative and liberal, from government influence. The only voices we hear – strident, hysterical – are the voices of right wing extremists who bear as much relation to the genuine conservatism of Colin Powell as, in the field of Christianity, Jerry Falwell does to the compassion of Christ.**

**While Kennedy did not know what would happen if he preemptively attacked Cuba, he assumed the worst, a full scale nuclear war. Many people think he was right. Today, with the intellectual children of the right wing zealots of the Kennedy years in full control of the country, they have no restraint on their actions. And neither does Saddam Hussein. I see no reason, why, like Kennedy, we should assume anything but that the worst would happen given a preemptive strike. Back then, Lemay was considered barely to the left of the Klan, and Kennedy knew enough not to take views that extreme seriously. Bush is not so smart**

**and takes the latter day Lemays all too seriously. He must be prevented, by all legal means at our disposal, from implementing this incredibly crazy policy of preemptive unilateralism.**

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