

Commentary: New Light on the Cuban Missile Crisis?

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Over the past few years we have learned a good deal about the Cuban missile crisis. But almost all of the new information has come from the American side. Soviet sources, even in this era of *glasnost*, have not provided us with much hard evidence. This I think is on the whole true even of Bernd Greiner's interview with Sergo Mikoyan. The text did little to change my own thinking about the crisis. When Mikoyan said something that I already believed, I thought to myself, "Yes, that's true. Maybe I can use that." But when he said something I did not agree with—his claim, for example, that Khrushchev's fall had nothing to do with the missile crisis—it was easy to dismiss the remark out of hand. He was essentially expressing his own opinion, and there was no way to know how much information his conclusions were based on. The most important passages were those in which he provided us with some new factual detail. But the more general observations simply reflected his own personal point of view, and as such did not carry much evidentiary weight.

Even with all the new American evidence, there is much that we do not understand about the missile crisis. Indeed, this evidence has had the effect of raising many new questions and opening up some old ones. Greiner, for example, talks about how the Soviets "even at the peak of the crisis," on 27 October, "willfully escalated tensions in order to test the limits of American resolve" and were thus "playing with fire." Presumably the reference here is to the hardening of the Soviet terms for a resolution of the crisis—the adding of a demand on 27 October for withdrawal of the Jupiter missiles from Turkey in exchange for a withdrawal of their own missiles from Cuba. But a comment by CIA Director John McCone in the ExComm discussions on 27 October leads one to question this sort of interpretation. "I think it's very probable," McCone said, "that the initial discussion that Ray Hare [U.S. ambassador in Ankara] had with the Turks leaked in some way." The Soviets, in other words, might have just learned through intelligence channels that the Americans were trying to get the Turks to agree to a trade,

and this may help explain the new demand. If in fact the USSR was simply trying to take advantage of some softness it saw in the American position, this tends to support a picture of the two powers playing their cards cautiously during the crisis, moving only when they thought the risks were relatively limited. It runs counter to the idea that the two sides were "playing with fire" and escalating tensions in order to test each other's resolve.¹

The conventional interpretation of the missile crisis has changed dramatically over the past decade. For many years, it had been argued that the Kennedy administration's handling of the crisis—its ability to calibrate the level of tension and thus to strike just the right balance between firmness and flexibility—had demonstrated that there was a kind of art of crisis management. But by 1987 it had become clear that the standard interpretation had changed. The argument now was that crises between nuclear powers are inherently unmanageable. The missile crisis, it was claimed, was a good deal more dangerous than people had realized. There were so many things that did go wrong, and so many more things that could have gone wrong, especially once military action had begun, that the crisis could very easily have gotten out of hand.

This was certainly the view of certain key officials of the Kennedy administration who gathered on a number of occasions to look back and reflect on the crisis. Former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, for example, argued repeatedly that no one can with any confidence predict how events in a nuclear crisis would unfold, especially if military force is actually used. The way a crisis runs its course would be dominated by such factors as "misinformation, miscalculation, misjudgment and human fallibility." It was therefore "not possible," he said, "to manage a crisis in the nuclear age," in the sense of being able to exercise strong control over how the confrontation works itself out. For McGeorge Bundy, President Kennedy's national security adviser in 1962, the missile crisis appeared in retrospect not as an exercise in successful crisis management; it looked more like a "battle of blunders," and had resulted mainly from a kind of communication failure: "With more farsighted and better informed governments, more able to communicate with each other openly and honestly, the Cuban missile crisis need never have happened." The same sorts of arguments were made by other commentators on the crisis—by Raymond Garthoff, for example, and by Daniel Ellsberg and Seymour Hersh.² Greiner here takes a similar line. He speaks, for

¹"Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings, October 27, 1962," 44, McGeorge Bundy, transcriber, John F. Kennedy Library (henceforth "October 27 transcript"). Extracts were published in *International Security* 12 (Winter 1987/88): 30–92.

²McNamara's and Bundy's comments were made during a conference to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the missile crisis held at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 21 October 1987. I am grateful to Meg Vaillancourt of WGBH for giving me a copy of the videotape she made of some of those sessions. Raymond Garthoff, in "Cuba: Even Dicier Than We Knew," *Newsweek*, 26 October 1987, 34, listed a number of "close calls" that he says might have "tipped the balance toward war during the missile crisis." Seymour Hersh, "Was Castro out of Control in 1962?" *Washington Post*, 11 October 1987, gives both his and Ellsberg's views and concludes that "the risks were greater than anyone in Washington knew." For Ellsberg's own statement see his "The Day Castro

example, of the Soviets losing "control over military decision-making in Cuba." The dangers inherent in such a situation, he says, were not really understood, and only at the last minute did Khrushchev realize "how close both sides had come to the brink of war."

This new interpretation did not take shape as people tried to come to terms with the new evidence on the crisis that became available over the past decade. Indeed, that evidence should have had the opposite effect. The most important point to emerge from these new sources was that President Kennedy was much more willing to compromise on the issue of the Jupiter missiles in Turkey than had previously been thought.³ This implied that there was more of a "cushion," more room for a diplomatic settlement, and thus less risk, than had earlier been assumed.

This was, however, only the most important of many new findings that pointed—or should have pointed—to the basic conclusion that the risks were *not* as great as people had thought. Let me give two other examples here. It is widely assumed, first of all, that if Cuba had been attacked, and especially if Russian lives had been lost in the process, there would have been a retaliation, probably against the Jupiter missile sites in Turkey; the Americans would have been forced to respond, and the conflict in all likelihood would have escalated to the point of general war. But the new evidence suggests quite strongly that if things had reached the point of a Soviet attack on the Jupiters, an American retaliation would have been far from automatic. The Americans, at one point at least, thought they might just accept the attack and let the confrontation end there: "We were going to let him have his strike in Turkey, as I understood it last week," Bundy remarked in one of the 27 October meetings.⁴ This to me was a real surprise.

The second example relates to Greiner's argument that the Cubans' persistence in firing on low-flying American reconnaissance planes was one of the main factors that brought the world "to the brink of war." This, however, was not nearly as dangerous as we have been led to believe. It is clear from the transcript of the 27 October ExComm meetings that the American response to these attacks was not to order a counterescalation. Cuban anti-aircraft fire was instead leading the United States to pull back. As General Maxwell Taylor, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that day: "We're approaching the point, I think, Mr. President, where low-level reconnaissance will be entirely impossible. . . . Low-level reconnaissance *probably* is on its way out."⁵ When one studies these events at this level of detail, one does not detect a process of escalation spiraling out of control. Toughness was met not by countertoughness, but by accommodation. A

Almost Started World War III," *New York Times*, 31 October 1987; and also the videotape of Meg Vaillancourt's interview with him, October 1987, a copy of which is also in my possession.

³See Marc Trachtenberg, "The Influence of Nuclear Weapons in the Cuban Missile Crisis," *International Security* 10 (Summer 1985): 144–45; and idem, "White House Tapes and Minutes of the Cuban Missile Crisis: Introduction to Documents," *ibid.*, 165.

⁴"October 27 transcript," 55 (emphasis in original).

⁵*Ibid.*, 69 (emphasis in original).

similar point is suggested by Mikoyan's comment in the interview that the forced surfacing of their submarines convinced the Soviets that the Americans were very serious about this whole business.

Is there, however, no empirical evidence whatsoever to support the conclusion that the crisis was much more dangerous than we had thought at the time? Are these claims about how risky the crisis was nothing more than the projection of changing political beliefs, especially changing attitudes about nuclear weapons and about U.S.-Soviet relations in general, and have they little to do with the new historical evidence? There is one important empirical argument, developed mainly by Daniel Ellsberg and Seymour Hersh, that is offered in support of these general claims. The Americans, this argument runs, felt during the crisis that they had to maintain surveillance of Cuba. To protect the reconnaissance aircraft, the American government would have to react militarily if these planes came under hostile fire, and especially if any of them were shot down. The calculation that the risk inherent in such a policy was tolerable was based on the assumption that Khrushchev, a responsible statesman, exercised control both over Castro and in particular over the surface-to-air missile sites. But this was incorrect. Khrushchev did not control all the SAM sites, and indeed the Cuban government itself might have taken over one of these installations with military force during the crisis. It was this same SAM site that downed an American U-2 spy plane. Because an American retaliation could have set off an escalatory process that might well have culminated in general thermonuclear war, the American policy, rooted in a misperception about who was calling the shots in Cuba, was extremely dangerous. The Kennedys, Ellsberg says, had in effect "passed the trigger on our own retaliatory forces to Fidel Castro, who was in fact acting independently of Khrushchev," although (according to Ellsberg) this was simply inconceivable to the American government at the time.⁶

These claims received a good deal of publicity in 1987. There were articles in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Boston Globe*, and *Newsweek*; reports were also carried on certain televised news programs.⁷ As some of Greiner's comments show, this argument is now in the process of being accepted even by professional historians. It is therefore worth examining in some detail here, if only as a case study in how historical misinterpretation takes root.

What is to be made of the Ellsberg-Hersh argument? There are first of all a number of problems relating to the factual accuracy of their account. The idea that the United States had *unknowingly* "passed the trigger" to Castro is based on the assumption that Cuban troops controlled at least one of the SAM sites; the U.S. government certainly already knew that the Cubans controlled the anti-aircraft batteries that were a threat to low-flying reconnaissance aircraft. But what sort of evidence is there that Cuban

⁶Variants of this argument are found in the Hersh, Ellsberg, and Garthoff articles cited in footnote 2 above; the quotation is from Meg Vaillancourt's interview with Ellsberg.

⁷See the sources cited in footnote 2 above.

government forces had, unbeknown to the United States, taken over the base? The U.S. National Security Agency, Hersh reveals, broke a Soviet code in 1964 and was then able to learn from recordings it had made during the crisis that there had been a firefight near the SAM base at Los Angeles, in northeastern Cuba. Nothing in these intercepts indicated that the attackers were Cuban government troops, and not, for example, anti-Castro guerrilla forces. Nor did the intercepts in any way indicate that the attack on the Soviet base had been successful. The most the NSA analysts had been able to conclude was that the possibility that this SAM site “may not have been fully under Soviet control when the U2 was shot down” could not be ruled out.⁸ This was the only real basis for Hersh’s claim that the clash had “apparently” been with Cuban government forces; Ellsberg’s conclusion that the Cuban regime had probably taken over the site also relied mainly on this source.⁹ What for the NSA analysts had been a mere “possibility” was for Ellsberg transmuted into a “fact”: “ ‘Precisely whose finger was on the button’ when the U2 was shot down the next morning ‘is not known,’ Ellsberg said. ‘But the fact that the Soviets had lost military control of the site is knowable at this point, although . . . no one knew that on the U.S. side at the time.’ ”¹⁰ Mikoyan’s story here, that the downing of the U-2 was the result of a “human error” by one of the Soviet commanders and that the Moscow authorities quickly clamped down on their commanders in the field and were able to prevent a repetition of the incident, is clearly more plausible than the picture of the Soviets “losing control” and of Castro having his finger on the trigger—especially since it is fleshed out with some additional corroborating details in Blight and Welch’s *On the Brink*.¹¹

Was it true that the American government, which did not have the faintest idea of what was really going on at the SAM site, simply assumed that the U-2 had been shot down on Khrushchev’s personal orders? Hersh says that the ExComm members “all assumed that Khrushchev had authorized the U-2 shootdown as a show of force designed to buttress his bargaining strategy—or had been forced to take this action by hardliners in the Soviet Union.” “Everyone in the government,” he writes, “assumed that the spyplane had been shot down by a Soviet SA2 missile in the control of the Soviet forces on the ground—and thus by Khrushchev.”¹² Greiner basically accepts Hersh’s interpretation: “For the ExComm in Washington there was no doubt: this was a conscious provocation and escalation by Khrushchev.”

Hersh had not actually seen the 27 October transcript, the ultimate source for these claims, when he wrote his article; he relied instead on what he was told by people who had read it. It turns out that the transcript, which

⁸Hersh, “Was Castro out of Control?”

⁹Ibid.; Vaillancourt interview with Ellsberg.

¹⁰Hersh, “Was Castro out of Control?”

¹¹James G. Blight and David A. Welch, *On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York, 1989), 311, 369 n.118.

¹²Hersh, “Was Castro out of Control?”

was released a few weeks after Hersh's article appeared, does not support his account. Khrushchev, for example, was never singled out by name as the individual responsible for the downing of the plane. President Kennedy did comment in passing that the attack was "an escalation by them," but neither he nor anyone else elaborated the point in the way that Hersh suggested and argued that the attack had been ordered for bargaining purposes. No one said that Khrushchev might have been "forced to take this action by hardliners in the Soviet Union." Nor was it universally assumed that the authorities in Moscow had ordered the strike: someone suggested that "you might have Cubans," and Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson thought that "some crazy Russian captain" might "just pull a trigger."¹³ Most important, one gets the distinct impression reading the transcript that no particular theory about who exactly had actually ordered the attack played a major role in shaping American policy—that is, in determining how the United States should react to the attack.

Putting the issue of factual accuracy aside, one can pursue the basic question a bit further. Suppose the Cubans really had been responsible for shooting down the U-2, but that the U.S. government had blamed the Soviets instead. Why would this misperception have been a source of danger? If the Americans had understood the situation correctly—if they had recognized that the Cubans had been responsible and indeed that Castro had taken over a Soviet base through force, killing and wounding a number of Soviet soldiers in the process—would a U.S. reprisal have been *less* likely? The more isolated the Cubans were, the more their Soviet protector could be presumed to have been alienated by Cuba's hostile behavior, the more likely the Americans would have been to judge that the risks were low and thus to retaliate. But for these commentators, the assumption is that an American retaliatory attack could have set off the avalanche and led to a full-scale war.

We now know, however, that the U-2 was almost certainly shot down on the orders of the Soviet commander at the SAM base acting on his own authority. Mikoyan also informs us here that "the Americans were assured that it had been an accident and that it would not be repeated." How should this new information affect our estimate of the level of risk in 1962? The giving of such an assurance might be expected to reduce the probability of an American reprisal; it also reflects a Soviet eagerness to avoid provocation that should be taken into account in an overall assessment of the risk of escalation. But even if the United States had chosen to retaliate, our new knowledge that the Soviet government did not order the attack should lead us to *reduce* our estimate of the probability of a Soviet counterretaliation. The Soviet leadership had clearly expected a SAM attack of this sort to be dangerous. A U.S. reprisal was more likely to be "understood" and accepted, given that the attack was the result of a decision by the commander in the field, than if the strike had actually been ordered by the Kremlin. This new

¹³"October 27 transcript," 45, 48, 58.

evidence should therefore lead us to *downgrade* very substantially our estimate of the risk that this particular incident actually generated.

The Cuban crisis began with an act of deception, when the Soviets deployed missiles on the island while saying, or at least strongly implying, that this was something they would never do. It was also ended by an act of deception. On 27 October, when the Kennedy administration was looking for a way out of the crisis, none of the normal diplomatic alternatives it explored seemed at all attractive. It cut the Gordian knot by issuing what was in effect an ultimatum combined with secret "assurances" regarding the withdrawal of the missiles from Turkey. In public, it denied that anything like a trade had taken place: President Kennedy, it was said, would never have considered anything of the sort. It was the administration's skill in crisis management, the argument went, that had brought about a resolution of the crisis.

In this way a set of myths took shape. We are, however, now well on the way to trading it in for a new set of myths, equally remote from reality, about the ease with which things can spin out of control in a crisis. We will be doing our job as historians only if we maintain a certain critical distance and refrain from accepting these new myths too quickly. It all comes down to a question of evidence. But the evidence itself has to be evaluated without preconception. It would be counterproductive to pretend that the mere expression of opinion, unsupported by factual detail, even by those who have firsthand knowledge of these events, carries any real evidentiary weight. This is true whether we are talking about Soviet or American accounts. In the present case, Mikoyan's remarks were most valuable when they were most precise: at this point, only hard information should have any real value for us.