

October 15, 2012 The National Conversation:
Is the World More Dangerous 50 years after the Cuban
Missile Crisis?

Jane Harman:

Good Afternoon. I'm Jane Harman, president and CEO of the Wilson Center, and I apologize to some of you if you had trouble getting into our space. That is because a few hours ago we were part of a very touching memorial service to Nancy Hamilton, wife of my predecessor, Lee Hamilton, and there are hundreds of people in this building who want to shake Lee's hand, and some of you are probably among those people, and both events went on at the same time. So, apologies if it was difficult to get in.

I also want to welcome not just those in this audience whom I'm looking at, but those tuning in via live webcast which is a terrific tool for bringing even more people into our discussions. The Wilson Center joined forces with NPR and Big Bird -- I added that -- to create this public event series that we call "The National Conversation." Our hope is that these events will provide the public with new opportunities to engage in much needed civil discourse free from spin. Let me try that on you again. Civil discourse free from spin -- imagine that in this election season -- in the safe political space that the Wilson Center provides.

Through the Wilson Center's Cold War International History Project led by our own Christian Ostermann. Where's Christian? Oh, he's in the back. Christian, sit up -- come on -- come on down, Christian. Our experts conduct research and analysis on the Cold War, perhaps the most informative period in our history for policymakers and members of the public thinking about crisis management and presidential decision-making today. This National Conversation will focus on the time when the -- when the Cold War got hot. I was a freshman in college during the 13 days of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and I vividly remember, and so do many of you, how close we came to war. Thinking of that crisis reminds us that history sometimes calls for presidents to risk their careers to get things right. It happens rarely, but October of 1962 was one of those times and President Kennedy -- we'll hear this discussed, but in my view he rose to the occasion and

exhibited extraordinary leadership. Over the past 50 years there have been other such moments including with LBJ pushed the Civil Rights Act through Congress, when Nixon went to China, when Bush 41 led a coalition of U.N. member nations into the Gulf War Conflict, the first of its kind after the Cold War. The most recent example, in my view, was President Obama's call to carry out the attack to take down Osama bin Laden.

Fifty years after the Cuban Missile Crisis most of the participants are long gone, but thanks to secret tapes Kennedy made of the deliberations, something my friend Graham Allison here recently wrote about in an article for Foreign Affairs we can be flies on the wall listening to the debate during the crisis. As Graham writes, quote, "Every president since Kennedy has tried to learn from what happened in that confrontation, but ironically half a century later with the Soviet Union itself only a distant memory, the lessons of the Crisis for current policy have never been greater." According to Graham, who will deliver today's keynote address -- and I hope I'm not delivering it, oops -- the Cuban Missile Crisis can help U.S. policymakers to understand what to do and also what not to do about Iran, North Korea, China, and presidential decision-making in general.

I'm not sure if anyone has ever used this word to describe Graham, but he is delicious. I'm his designated driver. I took him two weeks ago and dropped him off at the Pentagon. We were driving around and couldn't find an entrance that was open, imagine. There's very little I wouldn't do for you, Graham. Graham is currently the Director of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs and Professor of Government at Harvard's Kennedy School. He previously served as special advisor to the secretary of defense under President Reagan and assistant secretary of defense for policy and plans under President Clinton. Earlier this month another friend, David Ignatius of the Washington Post, rightly called Graham "the dean of scholars of the crisis." Indeed, Graham's 1971 book, "Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis", which was updated in 1999, has been credited with revolutionizing the field of international relations. The title comes from a JFK quote that I love, quote, "The essence of ultimate decision remains impenetrable to the observer, often in -- " let me try this again. "The essence of ultimate decision remains impenetrable to the

observer, often, indeed, to the decider himself." After Graham speaks he will join a panel with Michael Dobbs and Tim Naftali, both Wilson Center alums.

Michael, a former short-term Wilson Center Scholar is now a correspondent for foreign policy. He is also the author of the book, "One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War," which is currently being made into a movie. Congrats. While Michael was here at the Center he worked on a project called, "Peace Never Came: An Inquiry into the Origins of the Cold War." And his new book on the period between the Second World War and the Cold War is coming out tomorrow. Michael and Foreign Policy recently launched a Twitter page that provides real time tweets on the Cuban Missile Crisis events to mark the 50th anniversary. My kids say grandma here isn't allowed to join Twitter, but those of you who do have access should be sure to check it out.

Tim Naftali is also part of the Wilson family. He worked here in the '90s on a project called a comparative history of U.S. and Soviet policy toward Fidel Castro in the Kennedy-Khrushchev era. He then went on to write a book, "One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964: The Secret History of the Cuban Missile Crisis," which was published in 1998. Tim is a former director of the Nixon Library and now serves as a senior research fellow at the New America Foundation. He is currently working on a study of the Kennedy presidency for publication next year, and he is also a visiting professor at UCLA, a place I once taught too.

Our spectacular moderator is my friend, Tom Gjelten, whose wife, -- he knew I was going to say this -- Martha Raddatz, won last week's vice presidential debate.

[laughter]

She is now -- he -- I don't know if either of them is enjoying the fact that she's a celebrity, but everyone now recognizes her all over this town and surely her talent is enormous. Tom led a terrific NatCon, as we call them, here last month on America's role in the world post-9/11. He went to Havana for the 40th anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis to report for NPR and he is the author of the 2008 book "Bacardi and the Long Fight for Cuba" which tells the story of the Bacardi family and their famous rum

business against the backdrop of Cuba's tumultuous history over the last 150 years.

This National Conversation is the first in a series of terrific events we are hosting to mark the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis. We will be launching a new book on Soviet-Cuban relations after the crisis and releasing 500 newly declassified documents in a huge 800 page e-book that reveals what went on behind closed doors. Be sure to stay tuned. With that, let me turn over the mic to delicious Graham Allison. Please join me in welcoming him.

[applause]

Graham Allison:

I've been called many things, and I'm happy to be called anything by Jane, but to be called delicious, I think I should probably stop now. I'm a huge fan of Jane and her former husband, Sidney, they've been great, great friends for many, many years. I told Jane at one stage that I'm happily married for more than 40 years, but if I weren't I would be courting.

[laughter]

Thank you very much, and I'm glad to be regarded as delicious. My wife, I'm not sure would agree, but that's because sometimes things look better than they are. I've - - Jane asked me to take 12 minutes, I'm not going to take more, to introduce this topic, and she set, as usual, an unusual question about the Missile Crisis. There are questions about lessons, but her question is, are we safer or is the world more dangerous than it was 50 years ago? So, having got an assignment from Jane I know better than not to try to answer it. I'm going to give you three dates, three vignettes, three questions, and three lessons and that's four times three is 12 minutes, but I have only 11 left, so let me go fast. The dates are October 1962; you shouldn't have trouble figuring out what that one was. December 1991, what was that? Who can remember?

[inaudible commentary]

Graham Allison:

Soviet Union disappeared, December 1991. Hard to believe. Thirdly, October 2012, today. So, first October 1962. By

now, if you've come to a meeting like this you'll remember that the Cuban Missile Crisis was a rush of 13 days to the precipice. The question is, how serious was -- how likely was nuclear war in October 1962? And I don't know whether they handed out this one-page sheet that I brought copies of, and I think there's some there, Tom, on the table. So October 1962, one-third to one-half. What is that? That's President Kennedy's private estimate to his brother of the likelihood that this would end in nuclear war. One-third to one-half. And 40 million and 90 million, what does that refer to? These are notes taken -- handwritten by Bobby Kennedy in the personal papers that were just revealed last -- just opened last week in Boston at the JFK Library on how many Americans would die in scenario one and scenario two. Scenario one is we go first, preempt. Scenario two is they go first. These are million people, million people. So, how risky was it? I think nothing that historians have found in the 50 years since the Missile Crisis would lead one -- would lead me to believe that JFK's estimate was an exaggeration. So, a one in three chance of between 40 and 90 million dead Americans, about 300 million people would have died in an hour of a nuclear war. Hard to believe, but I think that's the fact.

Question to you, how can you get from the events that occurred to nuclear bombs exploding on American soil? So, how can you work your way through the scenario from what happened with a minimum counterfactual to nuclear bombs exploding? And if you can't work your way to a dozen paths to that you're not working hard enough. I gave a little discussion of this and a challenge in the last chapter of "Essence of Decision." For an example, and I think we'll probably talk more about this later in the conversation, Tom, there were 100 tactical nuclear weapons in Cuba with the Soviet forces, 100 weapons that Kennedy and his associates when making choices were not conscious of. So an air strike plus invasion would have triggered use of those weapons and you can work your way down that path.

So what should we learn from the Missile Crisis? Let me do a short advertisement. There's a website, if you'll look at the bottom here, belfercenter.org or cubanmissilecrisis.org, where we try to take excerpts of lessons that all presidents and all other serious foreign policy -- secretaries of State, defense, national security advisors have drawn from the Missile Crisis, so what are the lessons of the Missile Crisis starting with JFK?

There's also a contest. Now, unfortunately, the contest ends tonight at 11:59, but you still have time. The contest goes in three categories. You can win an iPad. You're going to write your own lesson, a new lesson, and apply it to some issue today in less than 300 words. So you still have time for that.

So what did JFK say was the single most important lesson of the Missile Crisis? He did not say that it was we did crisis management, we knew how to do it, bring it on, we can do it again. He had the feeling that he had had a gun to his head with five chambers and two of them had bullets in them, the trigger had been pulled and he had survived. So, his lesson was going forward we must, quote, "Avert confrontations that force an adversary to choose between humiliating retreat and war." So there's one lesson and I would say the stunner for me.

Point two: December 1991. What happened? Soviet Union disappeared. So a failed nuclear weapon state. And you can look at here, more than 50 percent and 250 and try to see if you can remember what that might refer to. On "Meet the Press," December 15, 1991, moderator asks, "Well, gee, if the Soviet Union comes apart, what's going to happen to their nuclear arsenal?" Guest answers, "If the Soviets do an excellent job at retaining control over their stockpile of nuclear weapons and they're 99 percent successful, that would mean you'll have 250 weapons you're not able to control." Who was the secretary of defense in December 1991? Dick Cheney. Okay? Moderator didn't give him an easy pass. This was like Tom's wife the other night. Okay? So the moderator says, "Well, okay, yes, but wait a minute, let me see here. Well, therefore, what are we going to do about this?" And here's the answer from Cheney, "Given the disintegration of their society, given the sad state of their economy, the only realistic thing for me to do as secretary of defense is to anticipate that one of the byproducts of the breakup of the Soviet Union will be the proliferation of these nuclear weapons." So answer, I can't think of what to do.

So now, let's think about it, 250 weapons, loose. He's even not saying 50 percent chance that this is just going to happen. Well, who else had a different answer? Thank goodness, two senators, Senator Lugar and Senator Nunn, and on the House side, Les Aspin and Lee Hamilton, who we were just remembering a few minutes ago. They created a program

called Nunn-Lugar. Over the past 20 years this program has addressed the risk of loose nukes and here 20 years on how many nuclear weapons have been found loose from this Soviet arsenal? Answer: zero. Zero.

So what's the lesson from this case? That a seemingly insurmountable problem can, in some instances, by imagination and courage and great good fortune, produce results that nobody could have imagined.

Point three: October 2012, how dangerous is the world today? Well, we're all accustomed, especially people who do international security, to bemoan the list of crises that we currently have and think that the top 10 make this the most dangerous period, blah, blah, blah. If you ask what is the single largest threat to American national security today, President Obama and his predecessor, George W. Bush, gave the very same answer: nuclear terrorism. Nuclear weapons in the hands of somebody like al-Qaeda producing something like a nuclear 9/11.

Well, but let's stand back and think about it if we're putting it in a historical perspective given the question Jane gave us. Safer today or more dangerous today than when? So chance of nuclear Armageddon today. If you look at my chart I say not more than one in a million. Wait a minute, in the Missile Crisis it was one in three and even. Chance of a great power war today, the thing that was the major characteristic of the 20th century, I would say not more than one in a 100,000. Chance of nuclear terrorism today, a topic that I worry hugely about, I'd say maybe 5 percent, not more. Chance of dying violently in the world today for the seven billion souls, less than half of one percent. You take the 20th century: 3 percent, you take pre-state: 15 percent.

So what's the lesson from this? I would say before giving into conventional wisdom about the worst of times we should remember 1962, we should remember 1991, we should remember how a combination of imagination and strategy and stick-to-itiveness and grace and good fortune produce results that make us today safer, in my view, less dangerous, though extremely dangerous and extremely daunting, than the world of 1991 or the world of 1962.

[applause]

Tom Gjelten:

Thank you, Graham. Okay, so, before we begin, let me just say that on behalf of NPR how delighted we are to be partnering with the Wilson Center in these very important National Conversations, very useful discussions. So, I wanted to make that point right here at the outset. I think we're going to try and do a couple of things here today. One is to continue the discussion that Graham just raised which is to look at the lessons that this Missile Crisis has had for us now when confronted with the challenges that we face today, but also, secondly, to review, recollect, remember actually what happened 50 years ago this week, and I'm going to turn to Michael Dobbs for that. But before we do, Graham, just at your very end here you said something that immediately had a question in my mind. So, your calculation of how much chance there is of a great power war, a nuclear conflagration today versus the Missile Crisis is very stark, but if you were to make that calculation, say in October 1961 or in October 1960, what would you have said?

Graham Allison:

Good question, very good question, and we'd have to go back and try to get into the mental frame, but I would say the generic thought in the early '60s of the conventional wisdom would be that it was quite likely that the Cold War would end with a bang rather than a whimper. So there was a famous course given at Harvard when I was an undergraduate, I graduated in 1962, by Tom Shelley called "Bombs and Bullets" and there it was, you know, whatever, two-thirds likely that this ends in war. C.P. Snow gave his famous, you know, two cultures lecture. He said scientists know things other people don't know. We know that there's a risk every year, therefore, it's a certainty that there'll be a nuclear war. So the general mood was that great powers traditionally had struggled with each other for a while and eventually found their way to war and that if -- it wasn't about in '61, Cuba in '62, but there'd be a fuse in Berlin or here or there something would happen. So, I would say people would say 50/50 wouldn't have been unreasonable.

Tom Gjelten:

Still, I do think that we have to recognize, and I'm sure you'd agree with this, that crises can emerge overnight, can't they?

Graham Allison:

Absolutely, and you can imagine if you're stretching -- I mean, I just -- there's no magic to these numbers, I just sucked my thumb, but I would say that the -- if you say great power wars, now the U.S. and Russia continue to maintain these huge nuclear arsenals, and if they were exchanged we would kill several billion people. So the consequences are the same but the likelihood now, there are still ways you can get there but it's pretty farfetched as compared to then. For the great power wars, I think if you gave me 20 years for the U.S. and China, well now it becomes more interesting that you could probably -- and you could even now if something terrible happened in Taiwan and the Chinese decide this is essential for their security and we find ourselves in the middle of it you could probably get a path there, but it's quite low relative to where you would have been in 1962 or if we have to remember, most of the 20th century where there were great power rivalries and got us to World War I and World War II.

Tom Gjelten:

Well, let's go back now, 50 years ago this week, and we have the ideal person on this panel to take us through that moment by moment, and I want to echo what Jane Harman said, that there's -- Michael Dobbs has this terrific live Twitter feed that you can check in every day over the next two weeks and see what happened 50 years ago on that date. So let's start at the beginning. Where were we -- it was also a Monday, October 15, 1962, where were we on that day, Michael?

Michael Dobbs:

In fact, I've just come from an event at the National Geospatial Agency which is the successor to NPIC which is the National Photographic Interpretation Center which identified for the first time Soviet missiles on Cuba exactly 50 years ago today, and among the guests they had there were a couple of analysts who examined these photographs 50 years ago and they gave their recollections.

Now, to just go back a little bit, there were rumors of missiles being deployed to Cuba. There were a lot of human sources who were reporting on this. The Kennedy Administration, like today, was in pre-electoral mode, and the Republicans were attacking them for doing nothing about Cuba. So Jack Kennedy wasn't exactly thrilled to have missile discovered in Cuba. A photo blackout had been

imposed, a U2 blackout, between August and October 14. One of our U2s had been shot down over Cuba and the president and the secretary of state decided it was too risky to send U2s over Cuba, but on October 14 they sent a U2 over Cuba and it took photographs of a missile site at San Cristobal. The photographs were brought back to Washington, they were analyzed on October 15, and as the -- Vincent Derenzo [spelled phonetically], the analyst who spotted the missiles for the first time, I said, "When did this happen?" He said, "It was around about quitting time on October 15." About the time they were due to leave, about 4:00 or 5:00 in the afternoon.

Then the question was -- they reported this up the chain to their bosses. I think Bundy -- Mac Bundy, the national security advisor, was informed about 8:00, 9:00 in the evening. The president had already retired for the evening, and by the time they had definitively decided there were missiles in Cuba the president had gone to bed. So, Mac Bundy, the national security advisor, decides not to wake up the president. So, the 3:00 a.m. moment that we've all been talking about did not actually come until 8:00 the following morning when Mac Bundy, the national security advisor, goes into the president's bedroom and tells him, "We have found medium range ballistic missiles in Cuba."

Then there were two phases of the crisis. There was a private phase and a public phase. The private phase they had six days before they went public with the news -- before the President addressed the nation on October 22, and they were able to decide what they would do about this. Had then taken an immediate decision, they might well have bombed the missile sites. That was everybody's preference including the president, but they had some time to think about it, and they adopted this alternative option of a blockade, which was introduced on October 24, two days after the president spoke to the nation. And the culminating moment of the crisis was Black Saturday, October 27. Like this year it also falls on a Saturday. And then all kinds of things were happening that neither the president nor Mr. Khrushchev could fully control, and October 28, finally, Khrushchev decides to withdraw his missiles from Cuba.

So the famous 13 days that we hear so much about begin ticking not on October 14 or October 15, but when -- but

when the president finds out which is October 16. So the 13 days are from October 16 to October 28 when the Soviet leader announces he's withdrawing his missiles.

Tom Gjelten:

Michael, there's an interesting -- you have interesting discussion in your book when they showed the president those pictures neither he nor Bobby Kennedy had any idea what they were looking at. It was very vague, and it was actually a testament to the skill of the intelligence community analysts who were able to see those fuzzy pictures and know what they actually represented.

Michael Dobbs:

You know, they were taken by a U2 from 60,000 feet and Kennedy's first reaction was that this looks like a football field or something. But they identified the missiles by their length. Actually, the Russians had this habit of -- custom of parading their missiles through Red Square so, of course, photographs were taken and they matched up missiles that had been paraded through Red Square with those little dots in the football -- in what Kennedy thought was a football field.

Tom Gjelten:

Now, Tim, Graham said that in hindsight this crisis was every bit as dangerous as President Kennedy thought at the time. What's your view of this? Was it as dangerous or perhaps even more dangerous than we realized at the time?

Timothy Naftali:

Tom, I'm going to answer that question by answering another one.

Tom Gjelten:

Okay.

Michael Dobbs:

Politician.

Tom Gjelten:

Good thing I'm not my wife.

[laughter]

Timothy Naftali:

I watched her. She's really good.

Tom Gjelten:

I wouldn't -- she wouldn't let you get away with it.

Timothy Naftali:

I don't know if the audience on the radio or watching us understands why this was a crisis. Because, you know, placing missiles in Cuba was very much as we had done in Turkey. There's nothing illegal about the Soviets putting missiles in Cuba and there was nothing illegal about the United States putting missiles in Turkey. And we did it in Turkey, why wouldn't we let the Soviets do it in Cuba? But the entire world supported -- the entire world supported John F. Kennedy when he said, "Now why?" Was this a double standard? No.

And this is the part of the story that has immediate relevance to today. We have heard how many times prime minister -- the prime minister of Israel and Congressional Republicans ask for a red line -- for the president to draw a red line about Iran. John F. Kennedy drew a red line about missiles in Cuba. He didn't mean to. He did it because he was convinced the Soviets never intended to put missiles in Cuba. In fact, using back channels the Soviets told them that they didn't intend to put missiles in Cuba. You see, the Soviets lied to Kennedy. The problem was the president went on television and promised the American people, and this is just before an election, mid-term but still important, that there -- the United States would not countenance the placement of Soviet offensive weapons, which everyone understood to be missiles, on Cuba.

Now, how, when he discovered the Soviets had been lying to him, could John F. Kennedy have said, "Oh, never mind. Okay, we have them in Turkey, they can have them in Cuba." His leadership was on the line. His credibility as an international leader. His credibility with his allies and most importantly with the Soviets was on the line, and it's because the Soviets had lied to him about what they were up to.

So Kennedy goes into this crisis with a political problem. His military advisors, particularly Robert McNamara, are telling him that strategically this doesn't really matter much. Yes, it means there's less time if the Soviets were to launch a missile, the amount of time you'd have to be notified would be cut. But in terms of the strategy, no,

the United States is way ahead of the Soviets in strategic power. It was a political problem. Kennedy until the summer -- until October 1962 was a failed foreign policy president, let's not forget. We think of him today as a grand success. He is a grand success because of the Cuban Missile Crisis and because of the nuclear test ban, things that come later. What he was known for as of that moment was the Bay of Pigs, a failed attempt to overthrow Castro, and months and months of failed efforts to develop democratic regimes in Latin America and a collapsing ally in Laos in Southeast Asia.

So Kennedy faced this problem that he had promised the American people he wouldn't let the Soviets do something and they were doing it. So at that moment Kennedy could not back down on the big issue. There was going to be no compromise. The Soviets had to remove the missiles. As Michael very well reminded us, Kennedy chooses after some debate the middle point, the quarantine. The quarantine was not a solution, the blockade was no solution because the missiles were already -- some of them were already in Cuba. Nobody understood how you could actually get the Soviets to take down missiles they already had there. And, by the way, by one week into this crisis those missiles were operational. They were pointed up and operational.

So the problem for the president -- and that's where the danger that Graham described -- the problem for the president was the Soviets already had missiles, they were already operational. Yes, it wasn't as many missiles as they intended to have, but there were still enough. How were you going to get the Soviets to remove those missiles because Kennedy could not accept anything less than their removal for the sake of his political health? That was why this was so difficult on the American president. Now, it's because he drew a red line. He shouldn't have. Or, I mean, we can all argue whether he should have ever done it, but I assure you that he probably would not have drawn this red line had the Soviets not so successfully deceived him. Which is a reminder that presidents ought to be very, very careful about drawing red lines because if you do, that will mean war if the other side does what you've told them they can't do. That means war. There are -- there's no way around it.

Was this crisis as dangerous? Yes. But I want to tell you one little story that makes Graham's nightmare -- today's

nightmare -- very interesting in the context of 1963. You see, after the missile crisis Kennedy learned that his friends at NPIC, the people that Michael was describing, could find missiles, but you know what they couldn't find? Warheads. What they couldn't see were these tiny warheads. In fact, during the Missile Crisis, Kennedy's administration assumed there were warheads but never actually saw them.

At the end of the Missile Crisis Kennedy asked his advisors, actually, national intelligence estimators at CIA and the intelligence community, he said, "Look, how easy is it to move warheads around and can you move a warhead in a suitcase?" And they came back to him and they said, "Mr. President, it is true that the Soviets are able to make warheads that are small enough now that could be fit in a suitcase. It is impossible for us to monitor the movement of nuclear weapons in the world. Impossible." They also told him that chemical weapons -- that you could actually create chemical weapons in an apartment in New York City and that it was easy, the way flying was in that era when you weren't checked at all, to move vials of bacteriological weapons with you easily. But Kennedy did not establish a national alert. Why? When he received this intelligence, and we know he read it because we actually -- there's evidence on it he actually read this -- why wasn't there a national emergency in 1963 over the fact that nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons could be moved around the world? Because there was only one country in the world that could do it and we could deter them, we knew their address.

So Kennedy understood by the technology of '63 that weapons -- and by the way they used the term weapons of mass destruction -- that weapons of mass destruction could be moved around without the United States intelligence community ever observing it. But the point was, only another state could create it, and that was a state that was afraid of us because we had lots of nuclear weapons. So, my point today is, when you -- when these sorts of weapons can move -- be moved by sub-state actors who cannot be deterred the way the Soviet Union was deterred in 1963 doesn't that mean that the danger that John F. Kennedy felt we could deal with in '63 we can no longer deal with in 2012?

Tom Gjelten:

Thanks, Tim. So, just to review a couple of points here, Tim, the president's position was no offensive weapons in Cuba; however, tactical nuclear weapons are generally, I think it's fair to say, not necessarily considered offensive weapons. Right?

Graham Allison:
Could be debated.

Tom Gjelten:
Could be debated. But those were not known to the United States at the time and, in fact, we now know that those were operational and that the authority for operating them resided in Cuba. Do we know anything about --

Timothy Naftali:
Well, Tom, that's actually -- that's a very debatable point.

Tom Gjelten:
Okay.

Timothy Naftali:
My colleague, David Coleman, has written a brilliant book called, "The Fourteenth Day," which I think shows rather conclusively that the U.S. military knew that there were tactical nuclear weapons and, by the way, this is something to keep in mind about the leadership of the U.S. military in the early 1960s. It's a very dangerous -- the Joint Chiefs of Staff were very dangerous. They're heroes -- they're heroes of World War II, but they thought in a pre-nuclear way, and they thought of tactical nuclear weapons as if they were just an artillery with a bigger bang. They knew there were nuclear weapons -- tactical nuclear weapons, and they knew that they were the same type as something that Americans created, something called the Honest John, which could have a conventional weapon -- warhead, but you generally assumed that they had nuclear weapons. The plans the Joint Chiefs of Staff developed for Kennedy for the invasion of Cuba anticipated it would be a nuclear environment. So our military was advocating an invasion of Cuba knowing full well that it was -- now this, of course, there is a debate, I'm pretty persuaded they knew full well --

Graham Allison:
Michael and I are on the other side of this debate.

Timothy Naftali:

That's all right. That they knew full well that they were going to encounter -- the possibility of encountering a nuclear response.

Tom Gjelten:

So we very quickly hear the other side of the debate.

Michael Dobbs:

Well, historians have different views on this, but the equivalent to the Honest Johns were called FROGs or Lunas and they were discovered on October 25. One of our low-level reconnaissance planes happened to discover these FROGs in a field. They were nuclear capable. We didn't know if they were actually equipped with nuclear weapons. The president was briefed on that on October 26. That was the first time that he had got an inkling that there were these tactical nuclear weapons in Cuba and the full scale of it did not become apparent until 30, 40 years later when the Soviets revealed that they actually had 98 tactical nuclear weapons in Cuba, including a whole class of weapons that we never suspected called FKR cruise missiles that were aimed at Guantanamo Naval Base.

So, in -- during the 13 days -- at the beginning of the 13 days Kennedy didn't know about the tactical weapons. Toward the end he discovers about the possibility that there are nuclear-capable FROGs so then they start have to planning for a tactical nuclear war, but up until that point they hadn't planned for a tactical nuclear war. They based their battlefield casualty estimates on the idea of a conventional resistance rather than nuclear weapons in the hands of the other side.

Graham Allison:

I agree with Michael.

Tom Gjelten:

Well, one person --

Timothy Naftali:

Excuse me, I just wanted to say -- but that means, though, that when the U.S. military in the second week of the crisis was advocating an invasion of Cuba they knew that there was the possibility that the Soviets had tactical nuclear weapons. Correct?

Michael Dobbs:
After October 26.

Timothy Naftali:
Well, it doesn't matter, it's still the Crisis. And to have advocated an invasion of Cuba knowing that the Soviets could respond tactically -- with tactical nuclear weapons is, I would argue, itself highly dangerous.

Tom Gjelten:
That's something that wouldn't happen today.

Graham Allison:
No, I think Tim is right that the war planners were thinking this is conceivable and that the FROGS were nuclear capable, but the presentations to Kennedy of the war plan that he said he would have rolled out on the 28th or 29th, which he may or may not have done, would have included an invasion and would not, in terms of its estimates of how many Americans would be killed, include nuclear weapons being used against them.

Tom Gjelten:
There's another -- someone else who definitely knew that these nuclear weapons were in Cuba was Fidel Castro, and he's a character that doesn't get probably as much attention as he deserves in this episode. He famously argued that these weapons should be used, in fact, not only those weapons but there should be a first strike against the U.S. homeland in the case of an invasion which seems certainly in retrospect to be a suicidal kind of thought. And that raises the question of rationality in moments of decision making like this.

Khrushchev famously, it seems, backed down, if that's the right term, because he didn't want to see the whole world blown up, but Fidel apparently was prepared to see the whole world blown up and that raises the question of, you know, are we dealing with rational actors in today's environment or are we dealing with actors like Fidel Castro who maybe weren't seeing things so rationally? Do you have any thought about that Graham?

Graham Allison:
I think it's a great question, and I think that the -- hard as it is to believe, we need to go back and read the so-

called Armageddon letters. Khrushchev -- I'm sorry, Castro wanders over to the Soviet embassy on whatever it is --

Michael Dobbs:
The 26th.

Graham Allison:
Friday night, the 26th about, I can't remember, 11:00 or something and begins dictating a memo to Khrushchev and basically this was -- now you can read it -- it says, "If the Americans are going to invade us," paren, he doesn't say this, but that's the end of me and us, "so you should just go ahead now and attack them."

Tom Gjelten:
Wipe them off the face of the earth forever.

Graham Allison:
Yeah, right. Now, his appreciation of what is a nuclear weapon? Zero. His appreciation of what is a nuclear war? Zero. So here's a guy who's a revolutionary running around doing whatever he's doing and actually this turned out to be helpful in a perverse way because this comes back to Khrushchev and he looks at it and he says, "This guy is nuts." And he thought -- the relationship between Khrushchev and Castro was always quite -- whatever -- complex and tense. And Khrushchev, I mean, he was our guy, he's the, you know, the bastion of Soviet revolution and communist revolution in the western hemisphere and all that, but he was not somebody that Khrushchev thought was dependable or otherwise.

So early on he had been essentially excluded from the action, and he was very frustrated by this. So he is always trying to get into the game but Kennedy and Khrushchev were trying to say to him, "You sit over in the corner." And so, he got more and more frustrated as this went on. But the fact that he was proposing this to Khrushchev and then ultimately using his own -- the capabilities that he had, which were quite limited, but he had a capability to fire on the U.S. low level overflights of Cuba to actually attack American planes led Khrushchev to believe, "What a minute, this is another element that I'm not able to control." And it was the risk, and I think the fear, that both Khrushchev and Kennedy had set in motion processes that were now beyond their physical

control that actually contributed to Khrushchev's decision that, "Hey, this is enough, we better get out of this."

Tom Gjelten:

Michael, is there a Cuban view of this crisis?

Michael Dobbs:

Well, the Cubans see the Crisis as just one in a series of crises that began, certainly, well before the Bay of Pigs. I mean, Fidel had been preparing for some kind of showdown with the United States ever since taking power on January 1, 1959, and first -- the big ones were the Bay of Pigs 1961 soon after Kennedy becomes president, and then that was followed by a campaign -- a covert campaign of sabotage against the Cuban regime called Operation Mongoose which signaled to the Cubans and to their Soviet patrons that the Kennedy administration was out to overthrow the Castro regime, and the deployment of missiles in Cuba was partly a response to that.

Now the question of whether Castro was rational or not. From our point of view he was irrational, but you have to remember the slogan of the Cuban Revolution, "Patria o Muerte," Fatherland or death. They were prepared, in order to defend their revolution, they were a much smaller country, the weakest of all these three players, obviously. In order to have a chance of standing up to the super powers they had to be willing to push their resistance to the limits to be willing to die in defense of the revolution, and that was inculcated in the Cuban mind. And certainly -- so it's difficult to know is this irrational or is it rational? From Fidel's point of view it was rational because it was the only real weapon he had, and he is in power 50 years later, at least he and his brother are in power. So it was a rational calculation from his point of view.

Tom Gjelten:

Tim, 1962, as you say, was a mid-term election. This year we're in a context of a Presidential election and words like appeasement get thrown around a lot, weakness in foreign policy leadership. How was President Kennedy's handling of the Missile Crisis seen politically afterwards in 1962?

Timothy Naftali:

Oh, it was a huge success for the president but because -- that was because the president and the administration didn't let the American people know how the Crisis actually was resolved. John Kennedy was not like his rhetoric. Actually, he was a better president, if I may in my own humblest estimation, than his rhetoric. He had a very complex view of the Cold War. For example, John Kennedy did not believe that a war in Europe was likely, nor did he think the Soviets were interested in taking over Western Europe.

But the American people had been inculcated with hawkish rhetoric for 15 years, and Kennedy was such a smart politician he understood he could not reveal to the American people his complex view of the Cold War without seeming weak because, sadly, in our country at times we expect presidents because they're not only chiefs of government and commanders-in-chief, but they're also our bald eagle, we expect them to be tough, to talk tough, to say, to draw lines. Kennedy knew that was all stupid, but he couldn't admit it, so he was the kind of person who worked secretly, some would say deceptively, behind the scenes, all the time to seek compromises. Stand tough in public and then try to seek a compromise.

Now, as I mentioned, on the issues of the missiles staying in Cuba there could be no compromise. What Kennedy wanted to do was find something else, a little benni [spelled phonetically], something to give the Soviets that would give them a chance to save face so that the missiles could be removed from Cuba. That was the missiles in Turkey. Kennedy ultimately decided that he would give away the missiles in Turkey if that's was Khrushchev needed to save face and remove the missiles from Cuba.

There is yet another yet delicious debate -- the beauty of this whole Crisis is that it can be debated forever -- over whether Khrushchev really needed that benni or not. Let me put it to you this way: That concession made it a lot easier for Khrushchev to swallow this outcome, and when Kennedy used his brother to offer it secretly to the Soviets the Soviets were happy. Now I say secretly because even though it did a good job in those days, The New York Times and the Washington Post, Newsweek and Time, you name it, didn't know it. In fact, the full story of Bobby Kennedy's concession -- the full story didn't come out until the 1980s. The Kennedys believed that America

expected presidents not to concede. The Kennedys understood that pragmatic presidents in the nuclear age had to be prepared to give concessions.

Graham Allison:

Let me just make one footnote because as Tim said, this is delicious for students of this subject. So Kennedy secretly taped the deliberations -- that's a whole other story, but just leave it aside -- for us, after the fact as Jane said, we can go be flies on the wall. So, you can go the JFK Library and listen to the tapes. You can read a transcript of the tapes that Ernie May and Phil Zelikow produced so you can -- the tape is sort of scratchy, so you can just hear people deliberating about things.

So, on the 27th, the blackest day, as was said, they can't agree. People are saying, what to do? We have only two options, attack or acquiesce. Either we attack the missiles now or -- to prevent them from becoming able to fire against us or we acquiesce and this becomes a Soviet offensive base. That's it. And Kennedy keeps -- you can see in the conversations, he keeps saying, "Well, gee, but what about these missiles in Turkey?" Which Khrushchev's talking about. And the whole group says to him, "Forget about it. No. If you were to even think about this first you're going to be weak, you're going to ruin NATO." And he says, "Yeah, but what if we have a war? Will this be good for NATO?" So, you can see that this is in his head and he's playing with the idea, but he can't get any agreement at all. So, he finally says, "Okay, let's give it up for now. Everybody go home and have dinner and come back here at 9:00." Then he holds back his brother and five other people and says, "I got an idea. Why don't you go there and privately tell Dobrina [spelled phonetically] here in Washington. Tell Dobrina to come to your office at the Justice Department. You tell them, here's the deal: We'll have a public deal, you withdraw the missiles, we'll agree not to invade Cuba. The private ultimatum: I need to hear from the president -- from Khrushchev within 24 hours that he's withdrawing the missiles or I'm going to act independently. And thirdly, here's the secret sweetener, as long as you don't say anything about it: If the missiles go out of Cuba, within six months, the missiles will be gone from Turkey." So he goes, and he tells him this. Now he comes back to the meeting -- this is the charming part -- so you can go watch and listen to the 9:00 meeting -- so there's six people sitting at the table, these most

intimate advisors. There's 10 people that don't know that while we were talking -- you know, we were having dinner -- you were out making this arrangement. And so they're still debating options that have already been overtaken. And after the crisis, he didn't say anything to any of them.

Tom Gjelten:

We're going to open it up to some questions from the audience in a few minutes, but first I want to talk about today. And Graham, very quickly, you have a foreign policy -- foreign affairs article this summer where you draw some lessons for today's challenges from the Missile Crisis. One of the things that you said that intrigued me, is that there may, in your words, a Kennedy-esque third option for dealing with Iran. Third option in the sense of not complete capitulation or complete military response. Do you want to very briefly say what a Kennedy-esque for dealing with the nuclear challenge that Iran faces would look like?

Graham Allison:

Let me try to be very quick. So I think actually thinking of Iranian nuclear challenge, which is the big issue on the agenda today, as a Cuban missile crisis in slow motion actually gives you some clues. And in the missile crisis, in 13 days one rushed up to the brink, here over the next 13 months we're going to get to a point where there'll be a confrontation in which a president is going to have to choose between attacking to prevent Iran becoming a nuclear state, or acquiescing and it becoming so. It may not take 13 months, it may take, you know fewer, or -- about like that. So, if one looks at this as Kennedy did the missile crisis, he thought, "Gee, if we attack, I might end up in a nuclear war. If I acquiesce I think Khrushchev's going to move against Berlin, and then we're going to defend that may then end in nuclear war." So he was unprepared to take either of these options.

Myself, whenever I look at these two options, which is what I think a president will face sometime in the next year or two: Attacking, whew, I worked my way down that path and it just seems catastrophic; acquiescing, cascade of proliferation in the region, that one also seems horrible. And as I've said, whenever -- whichever of the two of these items I've -- alternatives I've examined most carefully most recently, I've come to think, "Well, gee, maybe the other one's a little better than I thought." So I would

say a Kennedy-esque sort of thought in this would be to say, "Is it possible to become imaginative about ugly options that have lots of reasons why you wouldn't like them, except the fact that they might be better than the only two alternative feasible options?" And I'd think in that space might be doing a lot of things that we would say would never, never, never do. Because I don't think that the Iranians are going to ever not know how to enrich -- excuse me, they've been doing this for 10 years. Are they ever going to give up the right to enrich? No. They're ever going to give up the practice of enriching? No. So all these things, the U.N. resolution say "no, no, no," you can't do this, but the answer is, they did it; this already happened, you can't reverse those facts.

So I think in that space, you might become inventive. Whether all the elements would be public would be interesting. Because today, with 24/7 news and many more investigative reporters and all the culture of leaks, you know, a Kennedy-esque kind of deal would be extremely hard to do. But I would say, that's the place to look.

Tom Gjelten:

Michael, what's your thoughts about comparing what lessons can be drawn from the missile crisis to not only Iran but also North Korea? Of course, these situations today with Iran and North Korea involve many more players than were involved in the Missile Crisis, which was basically just Washington and Moscow.

Michael Dobbs:

Right. There are some differences, there are many -- some similarities and many differences. And I think that when people use history in order to bolster their case for doing something, often we start making mistakes. At the Harvard website on the Cuban Missile Crisis, cubanmissilecrisis.org, they have a page of lessons that have been drawn about the Missile Crisis, including a page on lessons the presidents have drawn. And reading through these lessons, what really struck me was how the wrong lessons -- many of these lessons have been the wrong lessons. President Johnson thought he was following in Kennedy's footsteps of acting tough, controlling a crisis when he escalated in Vietnam, and we ended up in the quagmire of Vietnam. In the case of President Bush, before he went into Iraq, he cited the missile crises and he said " this shows we have to be prepared to take preemptive war.

I think he drew -- I mean, people can disagree with that, personally I think that was the wrong lesson and got us into a war that we should have avoided. Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel has been citing the Missile Crisis as a precedent for drawing a red line and taking action against Iran. I would also argue that's a wrong lesson.

Now, what are the right kind of lessons from history? I think the right sort of lessons -- so you can't just take one historical situation and compare it to another, because there are many differences. Kennedy, when he was trying to figure out what to do in the Missile Crisis, he just read a book by Barbara Tuchman called *The Guns of August*, which is about the beginning of the First World War. And it showed for Kennedy how we got into the First World War without the political leaders in any of these countries really intending to -- really understanding what they were getting into and not intending to bring the world to war. And he had that book on his mind throughout the Missile Crisis. In fact, I was just looking at some of the materials from the Robert Kennedy collection at the -- that have just been declassified, and he jots down on October 23, he's having a private conversation with his brother and Jack Kennedy is thinking about *The Guns of August*. Not that, of course, the situation August 1914 was identical to the situation in October 1962, but just the general principal: Don't get into something that you can't control. And if I go to war I better have a very good explanation for the American people about why I'm going to war. And that this is even more important in the nuclear age than it was in 1914. So I think the real lessons for the Missile Crisis are these kind of general cautionary lessons than "I'm going to behave exactly as Kennedy did back in 1962."

Tom Gjelten:

Tim, you're nodding your head.

Timothy Naftali:

We haven't talked about the Soviets much, and so that's part of a lesson, which is that your adversary may actually be rational and have a certain bounded rationality -- you have to figure them out. One of Kennedy's talents was to try to think through what Khrushchev needed to save face in this crisis.

One of the other things Kennedy learned from this, and he'd actually learned this just before but it helped him during

this crisis was that sometimes your adversary will bluff out of weakness, not out of strength. One of the challenges for a democracy, of course, is that because we fortunately have access to information, that means all of us have access to the bluffs of our adversaries. And there's often a lot of pressure on our president to act on a bluff rather than the reality of the threat. Weak states often will puff -- I think of them as like those fish, the puffers -- they'll puff themselves up in order not to be swallowed. That's what Iraq did after all. I'm not saying that Nikita Khrushchev and Saddam Hussein were the same, but the essential logic of lying about your weapons of mass destruction program in order to scare not only the United States but your allies and people in your own regime, that's a good strategy for a dictator. And it's one they often use. So I'm not suggesting that North Korea is like Iraq is like the Soviet Union, but one of the key principles of the Cuban Missile Crisis was that presidential decision making rested on the ability to think about -- to think in the other guy's shoes. That's a good -- to add to what Michael said about general lessons -- that's a very useful general approach that presidents ought to keep in mind when they face foreign adversaries.

Tom Gjelten:

Okay, let's turn it over to questions now. First, Peter Clement.

Peter Clement:

[inaudible]

Tom Gjelten:

Wait, there is a microphone coming, Peter.

Peter Clement:

First, what a fabulous presentation. I'm delighted to be here to hear all this.

My favorite anecdote involves the Soviet decision making piece of this story and Tim, we've talked about this in the past. It was a shock to me when I first discovered that, in fact, the Politburo had not decided on this decision to shoot down the U2. Could you elaborate a little bit more on the lesson learned from that?

Timothy Naftali:

Oh, well, Michael does a very nice job of this too, but one

of the reasons why the Goldilocks principle applies to this crisis: It's not too short and it's not too long. If it had been too short they probably would have -- both the Soviets and the Americans would have acted on their passions and God knows what would have happened. If it had gone on longer, it was coming apart at the end -- at the seams, and a lot of passions were flowing that might have led to war.

The situation in Cuba became almost untenable by the second week of the Crisis. Not only have we heard about Fidel's long night -- it's a fantastic story of how he spent the evening drinking beer and eating sausages with the Soviet KGB resident and Ambassador Alexiev during which he wrote and rewrote and rewrote this Armageddon letter.

But he wasn't the only one who was at the edge of his tether. So were the Soviet military commanders there. And Fidel had allowed the Cubans to fire on low level panes. And the Cubans were working closely with the Soviets on the ground, not up in the diplomatic sphere, but down on the ground. And it was that tension, that edginess, maybe also the bravado of the Cubans that led to the decision by the Soviet commander to shoot down the U2 without preauthorization by Moscow, which gives you a sense of how -- again The Gun of August analogy -- how things can run out of the control of even the best president or chairman of the presidium.

I would mention on that point too, that the shoot-down of the U2 in addition to Castro's letter and in addition to intelligence the Americans actually might invade Cuba, placed an enormous amount of pressure on Nikita Khrushchev on the morning of October 28, and helped make the final decision for him to accept the American offer and end the Crisis.

Michael Dobbs:

Just to add to that briefly. I think what that incident really illustrates -- the shoot-down of the U2 in Cuba -- was that neither leader really knew what was going on in Cuba. As Tim said, the U2 was shot down on the authority of local soviet commanders in Cuba. And Khrushchev didn't know, he only found out later and he got a rather garbled version of it. At the same time the U2 was shot down over Cuba, another American U2 had got lost over the Soviet Union -- amazing, on the most dangerous day of the Cold

War, we were sending U2s to the north pole to gather nuclear evidence of Soviet nuclear tests. And that U2 blundered over the Soviet Union on the most dangerous day of the crisis, without the president being informed until it spent an hour and a half over the Soviet Union. The president was not aware of that. There were many things that neither Khrushchev nor Kennedy was aware of. When Kennedy found about the U2 over the Soviet Union, he said, "There's always some son-of-a-bitch who doesn't get the word." And to me that is really the real risk that we ran in the Missile Crisis, was that we got to a point when there were many sons-of-bitches who didn't get the word. And the two leaders were unable to fully control what was going on and indeed they weren't aware of many things that were going on.

Tom Gjelten:

Was the Soviet commander or commanders who authorized the shoot down of the U2 the same one or ones who had the authority to use the tactical nukes?

Timothy Naftali:

Well they didn't have the authority to use the tactical nukes. This is a -- what happened was, best as we can determine because it involves oral testimony -- the best that we can determine is that there was some discussion of an oral pre-delegation of the -- for the use of tactical weapons. But once the crisis started for the Soviets, which is once they -- once John F. Kennedy gave his speech on October 22, Khrushchev and the presidium, that's what the Politburo was called then, told the local commanders, you may not use tactical nuclear weapons without our permission.

Tom Gjelten:

Okay --

Graham Allison:

But just a footnote on that, so, first, the commander had physical control of the weapons, that is, at the time if he had said use it --

Tom Gjelten:

[unintelligible] he could have done it.

Graham Allison:

-- they can use it, that's first. Secondly, the reason why they rescinded the permission would suggest that they had permission, so that -- and so if instead of announcing the blockade, which Kennedy did on the 22nd, he had gone with the air strike, these weapons wouldn't have been used.

Timothy Naftali:

Oh well, there's no doubt. The -- We have the minutes. They are cryptic, but they are, nevertheless informative. We have the minutes of the first presidium meeting, as they're awaiting Kennedy's speech. And they don't know what he's going to say. They don't know if he's going to announce an invasion, in fact I don't think any of them thought he would announce a blockade. And so there is a discussion of how he will respond and there is a discussion which Khrushchev leads about using tactical nuclear weapons in response, but then he calms down, they hear the speech, and they make sure that they control weapons. But the truth of the matter is, if the United States had launched an attack, it is hard to predict, it's impossible actually to predict if the Soviet response would have been measured.

Tom Gjelton:

Another question. You, ma'am, right, straight ahead.

Female Speaker:

Could you comment on [inaudible] decision-making?

Michael Dobbs:

Perhaps I could have a bash at that. Penkovsky was the Soviet spy who -- actually he was quite crucial during this period because he had given the technical manual for the R-12 missile, which is this medium-range ballistic missile. He had handed that over to the United States. So when they were figuring out what these things were in Cuba, they identified them as R-12s or as we called them, SS-4s. They had the technical manual which told them which told them what you had to do to prepare them to fire. And they were able to observe what was happening in Cuba at the missile sites, put that against the information that they'd received from Penkovsky, and told the president when these missiles were ready to fire. That was Penkovsky's main contribution. Actually Penkovsky is arrested during the 13 days. The Soviets probably had an eye on him for some time and they wrapped him up during the 13 days and he was later executed. So you could consider him a casualty of the Missile Crisis.

Tom Gjelton:
Mike Mosettig.

Mike Mosettig:
For Mr. Naftali, a couple points. Since you've mentioned the JCS, wasn't overall their conduct irresponsible during this time, culminating in General LeMay telling the president to his face, basically "You're weak and unpatriotic for making the deal with Khrushchev." And when you listed the foreign policy failures that the president was dealing with for October, I'm surprised you didn't mention the construction of the Berlin Wall and Kennedy getting cuffed around by Khrushchev in Vienna in 1961.

Timothy Naftali:
I'll say this quickly. One, I don't share the view about Vienna because I've seen -- I've wrote a -- my co-author Aleksandr Fursenko and I wrote about this in a couple books, most recent Khrushchev's Cold War, but -- Kennedy walked into an ambush. He -- Khrushchev had set that up to do that to him. I think Kennedy did brilliantly in Vienna. He -- I mean, he walked in to an ambush. Khrushchev intended to do what he did, which was to embarrass Kennedy, to harangue him, to throw an ultimatum at him. Kennedy's mistake was not to have anticipated this, but you know what, none of the Sovietologists around Kennedy anticipated it.

In terms of the Berlin Wall, I don't fault Kennedy for the Berlin Wall at all, in fact the Berlin Wall took some of the pressure off of Berlin. He stood tall against Khrushchev, and it's Khrushchev who really emerged from the that '61 crisis hurt. The Chinese, the Albanians, they don't care so much, but in those day's they were part of the socialist commonwealth. They mattered to the Chinese and the Soviets at the time. They were very critical, the Chinese and the Albanians were very critical of Khrushchev, as were the East Germans for standing down. So, those weren't -- I wouldn't call those Kennedy failures at all.

But the -- I think the point is that Kennedy's efforts to work with the Soviets which had been largely secretive -- you know, his use of Bobby during this crisis was not unique. He'd used Bobby Kennedy working with a Soviet intelligence officer named Georgi Bolshakov who was military intelligence. They -- he, Kennedy had established

or tried to establish a back channel with Khrushchev to try to figure out what Khrushchev's bottom line was. And you can say that naive -- that Kennedy was naive I suppose, but he felt that all leaders have a bottom line, and he tried to suss out Khrushchev's. The Cuban Missile Crisis proved to him he didn't understand Khrushchev effectively and then he figured out how to work with Khrushchev more effectively.

Tom Gjelten:

Michael points out that we're very fortunate to have, in the audience, the last surviving witness of JFK's handling of the Missile Crisis, former deputy head of intelligence at the State Department. Sir, do you want to identify yourself? Tom Hughes.

Tom Hughes:

Everybody seems to get A plus here for keeping secrets. Kennedy keeps secrets. Khrushchev -- Kennedy's trying to save face for Khrushchov. How does he save face with Khrushchev if the secret has to be kept by Khrushchev, how wide a circle in Moscow were privy to the Turkish deal and why did nobody leak it?

The way he saves face presumably is to have it widely known that he's -- that that was the deal.

Graham Allison:

That's a good question, Tom, and certainly he discusses it with his, you know, inner circle, with the members of the Politburo, and then it begins to leak out, and then -- among Soviets -- and that the question we had at Harvard where we all were, Andrei Kokoshin was there, and Andrei was a young, whatever, Komsomol leader, you know at the time, and they said that when they would have party meetings, as early as 1963; they would say, "We know a big secret, look and see what happened with -- " so they were doing a little bit to shore him up. So I think that's a good question.

Michael Dobbs:

I think the Soviets simply weren't as savvy about spinning the press as the Americans, and the Americans, if the situation had been reversed, the Kennedy administration would have leaked it. But leaking was not the sort of thing the Soviets did, and they tried to make it public, or the tried to get it on the record from Bobby Kennedy, and

Bobby refused to write -- he said, "This is just an oral undertaking, I'm not going to put it on the record for you." So they didn't want to antagonize the Americans. And the main -- Khrushchev's main constituency was not Soviet public opinion, which played absolutely no role in the Soviet Union. His main constituency was his fellow members of the Soviet leadership, the Soviet Presidium. So he certainly made sure that they were aware of it, and in fact, he argues that he said well we got them to take their missiles out of Cuba -- out of Turkey. That was one of the things he waved around. But he was not so interested in shaping public opinion as his American counterpart would have been.

Timothy Naftali:

I would add one more thing which is, it took a number of months, four months actually for those Turkish missiles to be removed, and Khrushchev knew that he had promised Kennedy not to say anything and he also probably assumed that if he said something about it, those missiles would never be removed. So the time to have actually done the spinning was the time during which the Turkish missiles were actually still in Turkey.

Tom Gjelten:

Mr. Hughes, I want to ask you if you have -- if there's a memory that you have from those events that you'd like to share or that maybe hasn't got a lot of attention.

Tom Hughes:

Well, one question that always fascinated me was the timing question. I think somewhere Graham Allison said that if the missiles had been discovered two weeks earlier or two weeks later it would have had a considerable difference in how the whole thing was handled. What would in fact have happened if the missiles had been discovered two weeks earlier or two weeks later?

Graham Allison:

Good question. Take the two weeks later just to see. So the fact that they were -- a great intelligence coup, and I would say great intelligence success; the combination of Penkovsky, as was already discussed, and these magical U2 overflights which had cameras that at the time took pictures of the ground that would allow you to see things -- this is way, way before the Internet, Google Earth, anything like this. So it was like magic, as you remember

very well. So, had this been two weeks later, the construction project would have been finished. So then the proposition that we're going to do a blockade, against what? To prevent what? So I think that actually we were extremely fortunate that one was in this quite short window. And I think if you'd gone two weeks later and now try to see what Kennedy's options would have been, they would have been much, much narrower and not have included the blockade which at least punitively was about preventing additional missiles, additional warheads, and without even knowledge of whether there were even warheads there at the time.

Timothy Naftali:

One thing to keep in mind is that the Soviets had operational missiles already, so in terms of the Soviet attitude, it probably wouldn't have been different. It didn't matter how many missiles they had there. They already had enough to respond. I think, first of all, that this whole proposition and this whole plan was Khrushchev's plan and his alone. It took two meetings to approve it. Now imagine, Khrushchev is supposed to be the dictator of the Soviet Union and yet it takes two meetings for them to agree to this cockamamie scheme. So you have doubt already in the Soviet leadership about it. And secondly, Khrushchev never told them that this would entail going to the brink of war. And I think one of the -- the one element of this story that is very important is that the Soviets never wanted to go to the brink of war, and so when they went to the brink of war, they removed them. And it wouldn't matter if they had, you know, 40 or 80 missiles operational. The fact that the United States would go to war over one operational missile in Cuba was something that they had not taken into consideration.

Tom Gjelton:

Yes, sir.

Male Speaker:

What was the Turkish response when the Jupiter missiles were removed from Turkey? Was there anywhere near a fraction of the anguish that Castro had in Cuba?

Timothy Naftali:

Can I answer that one?

The Turks were bought off. They were given -- there were Polaris submarines placed off the -- that was -- these Turkish missiles were obsolete.

Graham Allison:

No.

Timothy Naftali:

They were obsolete. And they could -- they were not part of Robert McNamara's future plan for NATO deterrence --

Tom Gjelten:

Graham says they weren't obsolete.

Graham Allison:

I think Tim has bought the administration's story, which was a good story and is as good a story as you could tell, but was not true.

So, first, the missiles only became operational for the first time just by accident during these 13 days. They'd never been operational before. So they were obsolete -- excuse me, I just got it --

Timothy Naftali:

That wouldn't be the first government program to be obsolete the minute it starts.

Graham Allison:

The question of what is an obsolete government program? Now, this is more philosophical.

The second question is, anybody that's offered Polaris submarines which are in the ocean, which are of course, just as good as the missiles that are here in Cuba -- excuse me, missiles, sorry, missiles in Turkey, missiles in Turkey mean that if there's an attack on Turkey, it's an attack on you and you're in the game. In the same way that American troops at a base are, quote, a guarantor. So whenever it was explained to Europeans, Tom will remember this very well, that oh well, missiles and -- that Polaris missiles are just as good as missiles on the ground, in Europe people said, "Well, wait a minute." But the guy [unintelligible] in the boats, if you're attacked -- Germany, you may or may not respond but on the other hand, if you've got three hundred thousand troops in Germany and the Soviets come pouring through here, they're in the

middle of the fight, you're in the fight. So I would say, well it's a good story, but not correct.

Female Speaker:

Thank you for those pictures. The recent years has witnessed a series of escalating disputes or confrontations in the South China Sea between the two powers. So I came from China, I'm Chinese. So I'm more concerned about the other end of the Pacific Ocean. As we can see that when the president especially President Obama, in his election debate, he accentuated that by the year 2014 Americans troops going to pull out. But they of course they won't all of the troops won't just pull out in a time till the -- let's say San Francisco. There are Japans there and Philippines there. They're providing some kind of operational, technical support to American troops which actually, it's just in front of the gates of China. And let's not talk about the North. I mean -- not to mention the North Korea and Japan and the -- what's happening between Pakistan and India, they're all about nukes. So, I know that we should be cautious when it comes to historical analogy, and what do you think about this situation, when it compare to the Cuban Missile Crisis? Thank you.

Tom Gjelten:

The situation in the South China Sea, or with respect to North Korea, or both of them?

Female Speaker:

South China Sea and the relation --

Tom Gjelten:

South China Sea. Because that is where we -- that's the scenario under which we can imagine kind of a U.S.-Chinese confrontation. You wrote about this in your Foreign Affairs --

Graham Allison:

I'll do a short version of it and then in the Foreign Affairs piece, I've got a little bit -- a longer version. But basically I'd say the South China Sea is a good candidate for conflict for conflict between the U.S. and China, and the reasons why are, for Americans, as I say in this foreign affairs piece, Americans like to lick the Chinese about "you should be more like us." But if you, if the Chinese government turns out to be like Teddy Roosevelt was, this time in the 20th century when he's coming to a

century that he's supremely confident is the American century, there's some analogies here that are interesting. When the British proposed that they'll help resolve territorial disputes between the U.S. and Venezuela or the U.S. and Panama, Honduras, or the U.S. and Mexico, or the U.S. and Canada, he says, "Forget about it. Forget about it. Out, out." So the U.S. resolves all these issues bilaterally, entirely on our own terms. Okay? So strong power, weak power, so when it comes to the question of -- with Canada over the territory that's now Alaska, that long strip, Americans say, "That's ours" and the Canadians say, "Well, wait a minute, that's ours." And the British say, "Well this is our, you know, colony. We should be part of this conversation." Teddy Roosevelt says, "forget about it, out, out. We'll do it our way." And then Taft says to them, "Well, we should do this by international tribunal," and he says "well, I'm not going to let international people" So Taft says, "How about I do the following: You can have a five person panel, and you get to -- it's by majority vote -- and you get to appoint three." He says, "That's okay." So they have the three, they have one meeting, they say, "This is it, you can look at that strip of Alaska, that's ours." Okay. When the people -- folks in Honduras don't want to have a canal. He says, "Well I have another idea. How about we have a coup, we declare a new country, it's called Panama. The next day we recognize it. The day after it gives us a contract for the canal we want. We make the canal."

So I would say it's going to be extremely difficult, I call this the Thucydides Trap that when you see a rising power rival a ruling power, generally this is a sad story. It doesn't turn out well. So if the leadership of China and the leadership of the U.S. performs no better than the leadership before -- in the Guns of August -- before World War One, this will end up badly and I think looking at the size of the challenge should remind us, it's not inevitable but it's -- it'll require a stretch to better sense -- than history as usual.

Tom Gjelten:

In the front row. Do we have a microphone down here?

Tad Daley:

Thank you. Tad Daley's my name. I wanted to share with the panel first that I was assigned to read The Essence of Decision when I was working on my bachelor's degree, and

then again when I was working on my master's degree, and then again when I was working on my Ph.D, Professor Allison.

Graham Allison:

Thank you. I get 50 cents a copy, so thank you.

[laughter]

I hope you turned your book in to buy a new one.

Tad Daley:

You can buy me a cup of coffee.

Graham Allison:

Good. Don't buy used copies.

Tad Daley:

Timothy Naftali, in his opening remarks, spoke very eloquently about the political and even electoral considerations on President Kennedy. I want to ask anyone on the panel, specifically about the strategic reality, and it's something I've never really gotten about the crisis, which is the Sovs had had nuclear weapons for 13 years and two months, since August of 1949. And while they certainly didn't have this capability right away in August of 1949, certainly it does in years later they did already possess the capability to drop a hydrogen bomb on New York, or Chicago, or Miami. According to the theory, they were deterred from doing so by our massive nuclear capability. So I'm not quite sure what really changed in terms of the fundamental strategic status quo by moving missiles a little bit closer and a little bit less of a warning time. But it is both before and after the installation, and presumably if the missiles had continued, in my view it wouldn't really have changed the fundamental strategic status quo, and therefore I guess I want to ask, what was the big deal, strategically?

Michael Dobbs:

Hmm. This is the point that Tim was getting at in his introduction. It didn't change a huge amount strategically, but the president had said, "This would be unacceptable to us," so therefore he had to act. At the time, of course, Kennedy ran on the so-called missile gap. He said that the Soviets had many more missiles than we had. That turned out to be untrue. There was a missile

gap but it was in favor of the United States. The United States had about a 10-to-one advantage in warheads that could hit the other side at this point. The Soviets would have got another 40 warheads that could reach the United States, if they'd succeeded in getting away with the Cuba gamble. But that would still have left them with a 10-to-one disadvantage vis-à-vis the United States, and Kennedy said at one point, "Does it really matter where they hit us from, Cuba or the Soviet Union?" But it was a psychological question more than a strategic question. The president was deterred actually just by the thought of one of those Soviet warheads getting through. But deploying these warheads to Cuba -- missiles to Cuba, did not give the Soviets a first-strike capability against the United States.

Timothy Naftali:

Can I just add that this is why the term "credibility" is important for leaders? Kennedy's credibility was wrapped up in a certain -- in a prohibition of placement of missiles in Cuba. And that's why, I think, President Obama is so careful about the words he chooses and uses about Iran. Because each time he says something about Iran, he is investing his credibility into that policy.

Tom Gjelten:

Okay, we just have -- two of our panelists have to run. Last question, a very short one please.

Male Speaker:

Yeah I'd like to return what -- to what Graham Allison said about the lessons learned with regard to Iran. And I would like to look at a different scenario where it's not us and Iran which are in this but, again, us and Russia. And Russia, people don't think about it these days, but our relationship with them has deteriorated significantly and the situation in Iran and Syria is considered by them a strategic issue. And therefore, if there were a military conflict or if the U.S. were to go in there without a U.N. mandate, this I think would drive the conflict, the tensions between the U.S. on one side and Russia, and also China on the other side, to a level which would be short of general war, perhaps, but in a similar situation to what we might have had in the Cuban Missile Crisis. And I would like you to comment on that aspect of this Middle East situation.

Tom Gjelten:

As brief as you want to make it.

Graham Allison:

Just very -- very briefly I would say, very good question and it would require a long answer to be thoughtful but the -- I think what you remind us of is that in the Missile Crisis, fortunately this was essentially a two-person game. So, Castro wanted to be in the game but really wasn't. In the case of Iran, there's Iran, there's the U.S., there's the P5-plus-one, there's Israel. So there are a lot of actors, and getting the pieces right in this case, therefore, is I think, hugely more challenging than in the Missile Crisis.

Tom Gjelten:

All right, I think we're going to have to wrap it up there. I'd like to thank our panelists: Tim Naftali, Michael Dobbs, Graham Allison; our hosts, Jane Harman and the Wilson Center; and NPR. Thank you very much.

[applause]

[end of transcript]