

Kitchen Table Kibitzing 10/16/24: Crisis? What Crisis?

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by jck for Kitchen Table KibitzingCommunity (This content is not subject to review by Daily Kos staff prior to publication.)



I was going to flash-fry ropa vieja but cooler heads prevailed

We live in a time where crises are piled on one another like kindling, in various stages of combustion. It's worth our while to remember earlier times when we came *thiiiiis* close to having it all go up, and we're still here.

62 years ago today was the start of two weeks that had the whole world in a cold sweat.

The **Cuban Missile Crisis**, also known as the **October Crisis** (Spanish: *Crisis de Octubre*) in Cuba, or the **Caribbean Crisis** (Russian: Карибский кризис, romanized: *Karibskiy krizis*), was a 13-day confrontation between the governments of the United States and the Soviet Union, when American deployments of nuclear missiles in Italy and Turkey were matched by Soviet deployments of nuclear missiles in Cuba. The crisis lasted from 16 to 28 October 1962. The confrontation is widely considered the closest the Cold War came to escalating into full-scale nuclear war.^[1]

In 1961 the US government put Jupiter nuclear missiles in Italy and Turkey. It had trained a paramilitary force of expatriate Cubans, which the CIA led in an attempt to invade Cuba and overthrow its government. Starting in November of that year, the US government engaged in a violent campaign of terrorism and sabotage in Cuba, referred to as the Cuban Project, which continued throughout the first half of the 1960s. The Soviet administration was concerned about a Cuban drift towards China, with which the Soviets had an increasingly fractious relationship. In response to these factors the Soviet and Cuban governments agreed, at a meeting between leaders Nikita Khrushchev and Fidel Castro in July 1962, to place nuclear missiles on Cuba to deter a future US invasion. Construction of launch facilities started shortly thereafter.

A U-2 spy plane captured photographic evidence of medium- and long-range launch facilities in October. US President John F. Kennedy convened a meeting of the National Security Council and other key advisers, forming the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (EXCOMM). Kennedy was advised to carry out an air strike on Cuban soil in order to compromise Soviet missile supplies, followed by an invasion of the Cuban mainland. He chose a less aggressive course in order to avoid a declaration of war. On 22 October Kennedy ordered a naval blockade to prevent further missiles from reaching Cuba.^[2] He referred to the blockade as a "quarantine", not as a blockade, so the US could avoid the formal implications of a state of war.^[3]

We came closer to nuclear war than we've ever been, before or since.

Arguably, the most dangerous moment in the crisis was not recognized until the Cuban Missile Crisis Havana conference, in October 2002, marking the 40th anniversary of the crisis. A three-day conference sponsored by the private National Security Archive, Brown University, and the Cuban government.^[203] Attended by many of the veterans of the crisis, they all learned that on 27 October 1962, a group of eleven United States Navy destroyers and the aircraft carrier USS Randolph located the B-59, a diesel-powered nuclear-armed Soviet Project 641 (NATO designation Foxtrot) submarine, near Cuba. Despite being in international waters, the Americans started dropping depth charges. There had been no contact from Moscow for a number of days and the submarine was too deep to monitor any radio traffic, so those on board did not know whether war had broken out. The captain of the submarine, Valentin Savitsky, had no way of knowing that the depth charges were non-lethal "practice" rounds intended as warning shots to force the B-59 to surface. Running out of air, the Soviet submarine was surrounded by American warships and desperately needed to surface. While surfacing, the B-59 "came under machine-gun fire from [U.S. ASW S-2] Tracker aircraft. The fire rounds landed either to the sides of the submarine's hull or near the bow. All these provocative actions carried out by surface ships in immediate proximity, and ASW aircraft flying some 10 to 15 meters above the boat had a detrimental impact on the commander, prompting him to take extreme measures... the use of special weapons."^[204] As firing live ammunition at a submarine was strictly prohibited captain Savitsky assumed that his submarine was doomed and that World War III already had broken out. The Americans, for their part, did not know, that the B-59 was armed with a 15-kiloton nuclear torpedo, roughly the power of the bomb at Hiroshima.^{[205][149][better source needed]} The USS Beale was joined by other US destroyers who piled in to pummel the submerged B-59 with more explosives.

Captain Savitsky ordered the B-59's nuclear torpedo to be prepared for firing, its target was the USS Randolph, the aircraft carrier leading the task force. An argument broke out in the sweltering control room of the B-59 submarine among the three officers, including submarine captain Savitsky, political officer Ivan Semyonovich Maslennikov, and Deputy brigade commander Captain 2nd rank (US Navy Commander rank equivalent) Vasily Arkhipov. Accounts differ about whether Arkhipov convinced Savitsky not to make the attack or whether Savitsky himself finally concluded that the only reasonable choice left open to him was to come to the surface.^{[206]: 303, 317} The decision to launch the B-59's nuclear torpedo required the consent of all three senior officers aboard. The young officer Vasily Arkhipov was alone in refusing permission. Arkhipov's reputation was a key factor in the control room debate. The previous year he had exposed himself to severe radiation in order to save a submarine with an overheating nuclear reactor.^{[149][better source needed]}

During the conference October 2002, McNamara stated that nuclear war had come much closer than people had thought. Thomas Blanton, director of the [National Security Archive](#), said, "A guy called Vasily Arkhipov saved the world."^[203]

We got out of it by people finally acting like adults.

On Saturday, 27 October, after much deliberation between the Soviet Union and Kennedy's cabinet, Kennedy secretly agreed to remove all missiles set in Turkey and possibly southern Italy, the former on the border of the Soviet Union, in exchange for Khrushchev removing all missiles in Cuba.^{[152][153][154][155][156]} There is some dispute as to whether removing the missiles from Italy was part of the secret agreement. Khrushchev wrote in his memoirs that it was, and when the crisis had ended McNamara gave the order to dismantle the missiles in both Italy and Turkey.^[157]

At this point, Khrushchev knew things the US did not. First, that the shooting down of the U-2 by a Soviet missile violated direct orders from Moscow, and Cuban anti-aircraft fire against other US reconnaissance aircraft also violated direct orders from Khrushchev to Castro.^[158] Second, the Soviets already had 162 nuclear warheads on Cuba that the US did not then believe were there.^[159] Third, the Soviets and Cubans on the island would almost certainly have responded to an invasion by using those nuclear weapons, even though Castro believed that every human in Cuba would likely die as a result.^[160] Khrushchev also knew but may not have considered the fact that he had submarines armed with nuclear weapons that the US Navy may not have known about.

Khrushchev knew he was losing control. President Kennedy had been told in early 1961 that a nuclear war would likely kill a third of humanity, with most or all of those deaths concentrated in the US, the USSR, Europe and China;^[161] Khrushchev may well have received similar reports from his military.

Hiving adults in government is a good thing, folks.

Kitchen Table Kibitzing is a community series for those who wish to share a virtual kitchen table with other readers of Daily Kos who aren't throwing pies at one another. Drop by to talk about music, your weather, your garden, or what you cooked for supper.... Newcomers may notice that many who post in this series already know one another to some degree, but we welcome guests at our kitchen table and hope to make some new friends as well.

This content was created by a Daily Kos Community member.

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