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FAILURE OF NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

IN THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

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by

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Biography

Colonel Marcus Glenn is assigned to the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL. Colonel Glenn is a 1995 mathematics graduate of the University of Tennessee. He has served and lead in a variety of assignments to include Squadron Command, Deputy Group Command, Minuteman III ICBM Instructor, B-52 Wing Weapons Officer, B-52 Squadron Director of Operations for Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF), 2d Bomb Wing Executive Officer, and Chief of International EW programs for Secretary of the Air Force, International Affairs. In 2010, he led the US Army OEF electronic warfare enterprise as the US Forces – Afghanistan, Command Electronic Warfare Officer. Colonel Glenn has authored two Chief of Staff, Air Force export policies titled USAF EW Export Baseline and USAF Directed Infrared Countermeasures Export Baseline. He was the principle F-15 defensive system briefer to the Royal Saudi Air Force Commander for the largest Foreign Military Sale in US history worth $29B. Colonel Glenn was recently selected to command the 341st Mission Support Group at Malmstrom AFB, Montana in June 2017.

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Abstract

Most of the attention and scholarly analysis of the Cuban Missile Crisis focuses on 13 days, specifically 16-28 October 1962. However, crucial events months prior to October 1962 provide a defining perspective and analysis of how US nuclear deterrence performed. The notion that US nuclear deterrence kept the world from catastrophe during the Cuban Missile Crisis cannot be substantiated. The opportunity for nuclear deterrence to have saved the day came and went without much notice on 17 September 1962. The fact that nuclear weapons were not used during the crisis lends itself towards the convenience of a nuclear deterrence success, but a closer look at the actual events and covert letters between Kennedy and Khrushchev prior to October 1962 support the notion that nuclear deterrence failed. The purpose of this essay is to make the case for how possession of nuclear weapons alone does not always lead to deterrent success by examining the Cuban Missile Crisis. Kennedy's lack of resolve, explicitly communicated to Khrushchev, was the cause of the deterrent failure. Moreover, if US nuclear deterrence has not had a perfect record of success, the implications on US national strategic policy, based primarily on deterrence, are profound. The decisive lesson from this failure in deterrence seems to have been missed by senior US leaders of late, especially in response to high-level pressure towards nuclear weapon abolition.

Introduction

> "As the ultimate guarantor of the safety and security of the United States, the Joint Force must simultaneously adapt and evolve while neither discounting nor wishing away the future reality of strife, conflict, and war."[1] *Joint Operating Environment 2035*

In 2007, George Shultz, William Perry, Sam Nunn and Henry Kissinger proposed the idea of nuclear weapons abolition in the *Wall Street Journal* article, "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons."[2] The significance of these influential statesmen offering such a transformative idea was audacious considering the global impacts abolition would have on international security paradigms and the tectonic shifts in the perceptions of balances of power. The foundational assumption of this bold leap of faith is built upon the notion that nuclear deterrence was causal for the lack of war between great states during the Cold War and that nuclear weapons' legitimate primary purpose was and remains to deter use of nuclear weapons by other states. This line of reasoning can be seen early on in the nuclear age by President John F. Kennedy who wanted to "eliminate the tendency to confuse nuclear power with usable power."[3] The authors of the WSJ article above continue this logic by stating, "Nuclear weapons were essential to maintaining international security during the Cold War because they were a means of deterrence. The end of the Cold War made the doctrine of mutual Soviet-American deterrence obsolete."[4] These well-known statesmen seem to be inferring that simply possessing nuclear weapons leads to deterrence and history has proven this to be true because nuclear deterrence, as they define it, has never failed. Abolition then would seem reasonable since the only purpose of nuclear weapons is to keep others from using them. One important aspect missing in the WSJ article is how they define nuclear deterrence success. If one is going to suggest something as radical as eliminating nuclear weapons entirely, then we should be firm on how preliminary assumptions

are defined. What does nuclear deterrence success and failure look like and what are the practical implications of both? Not having clear answers to the questions of its success has served as an opportunity allowing revisionist, who argue its failure, to gain traction. The thesis of this paper is to make the case for how possession of nuclear weapons alone does not always lead to deterrent success by examining the Cuban Missile Crisis. Subsequently, if nuclear deterrence has failed in the past, what are the implications for US national strategic policy in response to high-level pressure towards nuclear weapons abolition?

Arguably the closest the world has ever come to nuclear war was during the Cuban Missile Crisis. It is the benchmark case study of nuclear deterrence strategy that has been analyzed and dissected for decades. For the most part, the scholarly deliberation was based on interpretations of evidence available up to 2001 when covert letters between President Kennedy and Premiere Khrushchev were published.[5] Analysis of these letters suggest a much different picture of what was going on between the two ultimate decision makers during the crisis.

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Measuring Nuclear Deterrence

Thomas Schelling categorized the statecraft strategy of coercion as either one of deterrence or compellence.[6] To deter a state actor is to dissuade him from initiating a verboten action. First and foremost, deterrence is a psychological process that resides in the mind of the targeted opponent. Communication is required to identify the offending action to the opponent who is to be deterred. Schelling uses the metaphor of a tripwire that is overtly advertised to the opponent.[7] It could also be thought of as a red line that is drawn and announced to an opponent. The incentive for the opponent not to cross the red line is the latent consequences supplied by the deterring state in the form of a threat which must also be communicated to the opponent. This threat is the basis of the deterrent credibility. Once the tripwire has been set and the opponent made aware, specified *inaction* is the goal. If the opponent decides to act and violate the expectation of abstinence, deterrence by definition has failed. There are a series of coercive, brute force actions, or inaction available to both sides once abstinence has ended, but the original strategy of deterrence has been discredited and voided. This does not mean a state cannot attempt to deter that same opponent again, but the failure of the first tripwire will weaken the credible value of deterrence in the opponent's calculus as he contemplates further action.

When state leaders include the use of nuclear weapons in their threats to deter their opponent, it is considered nuclear deterrence. There are two ways to define nuclear deterrence success. One is that nuclear deterrence would be a success if no nuclear weapons were used once any red line had been drawn by either side of a conflict. I call this the *success of nuclear abstinence* view. The other way to define nuclear deterrence success is to be consistent with statecraft definitions. If a state leader seeks to deter another state from a specific action and explicitly or implicitly threatens use of nuclear weapons, and the opponent violates the

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restriction, then deterrence has failed. If the opponent chooses not to act, then deterrence has succeeded.

The *success of nuclear abstinence* view is often an oversimplified bifurcation of the conflict outcome and, after the fact, disregards the contents of the threat that was used in an attempt to deter. For example, a state that has a significant nuclear weapon capability could seek to deter another state by drawing a red line and clearly communicating an exclusively conventional threat with no explicit or implicit intention to use nuclear weapons since they maintain a "no first strike" policy. Those who subscribe to this view would call this a nuclear deterrence success if the opponent did not act but they would not call it a nuclear deterrence failure if the opponent did act. The problem with the former is that it violates the pre-nuclear age definition of deterrence. Yet this view has been pervasive since the beginning of the nuclear age and continues today. In effect, this view attempts to equate preservation of the use of nuclear weapons with deterrent success even if nuclear weapons were never a part of the opponent's calculus that resolved himself not to act. At best, this is a leap in logic; at worst, it is a misperception of legitimate means of violence, nuclear or conventional.

The basis of the perceived success of nuclear deterrence can be traced back to the Churchill Counterfactual, which he stated after the US had successfully tested the hydrogen bomb in 1952: "A curious paradox has emerged. …That it may well be that we shall, by a process of sublime irony, have reached a stage in this story where safety will be the sturdy child of terror, and survival the twin brother of annihilation."[8] This idea set the initial expectation that nuclear weapons alone could be decisive for states to avoid war in the future. This was, of course, short-lived as the Korean War proved that nuclear deterrence did not necessarily imply success in avoiding all wars and state level violent conflicts. Mankind had the capability to

exterminate itself long before nuclear weapons. We have just become more efficient at it.[9] This view was common after The Great War and was acknowledged by Churchill himself in 1925 noting the advances in military technology. War had become "the potential destroyer of the human race. Mankind…has got into its hands for the first time the tools by which it can unfailingly accomplish its own extermination."[10] This perspective on reality 20 years before the first successful nuclear weapon denotation is problematic for Cold War statesmen who believe these devices of violence have singlehandedly changed mankind's nature forever. There are some who are skeptical that an inanimate object could change our nature and over the decades two camps have emerged in this debate.

One camp includes scholars John Gaddis, Phillip Gordon, Ernest May and Jonathan Rosenberg that posit "nuclear revolution" is one that has kept major powers from warring with each other; so much to the point that Elspeth Rostow suggested that the atomic bomb be given the Nobel Peace Prize.[11] Gaddis, who pushes the narrative even further stating "nuclear weapons did play the determining role in making great-power war obsolete, at least during the Cold War."[12] The other camp led by John Mueller and Ward Wilson hold that mankind's aversions to mass casualties changes over time and that nuclear weapons alone are not the sole reason for this aversion. The logic of Mueller is difficult to deny when he highlights the weakness in proof of the former which seem to imply that "without the vivid images of mushroom clouds, statesmen…would likely have tumbled into another massively self-destructive war."[13] The notion that the horror and terror of another great world war, with or without nuclear weapons, would prevent national decision makers from engaging in one, stands as the central flaw in the Churchill counterfactual. Simply put, aversion to mass casualties did not prevent world leaders in the past from making decisions that led to mass casualties on a scale of tens of millions. This

is especially salient when one considers the decisions that were made by strategic leaders between the two world wars in light of their perceptions of the horrors of the first go.[14]

Another aspect of this view of US nuclear deterrence is the primacy of perception and the role of psychology.[15] Proponents of nuclear deterrence having a perfect record of success rely on emotional rhetoric that often makes no distinction between one nuclear warhead detonation and the apocalypse.[16] This rhetoric surfaced at the beginning of the nuclear age and continues today. In an interview on 60 Minutes on 18 September 2016, William Perry, former US Secretary of Defense, stated "It only takes 1,000 nukes [sic] to destroy human civilization."[17] What is unfortunate with these types of statements is that they often overstate nuclear weapons effects and, in most cases, imply egregious violations of physics.

These claims also bestow mythical powers to nuclear weapons and reinforce "the notion that normal rules do not apply to these weapons."[18] John Mueller offers a more realistic assessment of a mass nuclear weapons strike based on the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) on the effects of nuclear war. "2,000 1-megaton weapons with 5 nautical mile radius destruction would only demolish less than 5% of the US territory."[19] It may seem callous to highlight that there are scales of mass casualties but ignoring the reality of nuclear weapon effects is not useful in formulating an effective strategy of deterrence. A more responsible assessment by political leaders would be to forego the nuclear rhetoric that makes no distinction between the apocalypse and mass casualties. Instead, they would better serve their constituents by accurately articulating what is an existential threat to a nation that spans approximately 3.8 million square miles with over 324 million citizens.[20] Scale matters, especially when assessing the difference between the end of civilization and a major world war. The largest nuclear weapon yield ever tested was 60-megatons. The associated destructive power of this man-made

detonation only equates to 1/1000 of the destructive power of a hurricane.[21] According to a U.S. Geological Survey, Mt. Saint Helens' eruption on 18 May 1980 released 24 megatons of energy which is "equivalent to 1,600 times the size of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima."[22] Despite the volcanos and hurricanes, the US and human civilization seems to be surviving well. Even with Perry's 1,000 nuclear weapons, the OTA estimates the casualties would be between 2-20 million in the US if the warheads were targeted at other nuclear forces.[23] Devastating? Yes. But would it be the end of civilization for the remaining 304-322 million Americans? No.

Putting rhetoric aside, the challenge of logically proving the success of nuclear abstinence view is that it cannot be proven using any scholarly method. In order to prove that nuclear deterrence succeeded in the past, one would have to prove that a red line would have been otherwise crossed if nuclear weapons did not exist. Proofs by absence are most often only used as a last resort and "not accepted in modern societies in any situation where serious matters are at stake."[24] One classic example of this misplaced type of proof is illustrated by some ancient religious group's belief that throwing virgins into a volcano was effective in preventing eruptions. Yet this type of proof seems to have satisfied US policy makers for decades as evident by 60 years of hyperbole.[25] The danger in acceptance of this type of proof is the potential for coincidence to be treated as causal.[26]

The better way of defining nuclear deterrence success is simply to ask a more relevant question. Context matters when one is making a threat. John Lewis Gaddis, who is a known advocate for nuclear deterrence success,[27] emphasized how a state decision maker's performance in executing strategy should be approached. "One must in particular avoid *ex post facto* judgements: the fairer procedure is to evaluate the strategy according to the goals its architects set for it, not by some external frame of reference they themselves did not impose."[28] Was the

threat posed by the state seeking to deter another state adequate to prevent them from acting? This view remains true to the original definition and purpose of deterrence. It also properly characterizes nuclear weapons as inanimate objects of war with no volition of their own. In formulating the threat using this definition, the strategist considers whether or not nuclear weapons are the right means for the ends.[29] If the opponent decides to act and nuclear weapons were included in the threat, then nuclear deterrence fails irrespective of whether the threat is carried out or not.

Arguments for Nuclear Deterrence Failure during the Cuban Missile Crisis

In light of the two perspectives above, the analysis of the performance of nuclear deterrence is stark. Examination using the success of nuclear abstinence view is fairly short and somewhat underwhelming. Historically and empirically, the one condition of absence of use obviously has been met since World War II. However, several questions remain unanswered regarding major crises since. Was it a coincidence or other factors of significance that drove the nuclear weapons free outcomes? Was an explicit threat to use nuclear weapons in association with a red line ever announced during the crises? What were the perceptions and expectations of states' lead decision makers? These types of questions justify applying the view that is consistent with the definition of deterrence to provide an analysis of the benchmark case, the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The pivotal point of answering the question of whether or not nuclear deterrence failed or succeeded hinges on if there was a red line that was drawn, if the associated threat included the use of nuclear weapons, and if the opponent violated or crossed the red line. Establishing the actual sequence of events is important since the red line must be drawn prior to the opponent's

opportunity to violate it. Most of the attention and scholarly analysis of the Cuban Missile Crisis focuses on 13 days, specifically 16-28 October 1962. However, the crucial actions months prior to October 1962 provide a defining perspective and analysis of how nuclear deterrence performed.

Practical analysis of nuclear deterrence performance in the crisis is best served by focusing on the two key decision makers, Kennedy and Khrushchev, to apply a parsimonious model. Otherwise, attempting to focus on the statements and views of others, even in the leader's inner circle, one will endeavor to reconstruct each person's view point inferred from each person's statements that are all accompanied with numerous potential hypotheses. This increases the number of assumptions significantly regarding each decision that was made by both key leaders. As the number of assumptions increase, as Ockham's razor holds, the more likely the analysis will be overcome by superfluity and miss the mark when the best explanation for the outcome is the simplest one with the fewest assumptions.[30]

Kennedy and Khrushchev communicated covertly via cables and letters over 120 times from the time Kennedy was inaugurated until he was assassinated in November 1963. The transcripts were originally classified and first commercially published in 2001.[31] Most importantly, Kennedy and Khrushchev understood their direct communications would be protected from public access. A letter from Kennedy dated 16 October 1961 stated, "For my part the contents and even the existence of our letters will be known only to the Secretary of State and a few others of my closest associates in the government."[32] This communication arrangement would appear to remove most doubts about the candor with which both leaders expressed in these letters and should be the most valid indication of their actual intentions. According to Sheldon Stern, The Kennedy Library Historian from 1977 to 2000, "Many of the enduring myths

about the Cuban missile crisis can likewise be traced back to the Kennedy administration's own initial spin on the events of October 1962."[33] This spin is problematic for the hundreds of published works that did not have access to these covert communications. There was no need for political spin in these letters since the information would not be subject to public scrutiny. John Mearsheimer posits that strategic leaders are apt not to attempt to mislead other state leaders because of an inherent, shared mistrust and the ability of both sides to corroborate the facts. "This lack of trust between rival states explains in good part why there is not much lying between them."[34] Additionally, Kennedy's clear intention in writing his letters was to avoid the type of hyperbole and misunderstandings that led to two world wars.[35] These letters also introduce a humanization effect between the two leaders that appears to be missing from most scholarly assessments of the crisis before the letters were published.

In April of 1962, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev and his Minister of Defense, Marshal Rodion Malinovsky, began a discussion of a plan to move Soviet nuclear forces to Cuba. This discussion took place on the shore of the Black Sea while the two were contemplating the fact that the US had Jupiter missiles in Turkey located just across the sea. The Soviets would have had about ten minutes of warning before the warheads of these missiles would reach their targets.[36] This put the Soviets at a considerable strategic disadvantage. The short warning timeline would increase the likelihood that their land based InterContinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) would be hit before they could be launched in response to a first strike. By comparison, their ICBMs would take approximately 30 minutes to hit their targets in the US, thereby giving the US more time to respond and not lose ICBMs and bombers on the ground.

In an attempt to balance this disadvantage, Khrushchev gained the approval of Fidel Castro for the concept of the nuclear weapons deployment via the Soviet Ambassador to Cuba,

Alexander Alekseyev. The movement of the nuclear forces was named Operation ANADYR and officially approved by Khrushchev on 7 July 1962.[37] Khrushchev's intent was to keep the operation covert and to have the assets in place by the US mid-term elections on 6 Nov 1962.[38] This decision set the Soviet Government into a motion that could not be easily reversed. It was in effect, Khrushchev's attempt to setup a nuclear deterrent tripwire against a US invasion of Cuba that ultimately failed since he was caught during the process of building the threat to make the deterrence strategy credible. Khrushchev was deploying forces to prevent, what his intelligence agency was assessing to be a certainty, a US invasion of Cuba.[39] This was based on the Soviet perception that the US would not be satisfied with the outcome of the Bay of Pigs failure of April 1961 and was actively planning direct support of counter-revolutionary forces to ensure success in the next attempt.[40] The US was indeed planning direct support of the counter-revolutionaries in Cuba and had named the effort Operation MONGOOSE.[41] It is important to note Khrushchev's explicit intent with Operation ANADYR using his own words. "We stationed our armed forces on Cuban soil for one purpose only…to prevent the invasion by a mercenary force which the United States was then preparing to launch. We've never thought in terms of any other than defensive war."[42] Khrushchev communicated as much in his 23 October 1962 letter to Kennedy.[43] Khrushchev was acting on what he believed was the only way to deter an American invasion and that was to introduce nuclear weapons into the equation if only from a geolocation standpoint.[44] He goes on to say that because of the vast distance between Cuba and the Soviet Union that their "communications with Cuba were so precarious that an attack against the US was unthinkable."[45]

The logistics and associated timeline of Operation ANADYR is relevant to the sequence of JFK's nuclear deterrent threat since by definition the tripwire has to be set and the threat

communicated prior to the opponent's offending action. Per a Memorandum on Deployment of Soviet Forces to Cuba, dated 24 May 1962, the plan was to ship three regiments of SS-4 Sandal Medium Range Ballistic Missiles (MRBM), two regiments of SS-5 Skean Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBM), and two regiments of FKR-1 cruise missiles. All these systems included nuclear warheads.[46] The deployment required 85 merchant ships. Supporting personnel and equipment started to flow during July 1962.[47] Given the numerous overt indications of such a large logistical movement, the US was well aware of the fact that the Soviets were shipping significant amounts of equipment to Cuba. The US did not, however, know what was being shipped.[48] U-2 reconnaissance flights in August 1962 had revealed only defensive surface-to-air missile systems like SA-2s being setup in Cuba.[49]

On 4 September 1962, President Kennedy publicly announced the US assumption that the Soviets were not placing offensive weapon systems in Cuba. "Were it to be otherwise, the gravest issues would arise."[50] No response could be graver than total war. The phrasing used leaves little doubt that this constitutes a clear red line but there are two different interpretations of what is implicit in this statement of the gravest issues. Kennedy was explicitly referring to war with the Soviets (and by association Cuba) that either included the use of nuclear weapons or not. The latter implies that nuclear weapons were not a factor in Kennedy's threat to the Soviets at this time. Following this logic, one can assess that nuclear weapons were never a part of Kennedy's deterrent threat. In effect, nuclear weapons would become irrelevant to the crisis and that the same result would have been reached had neither side had them. In this case, nuclear deterrence success would be difficult to argue if possession of nuclear weapons was irrelevant to the tripwire Kennedy was setting for the Soviets.

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Taking the interpretation that Kennedy had implied the use of nuclear weapons as a part of his 4 September threat to the Soviets is central to analyzing nuclear deterrence performance in a meaningful way. Again on 13 September 1962, Kennedy reinforced his threat during a 6:00 pm press conference. "Should [Cuba] become an offensive military base of significant capacity for the Soviet Union, then this country will do whatever must be done to protect its own security and that of its allies."[51] This was a well-defined red line that was clearly communicated with the implicit threat of nuclear weapon consequences and it was indeed received by Khrushchev before Soviet nuclear weapons departed Soviet ports. Kennedy's nuclear deterrence red line had been set first on 4 September and reinforced 9 days later. The choice to cross the red line or not was, at this point, up to Khrushchev.

According to the Soviet plan, nuclear warheads were to be moved last. The Soviet's naval shipments of nuclear forces bound for Cuba departed Russian ports as follows:
The cargo ship *Indigirka* departed Severomorsk for Cuba on 17 September 1962 and contained nine IL-28 bombers with six atomic bombs and three Luna battalions that included 12 missiles with 12 nuclear warheads. The *Indigirka* arrived at Mariel, Cuba on 4 October 1962.[52] The *Poltava* and *Omsk* were loaded with SS-4 Sandal MRBMs and departed Sevastopol for Cuba in early September as well.[53] The *Aleksandrovsk,* which contained 24 SS-5 Skean nuclear warheads, departed for Cuba on 5 October 1962 and arrived on or around 23 October 1962.[54] It is important to note that President Kennedy's naval Quarantine Proclamation took effect at 1000 EST 24 October 1962.[55] When Khrushchev was notified of the quarantine versus an invasion he responded, "We've saved Cuba."[56] This seems to validate his original defensive intentions for the nuclear force movement.

US nuclear deterrence failed on 17 September 1962 when Khrushchev made the decision to allow the *Indigirka*, *Poltav*a, *Omsk* and *Aleksandrovsk* to depart for Cuba despite the red line Kennedy had drawn days earlier. Khrushchev would have likely met bureaucratic resistance if he would have decided to cancel Operation ANADYR at this point. However, the option to cancel the operation was still viable for Khrushchev, especially considering the potential consequences of nuclear war with the US. Vivid acknowledgement of Kennedy's red line can be seen in Khrushchev's 28 September 1962 letter to the President.

> I must tell you straightforwardly, Mr. President, that your statement with threats against Cuba is just an inconceivable step. Under present circumstances, when there exist thermonuclear weapons, your request to the Congress for an authority to call up 150,000 reservists is not only a step making the atmosphere red-hot, it is already a dangerous sign that you want to pour oil in the flame. … The contents of that resolution gives ground to draw a conclusion that the U.S. is evidently ready to assume responsibility for unleashing thermonuclear war.[57]

Despite all this, Khrushchev continued his actions which were in violation of Kennedy's unambiguous red line. Later, Kennedy would emphasize his frustration that Khrushchev did not heed the threat after he had crossed the red line. Kennedy's 22 October 1962 letter to Khrushchev stated,

> It was in order to avoid any incorrect assessment on the part of your Government with respect to Cuba that I publicly stated that if certain developments in Cuba took place, the United States would do whatever must be done to protect its own security and that of its allies. … Despite this, the rapid development of long-range missile bases and other offensive weapons systems in Cuba has proceeded.[58]

The central issue for the failure of nuclear deterrence in this crisis is Kennedy's lack of credibility and his inclination to avoid nuclear war that was clear in his covert dialogue with Khrushchev. Kennedy expressed this aversive demeanor in his 17 July 1962 letter to Khrushchev. "Science has now given man a capacity for destruction which, for the first time,

could threaten the very existence of the race itself. This fact makes it imperative that, as rational men, we attempt to resolve our differences rather that move step-by-step towards a major confrontation."[59] In sharing his thoughts with Khrushchev, Kennedy had essentially violated the cardinal rule of deterrence and the National Security Council 162/2 to boot. "The psychological calculus of deterrence - not just the possession of nuclear weapons but the credible inclination to use them" defines its strategic value.[60] At this point, Khrushchev could have concluded that Operation ANADYR was a risk worth taking since Kennedy would likely attempt to communicate with him before initiating military action. If Khrushchev was an opportunist, then Kennedy had, in effect, given him the flexibility to act first then ask for forgiveness afterwards. Kennedy essentially played his hand after Khrushchev had violated the red line, even if Kennedy was not yet aware. Kennedy covertly told Khrushchev via his 22 October 1962 letter that no sane person would ever use them.[61] In other words, US nuclear deterrence lacked real credibility with the Soviets in 1962 because Kennedy explicitly signaled a lack of resolve to ever use them.

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Arguments for Nuclear Deterrence Success in the Cuban Missile Crisis

A case for nuclear deterrence success in the Cuban Missile Crisis was made by Marc Trachtenberg in 1985. He concludes that nuclear weapons were decisive because of the US's strategic superiority over the Soviets. Few would dispute the superiority of the US's conventional and nuclear weapons capability at the time of the crisis. However, Trachtenberg associates this imbalance as causal for the Soviet's capitulation and offers two statements, one by a US senior military leader and the other by a senior Soviet diplomat. General Burchinal, USAF Air Staff Director of Plans in 1962 reflected, "They had a gun to their heads, and they didn't move a muscle."[62] The second statement was made by Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister

Kuznetsov, who after the crisis told John McCloy, a private adviser to the president, "You Americans will never be able to do this to us again."[63] These statements are given as evidence of Khrushchev's motivation and reasoning for the decision to back down. The number of assumptions for these to directly relate to Khrushchev's final decision are numerous if you disregard the fact that both statements are coincidental to the outcome.

One assumption of this statement reflecting the reality of intent with Kennedy or Khrushchev is that the strategic imbalance condition mattered to either of them regarding the situation in Cuba. Kennedy made statements that indicate he thought the military imbalance did not matter. "What difference does it make? They've got enough to blow us up now anyway."[64] Another statement by Kennedy made in regards to the question of military significance of nuclear weapons in Cuba, "You may say it doesn't make any difference if you get blown up by an ICBM flying from the Soviet Union or one from 90 miles away."[65] The type of analysis that attempts to make logical connections between secondary actors and final decision makers soon becomes muddled in a sea of assumptions that have to be individually bridged between what General Burchinal said and how that played out in Khrushchev's mind, and then how the idea was reflected in his final decisions. It seems much more likely that statements made by each of the final decision makers themselves, under a condition of anonymity, reflects the realities of why they chose their actions far more accurately than secondary players that made statements on the outcome, after the fact, which could be coincidental.

Regarding the statement by Kuznetsov, Trachtenberg is suggesting the only reason for Khrushchev's eventual capitulation was a strategic imbalance but he offers no empirical evidence to establish what the Americans would never be able to do to the Soviets again. It certainly could be that Kuznetsov was simply referring to the notion that the Soviets were

compelled to change their plans for Cuba. Diplomatically, this appeared to be somewhat of a retreat for the Soviets which was not ideal for them. Kuznetsov could have been expressing his own personal dissatisfaction with the crisis outcome without any association or thought to why Khrushchev made his decision. It is a non-sequitur to directly associate the calculus of Khrushchev, who had won a pledge from the US to remove Jupiter missiles from Turkey, to a statement from a deputy minister that may not have known about the missile deal or the covert letters between Kennedy and Khrushchev; and further associate it another degree to strategic imbalance as causal.

Trachtenberg also offers that the Soviet forces were held at a normal day-to-day readiness posture because of Khrushchev's fear of provoking the US. However, this notion was debunked by Khrushchev's 28 September 1962 letter to Kennedy which states, "We have been compelled to order our armed forces to be in peak combat readiness. You forced us to do that by your mobilization and other measures that you have taken recently."[66] This was also confirmed by Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali. "Soviet forces were placed on 'the highest state of combat readiness" after the US activated 150,000 reserve soldiers.[67]

In addition, Khrushchev *perceived* that the Soviets were equally as strong as the US regarding military force. Whether that was a tangible reality or not is irrelevant, if Khrushchev made decisions based on the balance of power in his mind.[68] Khrushchev even told the US Secretary of the Interior, Stewart Udall, on a visit to the Soviet Union on 5 September 1962, "It's been a long time since you could spank us like a little boy – now we can swat your ass."[69] Given the evidence that is available today, Trachtenberg's nuclear arsenal cancellation theory seems to be the strongest argument to describe why the Cuban Missile Crisis ended the way it did. Nuclear war did not happen during the crisis because it was not a viable option on the table for

both Kennedy and Khrushchev. Neither men were willing to strike first with nuclear weapons. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that these particular two men did not want to start a major war, regardless of their nuclear arsenals. War was avoided by the discernment of Kennedy and Khrushchev. The opportunity for nuclear deterrence to have saved the day came and went without much notice on 17 September 1962. Ultimately, the outcome of the crisis will likely continue to lend itself towards the convenience of a nuclear deterrence success but a closer look at the actual events prior to October 1962 support the notion that nuclear deterrence failed.[70]

Implications of Unreliable Nuclear Deterrence

The danger of learning the wrong lesson from cases like the Cuban Missile Crisis is that confidence in nuclear deterrence success can be misplaced as a planning assumption. Based on the stated intent of Khrushchev, there is little doubt that offensive nuclear attack was not a factor in his decision to move nuclear forces to Cuba. The fact that he continued to do so after Kennedy's red line indicates that he did not believe the US would use nuclear weapons against the Soviets if he was caught. In light of this reality, the notion that US nuclear deterrence saved the world from catastrophe in the Cuban Missile Crisis cannot be substantiated.

Believing the notion that nuclear deterrence always works because it is somehow a special case raises a concern if our national leaders buy into a myth that causes them to be lulled into a false sense of security about the nature of war in the future. The Victorians of the 1900s, before World War I, had a strong sense of security and faith in a seemingly new nature of mankind that was being influenced by revolutionary technologies.[71] Stephen Cohen reminds us of Norman Angell's 1910 over-optimistic assessment that war between Austria, Britain, France and Germany would not happen because of economic interdependence.[72] Two world wars and

many limited wars since have proven that mankind's reluctance to mass violence ebbs and flows.[73] There is no indication that mankind's nature has changed. The suggestion that nuclear deterrence will eliminate the use of nuclear weapons in the future is reminiscent of the Victorians. Moreover, the belief that it will by our senior leaders has "extensive leverage over practical matters of doctrine, posture, and operational behavior."[74] The assumed terror nuclear weapons represent to us may indeed be acceptable for use to a state leader that views these weapons as what they really are, a means to an end.

Recommendations

Senior US military leaders must recognize and articulate the distinction between relying on nuclear arsenal possession as an instrument of assurance for US public and the requirement for credible deterrence. Military strategists must stay grounded in a world of capabilities, not intentions that can change in a matter of hours. Churchill made this incisive observation, "Want of foresight, unwillingness to act when action would be simple and effective, lack of clear thinking, confusion of counsel until the emergency comes, until self-preservation strikes its jarring gong — these are the features which constitute the endless repetition of history."[75] The use of nuclear weapons and its ensuing violence against an unsuspecting US would be the ultimate ice cold slap of reality…but then it would be too late to adapt our national security strategy.

Supreme Commander Author, Elliot Cohen reflects that, "In all wars…brains matter. But if your enemies, your allies, and your own people begin to think you lack heart, no clever strategies or brilliantly conceived doctrine will yield up victory."[76] As demonstrated in the Cuban Missile Crisis, possession of nuclear weapons alone does not lead to nuclear deterrence

success. Moreover, the challenge of using deterrence as a national strategic policy is that will and resolve must be perceived by your opponent. The US signaling has been inconsistent at best. President Obama, speaking in front of the United Nations, signaled that "Just one nuclear weapon exploded in a city," would destroy "our very way of life" and would be "a catastrophe for the world."[77] Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Richard Myers in 2003 stated that ten thousand Americans killed by a nuclear weapon would "do away with our way of life."[78] These statements, especially on a world stage, seem to undermine the notion of strong resolve.

Apparent lack of resolve can still be offset by capability as long as the opponent acknowledges it. The real danger is when will, or lack thereof, influences decisions to reduce military capability. If the US no longer has the capability to annihilate any opponent because our targeting policy dictates so, it would be a colossal shift in the credibility of our nuclear deterrence policy. Further, if opponents retained their capability to annihilate the US, then the US nuclear deterrence strategy has lost significant coercive leverage. This strategy also surrenders the "balance of terror" towards Russia by signaling to Putin that the US does not hold its population centers at risk when we have no assurances that it is reciprocated. Call the strategy something else besides deterrence, and articulate to the American people the risks the US is accepting. The sufficient aversion to mass casualties that nuclear power leaders have demonstrated since the end of World War II does not guarantee future abstention. For the US, there is nothing magical about possessing nuclear weapons that make a state impervious to nuclear attack and strategists should not be hopeful in assuming they are the ultimate insurance policy against another world war.

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Notes

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[2] "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons," Wall Street Journal, accessed 4 November 2016, http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB116787515251566636.

[3] John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 214.

[4] "A World Free of Nuclear Weapons." Wall Street Journal, accessed 4 November 2016, http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB116787515251566636.

[5] Thomas Fensch, *The Kennedy-Khrushchev Letters* (Woodlands, TX: New Century Books, 2001) VII and IX.

[6] Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), 69.

[7] Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 71-72.

[8] John Lewis Gaddis, Philip H. Gordon, Ernest R. May, and Johnathan Rosenberg. *Cold War Statesmen Confront the Bomb: Nuclear Diplomacy Since 1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 1-2.

[9] Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 19-20.

[10] Gaddis, Gordon, May, and Rosenberg, *Cold War Statesmen Confront the Bomb* as referenced by John Mueller in the epilogue 275. See note 11 for original.

[11] Cited in Arthur M. Schlesinger, "The Measure of Diplomacy," Foreign Affairs, 73/4 (Jul-Aug 1994) 150. Cited in Cold War Statesmen, 3.

[12] Gaddis, Gordon, May, and Rosenberg, *Cold War Statesmen Confront the Bomb*, 270.

[13] Ibid., as referenced by John Mueller in the epilogue, 272.

[14] As written by John Mueller in *Cold War Statesmen Confront the Bomb*, 273. "I find it difficult to understand how people with those sorts of perceptions and with that vivid and horrifying experience behind them world eventually become at best incautious about, or at worst eager for, a repeat performance. But that, essentially, is what the Churchill counterfactual asks us to believe."

[15] Robert J. McMahon, "US National Security Policy from Eisenhower to Kennedy," in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Volume 1: Origins*, Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, eds, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 293.

[16] John Mueller, *Atomic Obsession* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), Ch 1.

[17] *60 Minutes*, David Martin, 18 Sep 2016, http://www.cbsnews.com/news/60-minutes-new-cold-war-nuclear-weapons-david-martin/

[18] Ward Wilson, *Five Myths about Nuclear Weapons* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2013), 16 and 52.

[19] Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, 8.

[20] US Census Population Clock, https://www.census.gov/popclock/

[21] Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, 17.

[22] US Geological Survey Fact Sheet, http://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/2000/fs036-00/

[23] Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, 8.

[24] Wilson, *Five Myths about Nuclear Weapons*, 90.

[25] Ibid., 121.

[26] Ibid., 99.

[27] Gaddis, Gordon, May, and Rosenberg, *Cold War Statesmen Confront the Bomb*, 270.

[28] Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*, 308.

[29] Wilson, *Five Myths about Nuclear Weapons*, 107.

[30] Barnes, E. C., 'Ockham's Razor and the Anti-Superfluity Principle', Erkenntnis, 53, 2000, 353-74.

[31] Fensch, *The Kennedy-Khrushchev Letters*, VII and IX.

[32] Ibid., VIII.

[33] Sheldon M. Stern, *The Cuban Missile Crisis in American Memory, Myths versus Reality* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012) 5-6.

[34] John J. Mearsheimer, *Why Leaders Lie* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 100.

[35] Fensch, *The Kennedy-Khrushchev Letters*, 265.

[36] Jeffrey G. Barlow, "The Cuban Missile Crisis," in *Naval Blockades and Seapower*, ed. Bruce A. Elleman and S.C.M. Paine (New York: Routledge, 2006), 157.

[37] Barlow, "The Cuban Missile Crisis," 158.

[38] NSA archive, Alexandr Alexeyev interview, 6. PDF. nsarchive.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB400/docs/Interview%20with%20Alekseev.pd

[39] Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, trans. and ed. Strobe Talbott (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), 511-512.

[40] Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, 511-512.

[41] Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997), 148.

[42] Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, 511.

[43] Fensch, *The Kennedy-Khrushchev Letters*, 302.

[44] Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 196. (Note 61 on Alekseev)

[45] Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, 511.

[46] Barlow, "The Cuban Missile Crisis," 158 and Note 12.

[47] Ibid., 158.

[48] Timothy Naftali and Philip Zelikow, editors, *The Presidential Recordings, John F. Kennedy, The Great Crises Volume II* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001), 54-56.

[49] Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 204.

[50] Naftali and Zelikow, *The Presidential Recordings, John F. Kennedy*, 80.

[51] Ibid., 153.

[52] Barlow, "The Cuban Missile Crisis," 159 and notes 17 and 19.

[53] Ibid., 159 Note 18.

[54] Ibid., 159.

[55] Ibid., 162.

[56] Ibid., 163.

[57] Fensch, *The Kennedy-Khrushchev Letters*, 286-288.

[58] Ibid., 299.

[59] Ibid., 265.

[60] Robert J. McMahon, "US National Security Policy from Eisenhower to Kennedy," in The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Volume 1: Origins, Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, eds, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 293.

[61] Fensch, *The Kennedy-Khrushchev Letters*, 298.

[62] Marc Trachtenberg, "The Influence of Nuclear Weapons in the Cuban Missile Crisis." *International Security*, Vol 10, Issue 1 (Summer, 1985), 161.

[63] Marc Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991) 257.

[64] Naftali and Zelikow, *The Presidential Recordings, John F. Kennedy*, 443.

[65] Ibid., 441.

[66] Fensch, *The Kennedy-Khrushchev Letters*, 291.

[67] Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 212-213.

[68] U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, Documents on Germany, 1944-1961 (Washington D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1961), p. 339 and as referenced by Marc Trachtenberg, "A 'Wasting Asset': American Strategy and the Shifting Nuclear Balance, 1949-1954," International Security (Winter 1988-1989), 48.

[69] Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 209. It should be noted that Fursenko and Naftali have a different interpretation of the nature of this meeting between Khrushchev and Udall as a reflection of Soviet "anxieties" and being "tired of the imbalance" between the US and the Soviet Union.

[70] Wilson, *Five Myths about Nuclear Weapons*, 85.

[71] Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, 29.

[72] Stephen S. Cohen and J. Bradford DeLong, *The End of Influence* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 25-26.

[73] Wilson, *Five Myths about Nuclear Weapons*, 100.

[74] Gray, Colin S. "Understanding Airpower: Bonfire of the Fallacies." *Strategic Studies Quarterly* Winter (2008): 45. (6502-5)

[75] Peter Singer, Statement Before the Senate Armed Services Committee , "Lessons of World War III," 3 Nov 2015, 6.

[76] Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command in Irregular Warfare, Counterinsurgency Leadership in Afghanistan, Iraq and Beyond* (Marine Corps University Press, 2011) 25.

[77] Boyd, Dallas. "Revealed Preference and the Minimum Requirements of Nuclear Deterrence." Strategic Studies Quarterly, (Spring, 2016) 44.

[78] Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, 20.

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