

## The “Photo Gap” that Delayed Discovery of Missiles in Cuba

Max Holland

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The Kennedy administration harbored three great secrets in connection with the October 1962 Cuban missile crisis, not just two, as widely understood.

The most sensitive, of course, was the *quid pro quo* that ended the acute phase of the crisis. In exchange for the prompt, very public, and verified withdrawal of Soviet missiles, President Kennedy publicly pledged not to invade Cuba and secretly committed to quietly dismantling Jupiter missile sites in Turkey in 1963. Management of this first secret was so masterful—involving public dissembling, private disinformation, and a plain lack of information—that the *quid pro quo* remained a lively, but unconfirmed, rumor for nearly three decades.

The second secret involved keeping a lid on Washington’s ongoing effort to subvert Fidel Castro’s regime. Operation MONGOOSE, which was overseen by Attorney General Robert Kennedy, played a significant role in fomenting the missile crisis. Yet that covert effort was not part of the public discourse in 1962 and remained a secret in this country until the mid-1970s. Only after an unprecedented Senate probe into intelligence activities did enough informa-

tion seep out to reveal that Castro’s fears of US military intervention (and Soviet claims to that effect) were not wholly unfounded, however mistaken.

It was the administration’s third secret, however, that has proven the hardest to unpack. The Kennedy administration “shot itself in the foot” when it limited U-2 surveillance for five crucial weeks in 1962, which is why it took the government a full month to spot offensive missiles in Cuba.<sup>1</sup> If proven, this “photo gap,” as it was dubbed by Republican critics, threatened to tarnish the image of “wonderfully coordinated and error-free ‘crisis management’” that the White House sought to project before and after October 1962.<sup>2</sup> The administration’s anxiety over whether cover stories about the gap might unravel even trumped, for a time, its concern over keeping secret the *quid pro quo*. After all, an oral assurance with the Soviets concerning the Jupiters could always be denied, while proof of the photo gap existed in

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<sup>1</sup> Author’s interview with Richard Lehman, 3 June 2003.

<sup>2</sup> McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival* (New York: Random House, 1988), 459. Republicans coined the term “photo gap” after the infamous (and non-existent) “missile gap,” which Democrats had exploited to good effect in 1960.

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the government's own files. Largely because the administration labored mightily to obfuscate the issue, the photo gap remains under-appreciated to this day, notwithstanding the vast literature on the missile crisis.<sup>3</sup>

Recently declassified documents finally permit history to be filled in 43 years after the crisis, and these same records alter the conventional story in at least one important respect. John McCone, the director of central intelli-

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<sup>3</sup> Explanations for and/or dismissals of the photo gap are as varied and voluminous as the literature on the missile crisis itself. A thorough historiography would be instructive, but is beyond the scope of this article. While short on details, the first account to grasp the gist and significance of the photo gap was Alexander George, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 473–77. Peter Usowski provided an insightful account of McCone's role in "John McCone and the Cuban Missile Crisis," *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 2, no. 4 (Winter 1988). Important details later emerged in a history/memoir by CIA imagery analyst Dino Brugioni, *Eyeball to Eyeball* (New York: Random House, 1990). Official document compilations and a history separately released by the CIA began to build an authoritative record in the 1990s. See Mary McAuliffe, ed., *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Washington: Central Intelligence Agency, 1992); US Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963, Vol. XI, Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1996), and *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963, Vol. X, Cuba 1961–1962* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1997), hereafter *FRUSvX* and *FRUSvXI*; and Gregory Pedlow and Donald Welzenbach, *The CIA and the U-2 Program, 1954–1974* (Washington: Central Intelligence Agency, 1998). Still, several key documents have only been released over the past two years via the CIA Records Electronic Search Tool (CREST) at the National Archives-College Park (NARA).

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gence (DCI), and the CIA as a whole were deeply distrusted by key administration officials in the weeks leading up to discovery of the missiles. Moreover, the rampant uncertainty that prevailed within the Agency, itself, has been downplayed, if not forgotten, to the detriment of depicting the complexity of what actually occurred. The literature on the crisis has painted a rosier-than-warranted picture of how human intelligence, assiduously collected in September, finally overcame self-imposed restrictions on U-2 overflights. What actually happened was not a textbook case of how the system should work. And although tension between the CIA and the administration abated after the crisis, it was not by very much. Lingering sensitivity over the photo gap left a chill in the relationship between the DCI and the Kennedy brothers, a result that can only be labeled ironic, given McCone's role in securing the critical photo coverage.

**A New Leader at Langley**

Little more than a year after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, and for the first time in its short history, the CIA was being led by a man who was widely viewed as being at direct odds with the administration he served—that is, if politi-

cal affiliation or ideology counted for anything.

Liberals within the administration had been appalled by John McCone's appointment in September 1961, and not only because he was the stereotype of the wealthy, conservative Republican businessmen who had overwhelmingly populated the Eisenhower administration.<sup>4</sup> As chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, McCone had acquired a reputation as a “militant” anti-communist and “real [bureaucratic] alley fighter,” and he promised to be diametrically opposed to the dominant ethos of the Kennedy administration.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, here was a California engineer-turned-tycoon who would likely have been a strong candidate for secretary of defense had Richard Nixon won the 1960 election.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from being regarded with deep suspicion by Democrats because of his Republican ties, there was also the more specific concern that McCone's stiff-necked anti-communism might distort the intelligence produced by a demoralized CIA, still reeling from the failed invasion of Cuba.<sup>7</sup> Opponents of McCone's appointment had argued that he

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<sup>4</sup> McCone had also served as Truman's under secretary of the Air Force during 1950–51.

<sup>5</sup> Roger Hilsman Oral History, 14 August 1970, John F. Kennedy Library (JFKL), 15.

<sup>6</sup> George Kistiakowsky, *A Scientist at the White House* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 257.

<sup>7</sup> John McCone Oral History, 19 August 1970, Lyndon B. Johnson Library (LBJL), 7.

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**McCone raised the specter of offensive missiles being emplaced.**

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would be in a position to dominate intelligence in a city where information is often power. Apprehension inside the CIA over the appointment matched the trepidation outside. McCone was virtually a novice with regard to the craft of intelligence, and inflicting an outsider on the CIA was considered an even graver punishment than saddling it with a dogmatic man known for his molten temper and “slide-rule mind.”<sup>8</sup>

It was against this backdrop of doubt and distrust that an untested DCI faced his first real crisis late in the summer of 1962.

### Cuba Heats Up

The first of two U-2 overflights of Cuba scheduled for August occurred on the fifth—too early, by a matter of days, to capture any telling evidence about what would soon be an unprecedented

<sup>8</sup> *Current Biography*, 1959, 274.



A U-2 on an operational mission.

Soviet military buildup on the island.<sup>9</sup> Reports from other sources, nonetheless, prompted McCone to raise the specter of offensive missiles being emplaced, during a Special Group Augmented (SGA) meeting on 10 August.<sup>10</sup>

McCone sounded the alarm again in Secretary of State Dean Rusk’s office on 21 August, and while meeting with President Kennedy on 22 and 23 August. The Soviet Union was “in the red [behind in terms of nuclear missiles] and knew it,” McCone reportedly averred, and thus Nikita Khrush-

<sup>9</sup> Two overflights of Cuba per month—each of which traversed the island from west to east and back—had become the norm in the spring of 1962.

<sup>10</sup> The Special Group was a National Security Council subcommittee that oversaw all covert actions; the SGA dealt solely with Cuba.

chev was likely to try to redress that imbalance.<sup>11</sup> But the DCI did little to improve his persuasiveness, and much to enhance his Manichean reputation, when he promptly suggested staging a phony provocation against the US base at Guantánamo so that Washington would have a pretext for overthrowing Castro.<sup>12</sup> McCone was thought to be “too hard-line and suspicious,” as Under Secretary of State George Ball later put it, besides being too cavalier about the relationship between Cuba and the East-West faceoff in Berlin.<sup>13</sup>

Following the 23 August meeting at the White House, McCone left for the West Coast, where the 60-year-old widower was to be married for the second time, before traveling to the French Riviera for his honeymoon. Altogether, the DCI planned to be away until late September. President Kennedy’s advisers would later scorn the DCI for supposedly not warning the president before leaving, and/or for being absent during a critical period.<sup>14</sup> The first claim was demonstra-

<sup>11</sup> Brugioni, *Eyeball*, 96.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Elder, “John A. McCone: The Sixth Director of Central Intelligence,” 1987, Box 1, CIA Miscellaneous Files, John F. Kennedy Assassination Records Collection, NARA, 45.

<sup>13</sup> George Ball, *The Past Has Another Pattern* (New York: Norton, 1982), 288.

<sup>14</sup> During a February 1965 interview with Robert Kennedy, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., asked, “How much validity is there to [McCone’s] feeling that he forecast the possibility of missiles in Cuba?” “None,” answered the former attorney general. Edwin Guthman and Jeffrey Shulman, eds., *Robert Kennedy In His Own Words* (New York: Bantam Press, 1988), 15.

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bly false, but there probably was a marked difference between McCone’s dispatch of the so-called “honeymoon cables” in September and actually having him in town, doggedly pressing his views. Still, as Sherman Kent, chairman of the CIA’s Board of National Estimates, later observed, even if the DCI “had been in Washington and made a federal case of his intuitive guess . . . McCone would have had opposing him (1) the members of [the] US Intelligence Board [i.e., the Intelligence Community]; and (2) most presidential advisers including the four most important ones [who were experts on the Soviet Union]— [former ambassadors Charles] Bohlen, [Llewelyn] Thompson, [George] Kennan, and [serving

ambassador] Foy [Kohler].”<sup>15</sup> The president would have been far more likely to trust these four esteemed Kremlinologists, than to embrace the dissenting view of a “robber-baron Republican.”<sup>16</sup>

On 29 August, the second scheduled overflight of the month finally occurred, after several

<sup>15</sup> Jack Davis, “Sherman Kent’s Final Thoughts on Analyst-Policymaker Relations,” *Sherman Kent Center for Intelligence Analysis: Occasional Papers* 2, no. 3 (June 2003): 9.

<sup>16</sup> Author’s interview with Thomas Hughes, 2 July 2005.

delays due to bad weather. “I’ve got a SAM [surface-to-air missile] site,” a photo interpreter reportedly shouted, minutes after the film was placed on a light table at the National Photographic Interpretation Center (NPIC), the specialized facility where U-2 film was taken for analysis.<sup>17</sup> The SAM proved to be an SA-2, the same missile that had caused Francis Gary Powers’s U-2 to plummet to earth in the USSR in 1960. Soon, it appeared, the CIA would not be able to overfly Cuba with impunity. After being briefed, McCone reportedly observed, “They’re not putting them in to protect the cane cutters. They’re putting them in to blind our reconnaissance eye.”<sup>18</sup> For virtually every other senior official and analyst, however, the deployment “came not as a shock, but as a problem to be dealt with deliberately.”<sup>19</sup> The same missile had been sent previously to other Soviet client states in the Third World.

President Kennedy was inclined to believe the majority view: that the Soviet military aid was for

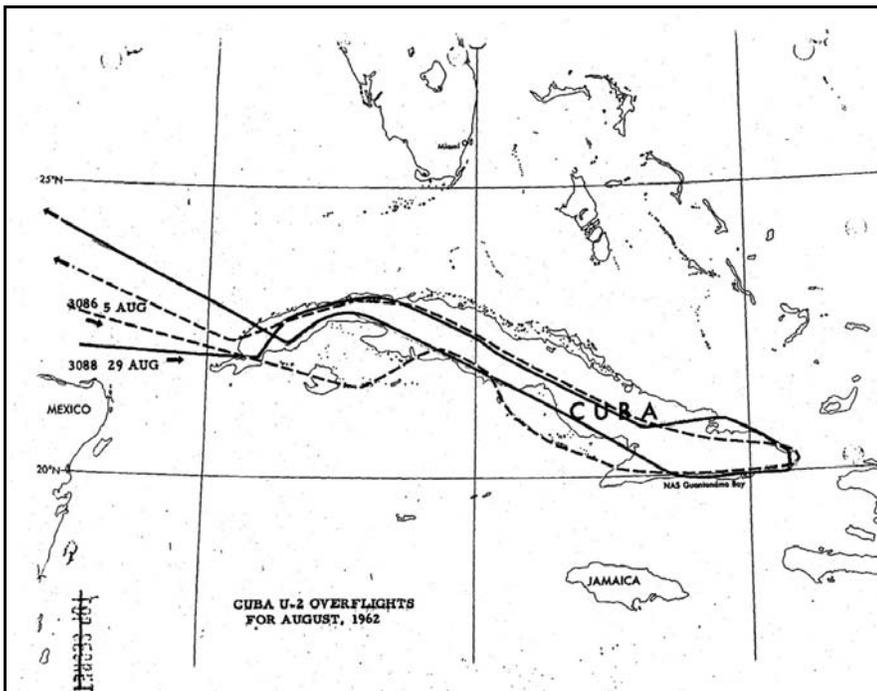


Figure 1: The flight paths of the two missions flown in August, both of which traversed the island.

<sup>17</sup> Brugioni, *Eyeball*, 104.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 105. It has been said that McCone was “right but for the wrong reasons.” The Soviet plan did call for the SA-2s to be ready before offensive missiles were operational, although for the sole purpose of defending them against an air attack. Khrushchev wrongly believed the missiles could be camouflaged. Anatoli Gribkov and William Smith, *Operation ANADYR* (Chicago, IL: Edition Q, 1994), 16, 28, 40, 51–52.

<sup>19</sup> Memorandum for DCI from Richard Lehman, “CIA Handling of the Soviet Build-up in Cuba, 1 July–16 October 1962” (hereafter Lehman Report), 14 November 1962, CREST, NARA, 12.

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the purpose of defending Cuba, while setting up the island as a model of socialist development and a bridgehead for subversive activities in the hemisphere.<sup>20</sup>

Consequently, the SA-2 deployment did not signal a foreign policy crisis in his eyes as much as it marked the onset of a domestic one. With a midterm election fast approaching, internal political pressure to “do something” about Cuba was bound to mount and had to be managed.<sup>21</sup> On 1 September, the president informed the acting DCI, Lt. Gen. Marshall “Pat” Carter, that he wanted the SA-2 information “nailed right back into the box” until such time as the White House decided to make it public.<sup>22</sup> Simultaneously, the president became greatly concerned about aerial reconnaissance of Cuba, and he was not satisfied until assured by the Joint Chiefs

that flights by the US military would not be conducted in a provocative manner.<sup>23</sup> These precautions left the vexing issue of intrusive U-2 surveillance twice a month unaddressed, though not for long.

**Disagreement over the U-2**

The next scheduled U-2 mission, on 5 September, detected additional SAM sites. Coincidentally, the “growing danger to the birds,” as acting DCI Carter described it in a cable to McCone, was underscored by two distant events.<sup>24</sup> On 30 August, an air force U-2 had violated Soviet airspace for nine minutes during an air-sampling reconnaissance mission; then, on 9 September, a U-2 manned by a Taiwan-based pilot was lost over mainland China. These bookends to the first September overflight of Cuba provided new ammunition to critics of intrusive U-2 surveillance. One longstanding opponent was the State Department, which looked askance at U-2 missions over sovereign airspace. Now the department had a new ally: the White House.

On 10 September, the issue came to a head. At 10:00 a.m.,

McGeorge Bundy, the national security adviser, made an out-of-channel request to James Reber, chairman of the Committee on Overhead Reconnaissance (COMOR), the interagency committee charged with developing surveillance requirements for the U-2. Within 30 minutes, Bundy wanted answers to three questions:

- *How important is it to our intelligence objectives that we overfly Cuban soil?*
- *How much would our intelligence suffer if we limited our reconnaissance to peripheral activity utilizing oblique photography?*
- *Is there anyone in the planning of these missions who might want to provoke an incident?*<sup>25</sup>

COMOR members found the third question so provocative that they wondered if they were really expected to comment on it.<sup>26</sup> But it genuinely represented resentments festering within the administration after the Bay of Pigs. Reflecting the president’s own jaundiced view, Bundy and Rusk believed that the CIA and the Pentagon had put Kennedy in an unforgivable bind before and during the agency-designed invasion of Cuba in April 1961. The two men, moreover, had been criticized severely for their own passivity at the time. Bundy

<sup>20</sup> FRUSvX, 942–43, 964, 969–70.

<sup>21</sup> Bundy, *Danger*, 393, 413.

<sup>22</sup> Telephone Conversation between Marshall Carter and Carl Kaysen, 1 September 1962, CREST, NARA. Inhibitions placed on the distribution of intelligence provide a telling measure of how the crisis was initially perceived. By late August, the CIA was not including raw intelligence about the Cuban buildup in community-wide publications unless it had been corroborated by NPIC. The president’s 1 September injunction made this practice official, although Carter pretended that he, rather than “higher authority,” had imposed the clampdown on this “forbidden subject.” Distribution of raw intelligence was normal until 12 October, when it was restricted to US Intelligence Board members. *Ibid.*, and Director of Central Intelligence, “Report to the President’s Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board on Intelligence Community Activities Relating to the Cuban Arms Build-up: 14 April Through 14 October 1962” (hereafter PFIAB Report), 26 December 1963, CREST, NARA, 48–53.

<sup>23</sup> FRUSvX, 1023–24.

<sup>24</sup> McAuliffe, ed., *CIA Documents*, 47.

<sup>25</sup> Memorandum for the Record, “Telephone Conversation with Mr. Tom Parrott on 10 September Concerning IDEALIST Operations Over Cuba,” 10 September 1962, CREST, NARA.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

and Rusk were thus hyper-sensitive about protecting the president from anything that smacked of another trap, especially when high-ranking military and intelligence officials were scarcely concealing their determination to force the president “to atone for his restraint” during the 1961 operation.<sup>27</sup>

When Reber pleaded for more time to prepare his answers, a high-level meeting was scheduled for 5:45 p.m. in Bundy’s White House office. In the meantime, shortly before 3:00 p.m., the national security adviser rescinded approval of the remaining September overflight, presumably to demonstrate that he was dead serious.<sup>28</sup>

Rusk tried to open the unusual meeting with a bit of levity. Nodding to Marshall Carter, whom he had known since World War II, Rusk said, “Pat, don’t you ever let me up? How do you expect me to negotiate on Berlin with all these [U-2] incidents?” As was his habit whenever Rusk advocated a cautious course, Robert Kennedy immediately snapped, “What’s the matter, Dean, no guts!”<sup>29</sup> The palpable tension between these two men almost overshadowed the substance of the meeting. “Let’s sustain the overflights and the hell with the

<sup>27</sup> McCone’s August proposal about staging an incident at Guantánamo reflected the “invasion-minded mentalities” prevalent in intelligence and military circles. Hughes interview.

<sup>28</sup> DD/R Memo for the Record, “Cuban Overflights,” 10 September 1962, CREST, NARA.

<sup>29</sup> FRUSvX, 1054–55.

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international issues,” Kennedy reportedly advocated.<sup>30</sup>

But the secretary of state worried that a U-2 incident would provoke two simultaneous uproars, one domestic and one foreign—the former arguing for an invasion and the latter condemning the United States worldwide. Soviet propaganda had successfully

<sup>30</sup> Brugioni, *Eyeball*, 137.

managed “to turn U-2 into a kind of dirty word,” as one columnist later put it.<sup>31</sup> International opinion regarded the overflights as “illegal and immoral,” and even Washington’s staunchest allies found them unpalatable.<sup>32</sup> Rusk shrewdly argued that losing a U-2 over Cuba would compromise Washington’s unquestioned right to fly it in international waters along Cuba’s periphery, and, given Cuba’s narrowness, maybe offshore flights were sufficient anyway. COMOR experts said that that meant interior areas of Cuba were unlikely to be covered.

<sup>31</sup> C. L. Sulzberger, “The Villain Becomes a Hero,” *New York Times*, 12 November 1962.

<sup>32</sup> Brugioni, *Eyeball*, 136; Hughes interview.

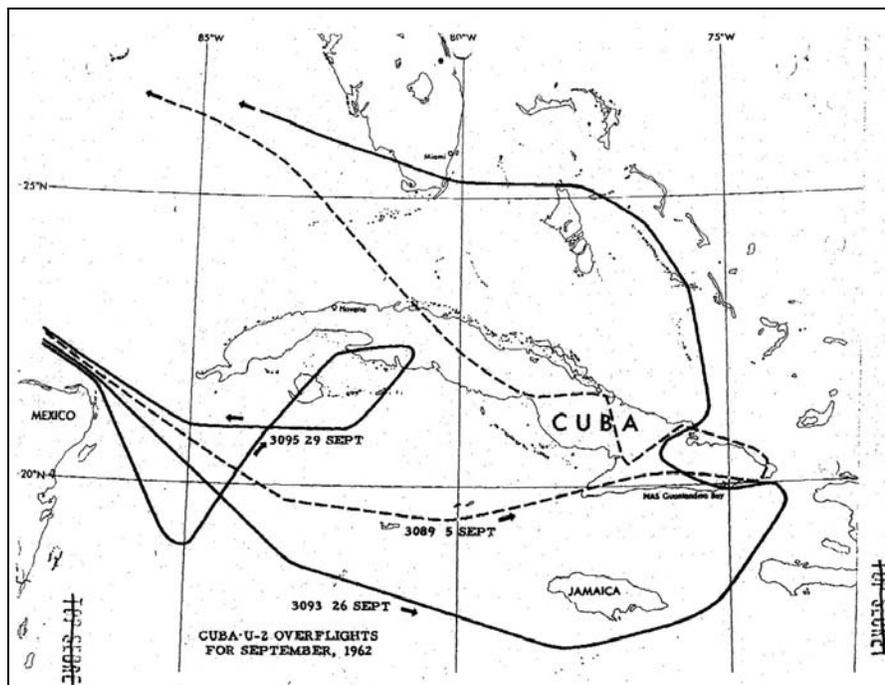


Figure 2: Only the 5 September mission, shown here, spent an extended amount of time in Cuban airspace. The paths of the following four flights (here and Figure 3) effectively precluded coverage of western Cuba and interior areas.

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“Well, let’s just give it a try,” Rusk reportedly remarked.”<sup>33</sup>

COMOR representatives were at a serious disadvantage. Not only were they in the uncomfortable position of dealing directly with officials who far outranked them, but, in place of McCone, the Agency was represented by Carter, who lacked the DCI’s fearlessness and stature. Once administration officials began drawing up flight paths that avoided known SAM sites, the experts retreated. “When men of such rank involve themselves in planning mission tracks, good intelligence officers just listen,” Reber later observed.<sup>34</sup> Finally,

in light of Bundy’s steadfast support of Rusk and Robert Kennedy’s acquiescence, Carter agreed to a Rusk proposal to reinstate the canceled September overflight, but as four separate missions: two flights that would remain in international waters and two that would go “in-and-out” over small portions of central and eastern Cuba.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Brugioni, *Eyeball*, 136. One expert remarked after the meeting, “After all this time and the many photographs that had been shown to Secretary Rusk, I was surprised to see how stupid he was on reconnaissance.” Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>35</sup> *FRUSvX*, 1054. Carter had gone into the meeting not only intent on reinstating the second September overflight, but also hoping to add a third extended mission before the end of the month. Ibid.

The next morning, President Kennedy approved the schedule of what were called (technically, but misleadingly) “additional” flights.<sup>36</sup> The political decision to desist from intrusive or risky overflights and stretch out the missions would be doubly crippling because of an uncontrollable (yet foreseeable) factor, namely, the vagaries of Caribbean weather from September to November, when the region is beset by torrential rains and hurricanes. Because approvals for overflights were hard to come by, the CIA made a habit of hushbanding U-2 missions. It was an operational practice to abort any mission if the weather was forecast to be more than 25 percent overcast.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, the 10 September decision not only limited the photographic “take” from every overflight, but had the unanticipated effect of drastically stretching out the mission schedule.<sup>38</sup> The result was a dysfunctional surveillance regime in a dynamic situation. Figures 1–3 depict the changes that flowed from the decision to degrade the primary tool used to verify Soviet capabilities in Cuba.<sup>39</sup>

It was during this very period, of course, that offensive missiles

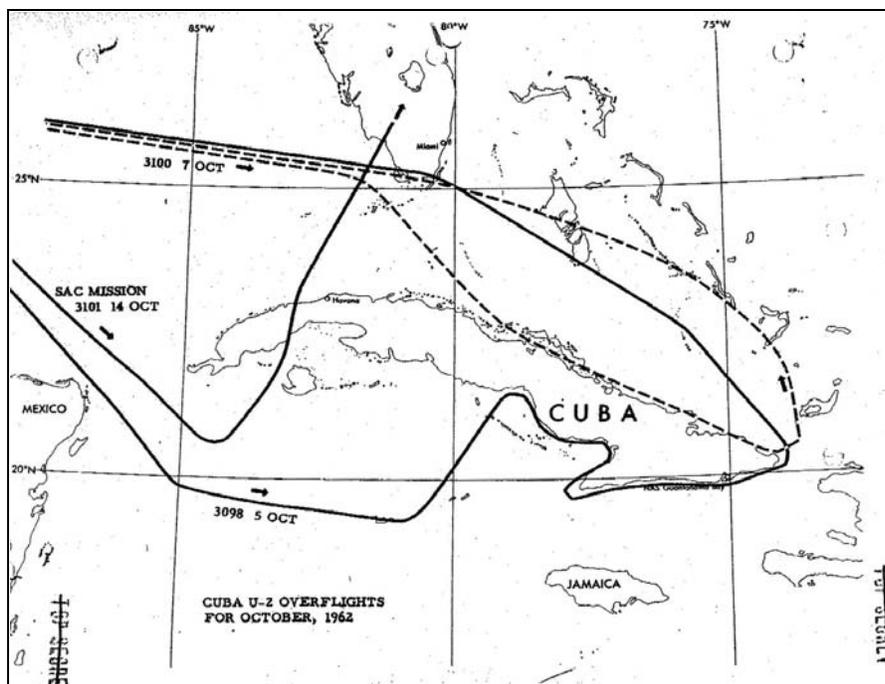


Figure 3.

<sup>36</sup> Memorandum for DD/R, “Status of Cuban Mission Approvals,” 11 September 1962, CREST, NARA.

<sup>37</sup> Pedlow and Welzenbach, *U-2 Program*, 205.

<sup>38</sup> President Kennedy always insisted that the CIA complete the schedule of approved missions before requesting new overflights. Richard Helms, with William Hood, *A Look Over My Shoulder* (New York: Random House, 2003), 212.

<sup>39</sup> George, *Deterrence*, 477.

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began to arrive.<sup>40</sup> Recognizable equipment reached the vicinity of San Cristóbal on 17–18 September, and that was subsequently fixed as the earliest date after which U-2 surveillance might have gathered evidence of surface-to-surface missiles (SSMs) in Cuba.<sup>41</sup> Yet Washington, by denying itself the “hard information that a constant aerial surveillance would have revealed,” as McCone later put it, did not establish the missiles’ presence near San Cristóbal until nearly a full month later—15 October.<sup>42</sup>

### Langley’s Unease

Acting DCI Carter remonstrated on at least one occasion about the

attenuation of U-2 surveillance. “We cannot put a stop to collection,” fumed Carter during a US Intelligence Board meeting on 19 September. “Otherwise, the president would never know when the point of decision was reached.”<sup>43</sup> Yet Carter proved incapable of reversing the decision, especially after a 19 September Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) reaffirmed the conventional wisdom.<sup>44</sup> The pre-

sumption was that even if the Soviets dared to introduce SSMs, against all estimates, that would only occur after the SA-2 defense system was complete, which still appeared some weeks away.<sup>45</sup>

Later, an Agency officer reportedly observed, perhaps harshly, that the acting DCI was “standing in quicksand which was hardening into concrete,” but did not even realize it.<sup>46</sup>

The moment when McCone learned about changes in the surveillance regime remains vague to this day. The pace of cable traffic between Langley, Virginia, and Cap Ferrat on the French Riviera was so torrential that a wit in the cable section reportedly observed, “I have some

<sup>43</sup> McAuliffe, ed., *CIA Documents*, 42. At this meeting, Maj. Gen. Robert Breitweiser, the Air Force’s chief of intelligence, wondered if a pilotless “Firefly drone” might substitute for the U-2. Someone around the table immediately suggested that “Remember the Drone” would not be as gripping a battle cry as “Remember the Maine” had been in 1898. Hughes interview.

<sup>44</sup> On 20 September, Carter asked for a reconsideration of the 10 September decision, but Rusk easily deflected Carter’s effort. “Thursday, 20 September [1962], Acting,” CREST, NARA.

<sup>45</sup> Lehman Report, 17, 30. Measuring the electronic reaction to reconnaissance of Cuba was one of the National Security Agency’s top priorities following the discovery of the SA-2s. On 15 September, NSA collected the first signals from a SPOON REST target acquisition radar, an advanced kind associated with the SA-2. “Handwritten draft of DIRNSA Note on Reporting Priorities,” 10 October 1962, and “New Radar Deployment in Cuba,” 19 September 1962, Cuban Missile Crisis Document Archive, NSA, <http://www.nsa.gov/cuba/cuba00010.cfm>. When not tied into an integrated command-and-control system, however, one SA-2 was practically incapable of shooting down a high-speed target acquired on its own radar. An integrated system was not turned on until late in October. According to Gen. Gribkov, Soviet commanders were not allowed to activate the system earlier because the SAMs had been emplaced to defend against an air attack against the missiles, not reconnaissance aircraft. Gribkov and Smith, *ANADYR*, 52.

<sup>46</sup> Unidentified officer, quoted in Brugioni, *Eye-ball*, 139.

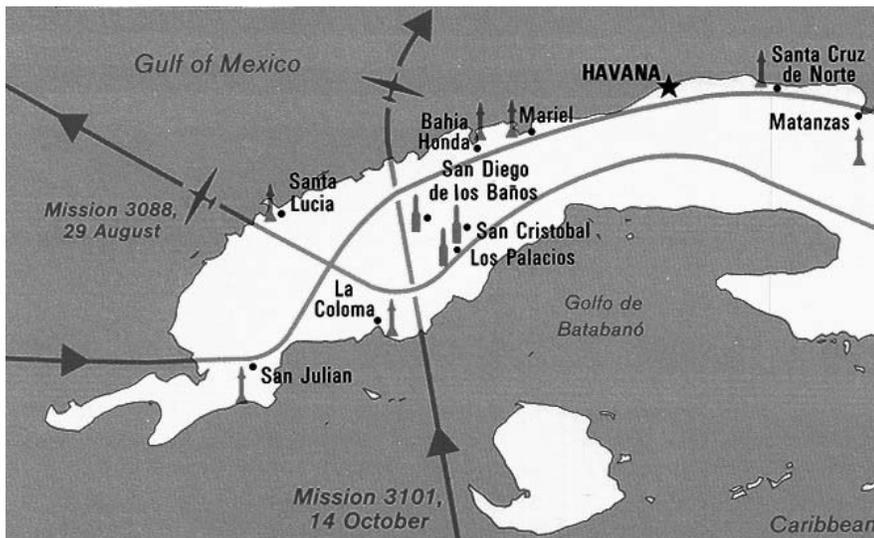


Figure 4: Soviet missile emplacements.

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**McCone was unable to reverse the administration's 'near-crippling caution.'**

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doubts that the old man knows what to do on a honeymoon.”<sup>47</sup> Yet the abrupt alteration in the U-2 regime went unmentioned in the cables, and McCone did not realize the degree to which overflights had been attenuated until he returned to Washington on 24 September.<sup>48</sup> Still, he was sufficiently concerned about the administration's lassitude to button-hole Bundy in late September while the national security adviser was in Europe for a NATO function. During a morning walk in Paris, the DCI zeroed in on what would turn out to be the Achilles' heel of the latest SNIE: the presumption that Moscow would not embrace such a risk in Cuba. Bundy was immovable, believing, as he did, that McCone was too fixated on a single element of the geo-political struggle, the thermonuclear balance.<sup>49</sup> The national security adviser remained determined not to allow McCone to entrap President Kennedy into sanctioning overflights with impunity. Any shoot-down would become a *casus belli* for those who were itching to invade the island.

McCone met with President Kennedy and the attorney general privately on 26 September, shortly after returning to Wash-

ington but apparently was unable to reverse the administration's "near-crippling caution," as Richard Helms later termed it, until the approved overflight schedule had at least run its course.<sup>50</sup> Meanwhile, and to McCone's consternation, the photographic "take" from the attenuated U-2 missions was being cited to rebut the administration's increasingly vocal critics in Congress and the media.<sup>51</sup> Simultaneously, influential columnists like Walter Lippmann and James Reston, drawing from public testimony and/or private conversations with administration officials, were characterizing the surveillance of Cuba as "elaborate" or "total" in their columns.<sup>52</sup>

By early October, McCone was determined to remove the strictures on U-2 surveillance as a matter of principle, believing

that the CIA had already been "remiss" in settling for much less than complete coverage.<sup>53</sup> Coincidentally, NPIC chief Arthur Lundahl had asked his staff to develop a visual representation of photo surveillance of Cuba since early September. The map graphically depicted, at one glance, that large portions of Cuba had not been photographed since late August. The DCI "nearly came out of his chair when he saw the map," according to Lundahl.<sup>54</sup> "I'll take this," McCone reportedly said, apparently intending to make it exhibit number one at the SGA meeting to be chaired by Robert Kennedy on 4 October.<sup>55</sup>

Generally, the DCI and the attorney general were of like mind when it came to Cuba. But McCone's imputation of hesitancy on the administration's part echoed what several Republicans, especially Senator Kenneth Keating (R-New York), were asserting virtually every day in Congress, and the attorney general visibly bristled at the characterization.<sup>56</sup> When the subject turned specifically to the matter of the self-imposed reconnaissance blinders, McCone stressed

<sup>47</sup> No minutes of the 26 September meeting are extant, but this may have been when McCone made a "strong representation to President Kennedy to remove some of the restraints on operations over Cuba," according to Richard Helms. *FRUSvX*, 1094–95, and Helms, *Shoulder*, 212. McCone also had an unrecorded conversation with the president on 8 October, and may have pressed his case then. James Giglio, "Kennedy on Tape," *Diplomatic History* 27, no. 5 (November 2003): 749.

<sup>51</sup> The Cuban buildup "is a configuration of defensive capability," Rusk confidently said during a rare, nationally televised interview on 29 September. David Larson, ed., *The "Cuban Crisis" of 1962* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1963), 28.

<sup>52</sup> Walter Lippmann, "On War Over Cuba," the *Washington Post*, 9 October 1962; and James Reston, "On Cuba and Pearl Harbor—the American Nightmare," *New York Times*, 12 October 1962. Rusk intensely disliked both columnists, so their private source was almost certainly Bundy, acting on President Kennedy's instructions. Hughes interview.

<sup>53</sup> McCone, "Notes for Mr. Earman," 17 December 1962, CREST, NARA.

<sup>54</sup> Brugioni, *Eyeball*, 159.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *FRUSvXI*, 12.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>48</sup> As late as December 1962, the DCI remained perplexed about exactly what had happened during his absence. "I do not have an explanation of this and I'd like to know where this change in procedure came from, by whose order, and under what circumstances." McCone, "Notes for Mr. Earman," 17 December 1962, CREST, NARA.

<sup>49</sup> Bundy, *Danger*, 419–20.

that they were ill-advised, particularly since the SAMs were “almost certainly not operational.”<sup>57</sup> McCone, presumably after pointing to Lundahl’s map,

*noted to the Special Group that there had been no coverage of the center of Cuba and more particularly, the entire western end of the Island for over a month, and all flights since 5 September had been either peripheral or limited and therefore CIA did not know, nor could advise, whether an offensive capability was being created. DCI objected strenuously to the limitations which had been placed on overflights and there arose a considerable discussion (with some heat) as to whether limitations had or had not been placed on CIA by the Special Group.*<sup>58</sup>

Now that the gaping hole in coverage was becoming obvious, no one was very keen to take responsibility for it. The SGA as a body, of course, had not issued an edict in writing against intrusive overflights. Rather, under duress from Rusk and Bundy—neither of whom was in attendance now—the CIA and COMOR had desisted from submitting such requests after being told, in effect, that such flight paths, if proposed, would not be approved.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, the president could technically claim (and, on his behalf, Bundy later would) that he had approved every over-

<sup>57</sup> Pedlow and Welzenbach, *U-2 Program*, 206.

<sup>58</sup> McAuliffe, ed., *CIA Documents*, 16.

<sup>59</sup> Lehman Report, 13; McCone, “Notes for Mr. Earman,” 17 December 1962, CREST, NARA.

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**No one was keen to take responsibility for the gaping hole in coverage.**  
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flight request received since the SA-2s were discovered in late August.<sup>60</sup>

### Making Headway

The 4 October meeting began nudging the surveillance regime in the direction that McCone was determined to move it. “It was the consensus that we could not accept restrictions which would foreclose gaining all reasonable knowledge of military installations in Cuba,” McCone recorded in his memo of the meeting.<sup>61</sup> But the State Department, for one, was not going to yield that easily. Rusk’s alter ego, Deputy Under Secretary of State U. Alexis Johnson, still managed to win agreement for a National Reconnaissance Office (NRO) report on an overall surveillance program for Cuba, to be presented at the next SGA meeting on 9 October.<sup>62</sup> That meant sev-

<sup>60</sup> “With respect to overflight policy, we [Bundy, Rusk, McNamara, McCone] agreed that all flights requested of the President were authorized by him,” Bundy wrote in a February 1963 “Eyes Only” memo for these four officials. This effort to put senior officials on the same page with respect to any congressional inquiries also observed that “delays in executing approved [U-2] reconnaissance missions were not reported upward, or monitored downward.” *FRUSvXI*, 703–4.

<sup>61</sup> *FRUSvXI*, 13.

<sup>62</sup> U. Alexis Johnson, *The Right Hand of Power* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984), 381; Pedlow and Welzenbach, *U-2 Program*, 206; McAuliffe, ed., *CIA Documents*, 136.

eral more days lost while the NRO pondered whether there was a substitute for the U-2. Nor was it clear that the White House would ultimately agree to remove the strictures on U-2 overflights, as became obvious on the next day, when McCone met with Bundy privately to discuss Cuba. The White House still viewed the unprecedented buildup as a domestic, rather than foreign policy, crisis.<sup>63</sup>

Separately from McCone’s effort to lift restrictions on principle, CIA officers at the operational level were correlating new human intelligence reports about alleged missiles in Cuba. One report dated 7 September, in particular, had grabbed the attention of Ted Shackley, chief of the CIA’s station in Miami, and officers in Task Force W, the MONGOOSE component at CIA headquarters. The report was from a Cuban observer agent, the lowest rank in the intelligence pecking order, who had been recruited under MONGOOSE.<sup>64</sup> In secret writing, the agent had conveyed information about a mountainous area near San Cristóbal, approximately 60 miles west of Havana, where “very secret and important work,” believed to involve mis-

<sup>63</sup> This meeting was also tense. McCone said that restrictions on U-2 flights “had placed the United States intelligence community in a position where it could not report with assurance the development of offensive capabilities in Cuba.” Bundy took refuge in expert opinion, stating that he “felt the Soviets would not go that far,” and the national security adviser “seemed relaxed” over the lack of hard information (or so McCone thought). McAuliffe, ed., *CIA Documents*, 115.

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**[To work around  
the politics,] CIA let  
DIA take the lead  
during the debate over  
resuming overflights.**

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siles, was in progress.<sup>65</sup> Besides providing coordinates for a specific area, what made this agent's report intriguing was that it coincided with two refugee reports that described large missiles last seen heading west from Havana.<sup>66</sup>

Under normal circumstances, Task Force W officers would have simply funneled the human intelligence up to COMOR, where a new requirement could be fashioned. But since 10 September, enormous uncertainty, and even a kind of defensiveness, had developed within the CIA over U-2 flights—so much so, that Sam Halpern, Task Force W's executive officer, believed it advisable to avoid having only the CIA's fingerprints on the intelligence. He worried about it being discounted as the product of a politicized, overly aggressive, or simply unreliable Agency.<sup>67</sup>

Consequently, in late September, Col. John Wright, head of the MONGOOSE component at

the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), was invited to a briefing in Task Force W's war room. Based on the coordinates provided by the MONGOOSE agent, CIA officers in Task Force W had marked off a trapezoid-shaped area on a map, and they asked Wright to push a request for U-2 surveillance up his chain of command. The maneuver “got us [CIA] out of the line of fire and let DIA take the lead” during “days of fighting” in early October about an overflight, recalled Halpern.<sup>68</sup> There was, however, a potential bureaucratic downside: If a U-2 overflight found anything, Col. Wright and the very junior DIA would forever be credited with having astutely assembled the crucial intelligence.<sup>69</sup>

On 9 October, the SGA met again to consider U-2 surveillance. By this time, the last two missions authorized on 11 September had flown—on 5 and 7 October—without finding any evidence of offensive missiles.<sup>70</sup> McCone came to the meeting armed with

a quick paper, prepared by the Office of National Estimates, on the consequences of a presidential declaration stating that the Soviet buildup necessitated invasive reconnaissance of Cuba.<sup>71</sup> The DCI had also taken the precaution of inviting along an air force colonel who could testify about the vulnerability of a U-2 during an intrusive sweep of Cuba. The SA-2 sites were fully equipped by now, but from the American perspective they were still not functioning as an integrated SAM system.<sup>72</sup> Col. Jack Ledford, head of the CIA's Office of Special Activities, “presented a vulnerability analysis that estimated the odds of losing a U-2 over Cuba at 1 in 6.”<sup>73</sup>

During the SGA meeting, no one single-mindedly maintained that the 10 September restrictions had to be lifted to allow photo coverage of a suspected surface-to-surface missile site.<sup>74</sup> On the basis of DIA's urgent recommendation, the COMOR had simply put the San Cristóbal area at the top of its target list *if* overflights of western Cuba were approved.<sup>75</sup> Ultimately, the SGA's recommendation to the president (which he approved promptly) eased the restrictions on overflights but by

<sup>64</sup> The White House and State Department were critical of the CIA's apparent inability to collect high-value human intelligence on Cuba and its corresponding dependence on technical means such as the U-2. Hughes interview. Helms observed in 1997 that this single piece of human intelligence was the sole “positive and productive” aspect of MONGOOSE. Ted Shackley, with Richard Finney, *Spymaster* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2005), 63.

<sup>65</sup> McAuliffe, ed., *CIA Documents*, 103–4.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 107–9; “Chronology of Specific Events Relating to the Military Buildup in Cuba” (hereafter PFIAB Chronology), undated, compiled for the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board, 38, [http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/cuba\\_mis\\_cri/chron.htm](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/cuba_mis_cri/chron.htm).

<sup>67</sup> Author's interview with Sam Halpern, 3 May 2003.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, and interview of Halpern in Ralph Weber, ed., *Spymasters* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1999), 125. DIA's request informed memos submitted to the COMOR, USIB, and NRO in early October.

<sup>69</sup> John Hughes, with A. Denis Clift, “The San Cristóbal Trapezoid,” *Studies in Intelligence* (Winter 1992): 44–45.

<sup>70</sup> The 7 October peripheral overflight skirted what would turn out to be the SSM complexes in central Cuba, but photo-interpreters were unable to detect any sites, presumably because of the oblique coverage.

<sup>71</sup> McAuliffe, ed., *CIA Documents*, 119–22.

<sup>72</sup> CIA/Office of Research and Reports, “Miscalculated Risk,” 28.

<sup>73</sup> Pedlow and Welzenbach, *U-2 Program*, 207. The odds cited likely pertained to an extended overflight of Cuba.

the most incremental margin imaginable.<sup>76</sup> Only one “in-and-

<sup>74</sup> “I feel it would be erroneous to give the impression this [14 October] flight went where it went because we suspected [SSMs] were there. This was simply not the case.” McCone, “Notes for Mr. Earman,” 17 December 1962, CREST, NARA. McCone was apparently loath to make missions or flight paths contingent on human intelligence reports, since he was dead-set on lifting restrictions on principle. The logic behind the SGA’s recommendation may have been perceived differently by others. The newly minted chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Maxwell Taylor, was acutely aware of the San Cristóbal trapezoid. He had been briefed by Col. Wright by 1 October. *FRUSvXI*, 1, note.

<sup>75</sup> PFIAB Chronology, 39–41; Lehman Report, 30–31; PFIAB Report, 75–77. A COMOR memorandum prepared on 5 October stated that the military items “of most immediate concern are the missile installations springing up all over the island.” These were identified, in order, as known and suspected SAM sites; coastal cruise missile installations; and, third, SSM sightings that required confirmation or denial. Memo for USIB, “Intelligence Justification for U-2 Overflight of Cuba,” 5 October 1962, CREST, NARA.

<sup>76</sup> Pedlow and Welzenbach, *U-2 Program*, 207.

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**It was a ‘moment of splendor’ for the U-2, its camera, and the photo-interpreters.**

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out” flight over western Cuba was sanctioned.<sup>77</sup> If this initial mission “did not provoke an SA-2 reaction,” additional in-and-out flights over western Cuba would be proposed, until a full mosaic of that region was obtained.<sup>78</sup>

The track of the mission approved on 9 October was plotted to include coverage of the San Cristóbal trapezoid. The overflight did not actually occur until 14 October, owing to inclement weather forecasts and the time needed to train an air force pilot in the intri-

<sup>77</sup> PFIAB Report, 32, 75–77.

<sup>78</sup> Pedlow and Welzenbach, *U-2 Program*, 207.

cacies of the more powerful U-2s operated by the CIA.<sup>79</sup> But eventually, Maj. Richard Heyser piloted the U-2 that took 928 photographs in six minutes over an area of Cuba that had not been photographed for 45 days.<sup>80</sup> The film was rushed to Suitland, Maryland, for processing and arrived at NPIC on the morning of 15 October. Shortly before 4:00 p.m., the CIA photo-interpreter on a team of four analysts announced, “We’ve got MRBMs [medium range ballistic missiles] in Cuba.”<sup>81</sup> It was a “moment of splendor” for the U-2, its cameras and film, and the photo-interpreters, as Sherman Kent later put it, if not the CIA’s finest hour of the Cold War.<sup>82</sup> The president issued blanket authority for unrestricted U-2 overflights on 16 October, and the missile crisis commenced in earnest.

### Success or Failure?

Ultimately, the performance of the Intelligence Community has to be judged a success, albeit by a narrow margin.<sup>83</sup> The fact that the SSMs were detected and

<sup>79</sup> Because the administration was anxious to preserve “plausible deniability” in case of an incident, responsibility for the U-2 mission was shifted from the CIA to the Strategic Air Command. A cover story involving a regular air force pilot was deemed marginally more credible and signified how dread of another U-2 incident was still greater than any concern about new reports of SSMs. Pedlow and Welzenbach, *U-2 Program*, 207–9.

<sup>80</sup> *FRUSvXI*, 29.

<sup>81</sup> Brugioni, *Eyeball*, 200.

<sup>82</sup> Sherman Kent, “A Crucial Estimate Relieved,” *Studies in Intelligence* (Spring 1964): 115.



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**The photo gap was more significant than the consistently wrong estimates.**

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reported before any of them were perceived as operational was vital to the resolution that followed. Washington had precious days to deliberate, and then orchestrate a reaction short of an instant military attack. That decision shifted the onus of using force onto the Soviets. And once having seized the initiative via a quarantine, the Kennedy administration never lost it. Khrushchev, meanwhile, was denied the *fait accompli* he had tried to achieve by deception and was forced to improvise in a situation for which he had not planned sufficiently, if at all.

It has been argued, therefore, that the system basically worked. “Fortunately, the decision to look harder was made in time, but it would have been made sooner if we had listened more attentively to McCone,” was the formulation McGeorge Bundy presented in his 1988 history/memoir.<sup>84</sup> This “system worked” view has been endorsed by every participant in the crisis who has written a memoir, as well as by most scholars of the crisis.<sup>85</sup> And it may well be that, given the intangibles of human behavior, the most one can ever expect is a kind of dogged performance by an intelligence service that somehow man-

<sup>83</sup> George termed the Intelligence Community’s performance a “near-failure” of the “first magnitude” in *Deterrence*, 473. See also Gil Merom, “The 1962 Cuban Intelligence Estimate,” *Intelligence and National Security* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1999): 52. The pre-14 October intelligence product was “deficient due to *operational*, as much as *analytical*, reasons,” according to Merom.

<sup>84</sup> Bundy, *Danger*, 420.

ages, in the end, to prevent a strategic surprise.

Yet some students of the missile crisis have gone too far, raising a counterfactual argument to claim that the CIA’s misestimates were the most significant shortcoming, and that the photo gap, in essence, did not even matter. “Discovery [of the missiles] a week or two earlier in October . . . would not have changed the situation faced by the president and his advisers,” Raymond Garthoff, one of the most esteemed scholars of the crisis, has written.<sup>86</sup> This is probably not the most appropriate counterfactual argument to pose, given that the missiles were found none too soon. A more significant question is: What would have happened if the missiles had been found even slightly later?

If some combination of the administration’s caution, more active Soviet radars, mechanical problems with the aircraft or cameras, or inclement weather had delayed discovery by as lit-

<sup>85</sup> Raymond Garthoff, “US Intelligence in the Cuban Missile Crisis,” 53–55; James Wirtz, “Organizing for Crisis Intelligence,” 139, 142–45; James Blight and David Welch, “The Cuban Missile Crisis and Intelligence Performance,” 199—all in *Intelligence and National Security* 13, no. 3 (Autumn 1998).

<sup>86</sup> Garthoff, “US Intelligence,” 24.

tle as a week to 10 days, then the first sighting would have correlated with a judgment that some SSMs were already capable of being launched, with who knows what consequences for ExComm’s deliberations.<sup>87</sup> It was the administration’s restraint in the face of a blatant Soviet deception/provocation that won allied and world opinion over to the US position very quickly. That restraint might have been even more sorely tested than it was if some missiles, when discovered, were simultaneously deemed operational. Then, too, the looming mid-term election helped define what the administration saw as its window of opportunity for a negotiated settlement.<sup>88</sup> Appreciably shortening the amount of

<sup>87</sup> “I am sure the impact on American thinking would have been shattering if we had not detected the missiles before they were deployed . . .” former Deputy Director for Intelligence Ray Cline later observed. “Commentary: The Cuban Missile Crisis,” *Foreign Affairs* 68, no. 4 (Fall 1989): 194. By 20 October, the CIA was estimating that the San Cristóbal SSM site, the most advanced of several under construction, “could now have full operational readiness.” McAuliffe, ed., *CIA Documents*, 228. The five days of deliberations in the interim were vital in helping the president achieve his preference for a limited objective, i.e., the removal of offensive weapons rather than an invasion of Cuba. Sheldon Stern, *Averting the “Final Failure”* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 132–37.

<sup>88</sup> Though the election largely went unmentioned during ExComm’s deliberations, at one critical juncture, a Republican (later identified as Treasury Secretary C. Douglas Dillon) passed a frank note to presidential speechwriter Ted Sorensen: “Have you considered the very real possibility that if we allow Cuba to complete installation and operational readiness of missile bases, the next House of Representatives is likely to have a Republican majority?” Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 688.

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**Kennedy faced the prospect of explaining why they had degraded the only intelligence-gathering tool that was indispensable.**

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time left before the 6 November voting suggests that the missile crisis might have played out very differently. Assuming that President Kennedy's determination to avoid an armed conflict remained fixed, he might have had to settle the crisis on less advantageous terms, such as an explicit exchange of Soviet offensive weapons in Cuba for the Jupiter missiles in Turkey.<sup>89</sup>

What actually happened, of course, matters more than what might have been. Yet by that measure, too, the photo gap was more significant than the consistently wrong estimates. The failure to anticipate Khrushchev's gamble, to be sure, was a serious mistake that warranted *ex post facto* study.<sup>90</sup> But was the emphasis on this inability to predict the future justified when the far more critical issue was intelligence collection—or, more accurately, the lack thereof? As one scholar of the analytical process has perceptively written, it really should not have mattered “what intelligence ‘thought’” about the likelihood of missiles being introduced into Cuba. “But it did matter, impera-

tively, that intelligence collect the data which would permit a firm judgment whether or not the missiles were there.”<sup>91</sup>

### Political Cover-up

It is indisputable, in any event, that the photo gap far exceeded the misestimates as a genuine political problem for the administration. Once the formerly villainous U-2 had been transformed, virtually overnight, into a heroic tool, it was more than awkward for the administration to admit that the CIA, in Helms's words, had been “enjoined to stay well away from what we called the business [western] end of the island.”<sup>92</sup> Although no one inside the executive branch had been exactly complacent, President Kennedy faced the uncomfortable prospect of

explaining why his administration had degraded the only intelligence-gathering tool that was indispensable until it was almost too late.<sup>93</sup> The photo gap also left the president vulnerable to charges, reasonable or otherwise, that he had been taken in by the Soviets' elaborate deception, to a point where the administration had even tried to foist a false sense of security onto the country.<sup>94</sup>

Well before a settlement of the crisis, ExComm members discussed how to create the widespread impression in public that the administration had been as vigilant as advertised, and that the missiles had been discovered at the earliest reasonable moment.<sup>95</sup> Deflecting congres-

<sup>89</sup> The president was prepared to authorize the so-called “Cordier ploy,” if direct negotiations failed to produce a settlement. This scheme envisioned a public *quid pro quo* ostensibly proposed by the UN secretary general. Eric Pace, “Rusk Tells a Kennedy Secret: Fallback Plan in Cuba Crisis,” *New York Times*, 28 August 1987.

<sup>90</sup> At the same time, the influence of National Intelligence Estimates can be overrated. Policymakers tend to embrace estimates that “validate their own certainties,” as one leading scholar has noted. Harold Ford, *CIA and the Vietnam Policy-makers* (Washington: CIA Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1998), 12.

<sup>91</sup> Cynthia Grabo, *Anticipating Surprise* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004), 140.

<sup>92</sup> Helms, *Shoulder*, 212. Gen. Maxwell Taylor seems to have been the only ExComm member whose memoir explicitly referred to the administration's problem vis-à-vis the photo gap. He absolved the president of responsibility and placed the onus on the CIA. “My impression is that the President was never made fully aware of these limitations on our primary source of information, mainly because the intelligence community did not bring the situation forcibly to his attention and urge approval of low-level reconnaissance when the U-2s could not fly.” Maxwell Taylor, *Swords and Ploughshares* (New York: Norton, 1972), 263.

<sup>93</sup> The State Department was certainly uncomfortable about its role. In March 1963, for example, Deputy Under Secretary U. Alexis Johnson, in response to a CIA memo reconstructing the attenuation of U-2 overflights, defensively asserted that no useful purpose would be served by recording the “various positions taken by the various individuals or institutions concerned.” Memorandum for McCone, “U-2 Overflights of Cuba, 29 August through 14 October 1962,” 6 March 1963, Document 626, microfiche supplement to *FRUSvIX*.

<sup>94</sup> William Taubman, *Khrushchev* (New York: Norton, 2003), 557. Reflecting criticism that might have become widespread, one conservative critic asked what the American public should think about a president “who, in the 59th year of the Communist enterprise, is shocked when a Communist lies to him?” James Burnham, “Intelligence on Cuba,” *National Review*, 20 November 1962. In his posthumously published memoir, Robert Kennedy admitted that “We had been deceived by Khrushchev, but we had also fooled ourselves.” The next sentence, however, claimed that “No official within the government had ever suggested to President Kennedy that the Russian buildup in Cuba would include missiles.” Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days* (New York: Norton, 1969), 27–28.

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sional curiosity, not to mention skeptics in the media, promised to be a very delicate problem. On 5 September, acting DCI Carter had informed senators on the Foreign Relations and Armed Services Committees that the CIA was in no way “assuming” that SSMs would not be implanted in Cuba.<sup>96</sup> On 17 September, before the same committees, Rusk gave similar assurances about the administration's vigilance and the quality of intelligence being gathered. “[With respect to missile sites] we do have very firm information indeed, and of a most reliable sort,” the secretary of state testified, seven days after he had helped to attenuate that reliable coverage.<sup>97</sup>

As it turned out, propagating the notion that the missiles had been discovered at the earliest reason-

able opportunity received an ironic assist from Kenneth Keating, the president's congressional nemesis. The New York senator, as evinced by his 10 October floor statement, seemed to have discovered the missiles several days before the administration. The media's subsequent fixation over Keating's supposedly superior intelligence tended to obfuscate the genuine issue in the weeks leading up to 14 October. The photo gap, in other words, was obscured by a controversy—Keating's ostensible “scoop”—that was truly a red herring.<sup>98</sup>

The last aspect of the photo gap that merits comment is the effect the secret had on the all-important relationship between the nation's chief intelligence officer and the president—actually, both Kennedys, in this case. McCone's prescience did not win him admission into the president's innermost circle of advisers.<sup>99</sup> It had the opposite effect. The DCI became mightily resented, not

only for having been right—which he was not inclined to let anyone forget for a moment—but also for being privy to an embarrassing truth.<sup>100</sup> Ultimately, McCone's loyalty and ambition (like others, he fancied himself a successor to Rusk) were such that the DCI went along with the fiction, in congressional testimony and elsewhere, that the missiles had been found as early as reasonably possible.<sup>101</sup> Yet that scarcely mattered. The Kennedys now distrusted their DCI more than ever, as revealed by their private conversation on 4 March regarding a Marquis Childs column on the photo gap.<sup>102</sup> Although the column did not actually contradict the administration's public position, the mere fact that someone

<sup>95</sup> Robert Kennedy, as might be expected, raised this thorny question on 22 October and promptly tried to forge a quick consensus, namely, that surveillance flights would not have “been able to tell up until the last ten days or two weeks.” Stern, “*Final Failure*,” 143–44, 152–53.

<sup>96</sup> US Senate, *Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Together with Joint Sessions with the Senate Armed Services Committee*, vol. XIV, 87th cong., 2nd sess., (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1986), 689, 716.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 760, 765. Present at both of these closed hearings was Richard B. Russell (D-Georgia), whose memory for tiny but critical facts was legendary. Typically, one of the first questions Russell shrewdly asked McCone when congressional leaders were finally briefed about the SSMs on 22 October was whether the SAMs were operational. “I'm sure you're monitoring this [electronic emissions],” said Russell, before McCone informed him that SAM radars “have been latching onto our U-2s the last couple of days.” Stern, “*Final Failure*,” 161–62.

<sup>98</sup> Another red herring was the speculation in the media (and rumor on Capitol Hill) that the administration allegedly knew before Keating but withheld the information so as to maximize the electoral gain from a showdown with Moscow. Finally, the misestimates, which became public knowledge almost immediately, also drew attention away from the near-failure to collect intelligence.

<sup>99</sup> A measure of this fact was that McCone was deliberately kept in the dark about the secret *quid pro quo*, despite openly advocating a public trade of the Jupiter missiles during ExComm meetings. McCone's exclusion here, however, may have had more to do with the DCI's relationship with Dwight Eisenhower and other Republicans. Since Kennedy intended to disinform the former president about the true parameters of the settlement (and did), telling McCone the truth was impossible. Stern, “*Final Failure*,” 388.

<sup>100</sup> In addition, McCone's continued hard line on Cuba and some bruising clashes with Defense Secretary McNamara over the Soviet withdrawal caused some teeth-gnashing within an administration trying hard to get the subject of Cuba off the front pages in early 1963. Guthman and Shulman, eds., *Robert Kennedy*, 14.

<sup>101</sup> If photos had been taken earlier than mid-October, McCone testified, they probably would not have been sufficiently definitive. *FRUSvIX*, 714. Robert Kennedy recalled that “I used to see him [McCone] all the time then [in early 1963] . . . so that we wouldn't have the whole thing bust wide open.” Robert Kennedy Oral History, 30 April 1964, JFKL, 224.

<sup>102</sup> Marquis Childs, “Blank Spot in Cuban Picture,” *Washington Post*, 4 March 1963.

other than the White House was obviously putting out a version of what happened, and thus keeping the issue alive, incensed the Kennedys. According to Robert Kennedy, Childs was claiming that the CIA was putting out information against the administration, trying to make itself look good. "Yeah," the president acidly remarked, "... he's a real bastard, that John McCone." "Well, he was useful at [one] time," the attorney general observed. "Yeah, but boy, it's really evaporate[d]," responded the president. "... Everybody's onto him now."<sup>103</sup>

### In Conclusion

Apart from clarifying key dynamics on the eve of the missile crisis, the photo gap is interesting because it speaks to issues of

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<sup>103</sup> Conversation between J. F. Kennedy and R. F. Kennedy, Item 9A.6, 4 March 1963, Transcript and Recording of Cassette C (side 2), Presidential Recordings, JFKL. Later in the day, and after a conversation between the president and McGeorge Bundy, McCone discussed the photo gap with the president, who said the photo gap was being used to drive a wedge into the administration, one that would pit the CIA against the State and Defense Departments. He hoped that McCone could avoid making any statements that would "exacerbate the situation." McCone assured the president that that "would not happen." *FRUS*vXI, 713-14.

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moment today, not the least of which is the difficulty of being the nation's chief intelligence officer and the qualities that make for an effective one. Telling the president and his top advisers what they prefer not to believe, or advocating a risk they want to avoid, is not a job for the faint of heart. The story of the photo gap is a reminder that the success or failure of the Intelligence Community unavoidably depends on the human factor: the character and capacities of the men and women in critical positions, along with the nature of relationships at the very top.

In January 1969, during his farewell address as director of the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Thomas Hughes, remarked: "Over the long run, the prospect for preserving intelligence and policy in their most constructive orthodox roles will depend on the real-life resistance which intelligence officers

apply to these pressures [from policymakers], as well as to the self-imposed restraints which impede the policymakers from originally exerting them."<sup>104</sup>

Hughes's observation was offered after eight years of firsthand exposure to the often troubled relationship between the Intelligence Community and the Kennedy/Johnson administrations during the fateful 1960s, which included McCone's entire tenure as DCI. The run-up to the missile crisis may not represent the model behavior Hughes had in mind, but, decades later, the government seems as far removed as ever from his prescription. Judging from such episodes as policymakers' failure to act against al-Qa'ida in the 1990s and the misappropriation of flawed estimates about Iraq in 2002, at critical junctures US policymakers still receive and absorb the intelligence they prefer rather than need. The recent establishment of a director of national intelligence, in and of itself, is not likely to ameliorate this problem.

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<sup>104</sup> Thomas Hughes, *The Fate of Facts in a World of Men* (New York: Foreign Policy Association, 1976), 27.