

The Cuban Missile Crisis:  
Once More Unto the Breach

*By Sheldon M. Stern*

*The Silent Guns of Two Octobers: Kennedy and Khrushchev Play the Double Game*  
Theodore Voorhees, Jr.  
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[Editor's disclosure to readers: *In 2017, the author, Theodore Voorhees, Jr. contacted the reviewer, Sheldon M. Stern, one of the most prominent scholars of the Cuban missile crisis, and asked Stern to read his manuscript-in-progress. Stern concluded that the work added an important and fresh perspective to Cold War scholarship, offered limited editorial advice, and then, together with Professor Martin Sherwin, assisted in finding a receptive university press.*]

The standard view of the Cuban missile crisis is engraved in our historical memory. My own books reflect that outlook, describing those iconic thirteen days as the most dangerous episode of the nuclear era and the thirteenth day, October 27, 1962, as the most perilous twenty-four hours in human history. That view is so widely shared in missile crisis literature that it was startling to read a book in which that interpretation was all but relegated to the status of “the conventional wisdom.”

Theodore Voorhees, Jr., senior counsel at the Washington, DC law firm of Covington & Burling LLP, concludes “that much of the Cold War rhetoric the leaders employed was posturing and that neither had any intention of starting a nuclear war.” Voorhees begins by dissecting the October 1961 confrontation along the Berlin Wall at Checkpoint Charlie when some sixty Soviet and US tanks faced each other “across a tense Cold War border.” His conclusion, however, is that John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev were personally determined to avoid escalation. Indeed, in a matter of hours, they maneuvered to assure that the confrontation evaporated without violence or casualties.

One year later, a vastly more dangerous crisis arose when US surveillance aircraft discovered that the Soviets had secretly placed medium and intermediate range ballistic missiles in Cuba. How Voorhees asks, did the rival leaders resolve the crisis “with lightning speed?”[\[1\]](#)

The simple answer is that the sudden, seemingly miraculous, restoration of peaceful coexistence was possible because both the underlying point of dispute and the ultimate deal terms that ended each crisis were matters under the personal control of each leader. When Kennedy and Khrushchev chose to settle, each man had the authority and the power to do so almost instantaneously. The two leaders personally directed all key decisions down to precise details . . . . It has become increasingly clear that Khrushchev and Kennedy felt free to reject the views of their closest advisers and brush aside the consternation they caused their alliance partners . . . . Neither Kennedy nor Khrushchev, whatever his publicly stated position, actually believed that his adversary's actions presented a problem whose *substantive importance* warranted even a conventional military engagement, far less a nuclear showdown.

Voorhees acknowledges that hawks on both sides of the divide regarded the missile crisis as an opportunity to settle the Cold War militarily and “there was always the danger that men lower down the chains of command might pull the trigger, whether by mistake, through personal belligerence, through fear, or all three.” However, this shared outlook at the top also significantly diminished the potential for unwelcome contingencies. The two leaders kept both the conventional and nuclear buttons under tight control and used back-channel diplomacy (involving the president's brother Robert and Khrushchev's son-in-law Alexei Adzhubei) to make sure that the other side received unmistakable signals of their ultimate intent to restore the status quo. JFK intended the naval quarantine of Cuba as a sign of caution and sober restraint,

and that is how Khrushchev and his colleagues at the Kremlin immediately interpreted it—with great relief. On the other hand, the president's DEFCON-2 alert unmistakably signaled to the Soviets the dire peril into which their gamble in Cuba had placed them. . . . In the days that immediately followed, both Khrushchev and Kennedy were literally tripping over one another to be first to make a settlement proposal that would be so generous that his adversary would be unable to turn it down.

Both leaders, Voorhees contends, understood that the US held “all the cards” in the nuclear balance of power with a twenty-to-one advantage in nuclear warheads. The extraordinary Kennedy-Khrushchev missile crisis correspondence, he insists, once the Cold War bluster is discounted, reveals two anxious men committed to “keeping the lid on” and ready “to get the deal done.”

And, most importantly, the rivals understood the danger posed by the tinder box in West Berlin, located deep inside Soviet East Germany, and carefully avoided any sign of aggressive intent to alter the status of that divided city. The US had nuclear superiority, but the USSR, with a substantial advantage in troops on the ground in East Germany and the Soviet satellites in Eastern Europe, could quickly overrun West Berlin. President Kennedy had remarked at a White House meeting that “It is insane that two men, sitting on opposite sides of the world, should be able to bring an end to civilization.” Khrushchev, fortunately, shared that point of view. The antagonists “realized that no politician in his right mind was going to use nuclear weapons first.”

There were, Voorhees concedes, unanticipated and very dangerous incidents: most notably the October 27th downing of a U-2 by a surface-to-air missile fired without Kremlin authorization by a Soviet officer on the ground in Cuba. Sergei Khrushchev recalled his father's near-hysterical reaction to that stunning development, which led to the death of the American

pilot, the only fatality of the missile crisis. The furious Khrushchev even threatened to exile the officer to Siberia because “Everything is hanging by a thread as it is.” From Voorhees’s perspective, Khrushchev’s response, surely one of the dramatic high-points in missile crisis literature, coupled with Kennedy’s decision not to retaliate against the SAM site(s), confirm the shared determination in Moscow and Washington to avoid nuclear war.

“Could it be,” Voorhees argues,

that the Cuban missile crisis proved exactly the opposite of what was widely feared: namely, just how much safer and better protected the world had become from the risk of war arising between the superpowers given the widely appreciated horrors that nuclear weapons had introduced to modern war-fighting? . . . The lesson—perhaps counterintuitive to generations who have long accepted that the world came close to a nuclear holocaust in October 1962—is that the fearsome prospect of nuclear war-fighting of any kind virtually guaranteed that the crisis would be settled with remarkable speed and certainly well before the parties came anywhere near a point of no return.

### **Pitfalls of Determinism**

After listening to hundreds of hours of recorded meetings and telephone conversations, I agree that JFK would never have *chosen* the nuclear option. Kennedy eagerly pursued a secret fallback plan, the so-called Cordier Ploy, in the wee hours of October 27-28 to give Khrushchev a face-saving way out by offering a Cuba-Turkey missile withdrawal plan that would appear to the world at large to have been put together by the United Nations rather than Washington. JFK was prepared, albeit reluctantly, to face the inevitable political fallout in the upcoming midterm elections if the missiles swap had to be made public to avert war. (Kennedy much preferred that the missiles swap be kept secret and successfully maneuvered to win that concession, so the swap remained effectively secret for decades). The president, in a state of near despondency, told his 19-year old mistress that he would rather his children be red than dead—not the predominant view in the United States in 1962. The only other choice was nuclear fallout.

Voorhees, however, in my judgment, seriously exaggerates the ability of the Kremlin to successfully micromanage a complex operation—carried out in secret for many weeks and more than 6,000 miles from the USSR. Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin later acknowledged that erratic and limited communications severely undermined Moscow’s ability to cope with every conceivable or inconceivable eventuality in real time because their Washington embassy did not have direct phone or radio communications with the Kremlin; coded messages had to be sent by Western Union telegram—which could take 8-12 hours—after being picked up by bicycle couriers who, oblivious to the urgency of the situation, were known to stop for a snack or to flirt with a girl. JFK and the ExComm struggled with similar constraints—for example, waiting hours to receive State Department translations of Khrushchev’s messages. And, of course, neither Kennedy nor Khrushchev were able to control a potentially lethal wild card in the crisis, Fidel Castro—as revealed by his October 26 cable to Khrushchev, advocating a nuclear first-strike on the United States, and his later refusal to accept on-site UN inspection of the missile sites even after the October 27-28 negotiated breakthrough.

There were, of course, several other perilous and potentially unmanageable episodes. Khrushchev had also ordered the nuclear warheads in Cuba to be stored miles away from the missile bases to prevent an accidental or rogue launch; but at least one base commander, again without authorization from Moscow, secretly moved them to his site. And, even more ominously, tactical nuclear cruise missiles had been put into position to obliterate the American naval base at Guantánamo if the US bombed or invaded Cuba. If the Soviets had killed thousands of Marines using tactical nuclear weapons, could Kennedy have kept the public demand for retribution in check? Voorhees seems confident that the answer is yes, despite the fevered Cold War context of 1962 (which included a poll in which most Americans concluded that a nuclear showdown with the USSR was inevitable).

Perhaps the most striking incident, which has gained a great deal of notoriety in recent decades, involves a Soviet submarine near the quarantine line forced to surface on October 27 after the US Navy dropped so-called “practice depth charges” [PDCs]—with the explosive force of a hand-grenade—producing “harmless explosive sound signals.” Voorhees recapitulates:

One of these PDC hand grenades may have detonated close enough to inflict some modest damage on at least one of the Soviet submarines, B-59, which would have allowed its captain under his standing orders to respond to any presumed damage-causing attack by firing torpedoes, one of which available to him in this case carried a nuclear warhead. ... This incident has earned an outsized place in missile crisis lore owing to reports that a Soviet naval officer named Vasily Arkhipov on board B-59 allegedly stood up to his vessel’s captain, Valentin Savitsky; single-handedly talked him out of his threat to arm the submarine’s nuclear-capable torpedo for possible firing at US naval vessels; and thereby became known as ‘the man who saved the world from nuclear apocalypse’.

Voorhees argues that Savitsky “had received notice of the new American [PDC signals] policy,” sent from Washington to Moscow on October 25, and “*presumably* [my italics] knew the difference between the sound of signaling PDCs and a determined lethal attack using real, full-strength depth charges.” However, JFK and the ExComm, Michael Dobbs concluded, “assumed that the Soviet submarine captains had been informed about the new procedures and understood the meaning of the [PDC] signals. *They were mistaken.*” [my italics] The Kremlin failed to confirm receipt of the message about the underwater signals and did not alert their four submarines in harm’s way near Cuba. Savitsky “knew nothing about the signaling procedures” and “nobody [on board] knew what was going on.” The submarines, Svetlana Savranskaya stressed, were also unable to contact Moscow without reaching “periscope depth” or surfacing in waters teeming with US Navy vessels. Voorhees remains confident, however, about “the essential inevitability of the actual outcome.”<sup>[2]</sup>

Finally, also on Black Saturday, October 27, a U-2 from a Strategic Air Command (SAC) base in Alaska, apparently on a “routine air sampling mission” to check on nuclear testing in the USSR, “accidentally” strayed into Soviet air space. MiG fighters scrambled and the plane was permitted to return to its base escorted by US F-102 fighters equipped with nuclear air-to-air missiles. Voorhees insists that the Soviets, “already facing *actual* [my italics] oncoming attack threats” from American B-52’s “took no responsive measures.” In short, he concludes that the evidence suggests that the threat was not an “actual” threat and the Soviets knew it. Fortunately, however, the MiG’s could only reach a maximum of 60,000 feet and the U-2 flew at 70,000

feet—thus limiting the Soviet fighters, at least initially, to tracking the path of the American intruder.

However, when Secretary of State Dean Rusk updated the president about the U-2 “accident” just hours later, he was reading from a prepared text—unlikely to have been written in the brief time since the intrusion: “Would there be,” Rusk asks President Kennedy, “*any advantage* [my italics] in our saying that ‘an Alaska-based U-2 flight engaged in routine air sampling operations in an area ... normally 100 miles from the Soviet Union had an instrument failure and went off course ... overflying a portion of the Soviet Union?’” Rusk’s calculated language and tone, captured on the tape recording, suggest that he was proposing a public relations cover story rather than simply presenting the facts to the president.

Decades later, at a conference, Professor Scott Sagan asked the then-Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara if the U-2 flight was part of the ultra-secret Strategic Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP) for nuclear war. The former defense chief curtly denied it but refused to discuss details—intensifying the skepticism of the panelists and the audience. Fred Kaplan, however, has documented that JFK, in 1961, had read and seriously discussed a nuclear first-strike plan that could have led to a million Soviet casualties in the first attack alone.[\[3\]](#)

Michael Dobbs later utilized some newly-released documents and interviewed U-2 pilots and senior SAC officers to nail down additional details on the overflight. He nonetheless stressed that the full report, originally ordered by McNamara, remains classified. Can historians rule out, without this potentially definitive evidence, the possibility that this episode was linked to a botched or aborted SIOP-related plan to “resolve” the crisis with a pre-emptive nuclear strike—in other words, that it was initially a strategic gamble that contingency morphed into a hazardous unanticipated consequence?[\[4\]](#)

Both Kennedy and Khrushchev, Voorhees insists, were resolved to avoid the use of nuclear weapons. But, as explicated above, the micromanagement of historical contingency is an illusion. “The destinies of nations,” Martin Sherwin demonstrates, “just as the lives of individuals, are moved inexorably forward through crossroad after crossroad by decisions and chance, with the influence of each in constant flux. The disconcerting conclusion ... [is that] a global nuclear war was averted because a random selection process had deployed Captain Vasily Arkhipov aboard a particular Soviet submarine.”[\[5\]](#)

Theodore Voorhees, Jr. has written a boldly original and impressively researched account of how events, *fortunately*, did turn out in October 1962. But, if those fateful thirteen days could be repeated one hundred times, it is all but inconceivable that fortuitous contingency, branded as “plain dumb luck” by former secretary of state Dean Acheson, would substantiate Voorhees’ confidence in “the essential inevitability” of a peaceful outcome. Kennedy was steadfast about deterring nuclear war—a fact incontrovertibly documented by the real-time tape recordings; Khrushchev’s apparently analogous motives must be deduced from his actions, his memoirs, and the testimony of those around him. Nonetheless, that shared outlook alone could not and did not predetermine the outcome.

History is not inevitable.

Sheldon M. Stern served as historian at the JFK Library in Boston from 1977 to 2000. He is the author of *Averting 'the Final Failure': John F. Kennedy and the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings* (2003), *The Week the World Stood Still: Inside the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis* (2005), and *The Cuban Missile Crisis in American Memory: Myths vs. Reality* (2012). Dr. Stern was the first historian and non-ExComm participant to listen to and evaluate the then-classified Cuban missile crisis White House tape recordings.

[1] If, as Voorhees maintains, the Checkpoint Charlie standoff provided Kennedy and Khrushchev with “a kind of blueprint and preview in miniature” of the missile crisis, it did not have a noteworthy impact, despite the persistent angst about Berlin, on the ExComm discussions or the correspondence between the two leaders.

[2] Michael Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 297-303; Svetlana Savranskaya, “New Sources on the Soviet Submarines in the Cuban Missile Crisis,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Volume 28, Number 2, 2005, 233-259.

[3] Fred Kaplan, “JFK’s First-Strike Plan,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, October 2001, 81-86.

[4] Dobbs, op.cit., 258-65, 268-72.

[5] Martin Sherwin, “[The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited: Nuclear Deterrence? Good Luck!](#)” and *Gambling with Armageddon: Nuclear Roulette from Hiroshima to the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1945-1962* (forthcoming September 2020).