

# *The Cuban Missile Crisis*

by Samantha Thornton

When American U2 planes flew over Cuba and captured images of a Soviet Union missile launch base being built a mere 90 miles from the shores of Florida, President Kennedy and his advisors sprung into a mad panic. Their immediate actions and the unknown reason behind why the base was being built, combined with the fear of the American people, became the week and a half long Cuban Missile Crisis. Historians have studied and analyzed those thirteen days since 1962, discussing why the missiles in Cuba were placed there to begin with, assuming that it was not just a lack of storage space back in the USSR. From the debates and discussions have surfaced two trains of thought: 1) The placement of Soviet missiles in Cuba was a threat to the United States' global political authority and position and 2) the Soviet Union placed the missiles in Cuba with the intent of using them to threaten the American people and possibly even use them for harm. As the years go by, more and more historians take a very investigative approach and come to the conclusion that the actions taken in that two weeks were a political move. With the first theory, it is typically believed that the Soviets never planned on actually firing the missiles and with the second, the firing of missiles was a very real possibility. As historians become more analytical, more theories join in as well. With both trains of thought comes two interpretations of the outcome of the Cuban Missile Crisis, as well. Was it a victory for the United States or just a game of Russian Roulette that happened to go in their favor?

David Horowitz was one of the first to write on the subject in his 1965 book, *The Free World Colossus*.<sup>1</sup> Horowitz explains, just three years after the debacle that the reason why President Kennedy had to act was because the political balance of the globe was in jeopardy. After examining the other possible reasons for action and concern he stated, "thus, it seems it was a *political* balance of power that was actually in danger of being upset, and this political balance was a question of appearances—prestige, presumably—the

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<sup>1</sup>David Horowitz, *The Free World Colossus* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965).

political consequences of what would appear in the eyes of the world and domestic critics of the Kennedy Administration to be a Soviet act of defiance...<sup>2</sup> In other words, the United States couldn't be shown as weak and vulnerable. Before this point of the book, Horowitz had rationalized that the action of the United States could not be explained by a growing Soviet presence or by the threat of being nuked by the USSR. The Soviet Union had been building up since July of 1962. If they wanted to bomb the U.S., they were just as likely to do it from their own country—the fact that they placed missiles 90 miles away from the American shores really didn't make a difference in the likelihood of them using them.<sup>3</sup> Kennedy said in 1961 to the U.N. General Assembly, "the weapons of war must be abolished before they abolish us..."<sup>4</sup> Horowitz argued in his conclusion that rather than a win for United States, the Cuban Missile Crisis just created a new stage of the arms race and made the world even harder to disarm of nuclear weapons.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast with Horowitz, Irving Bernstein focuses more on the possibility that the Soviet Union would have used the bombs against the United States. In his book, *Promises Kept*, Bernstein says, "by mid-October the photographs conclusively proved that the Soviets were installing missiles which could reach targets in an arc from Hudson's Bay to Peru."<sup>6</sup> Bernstein very briefly discusses the event, but he creates an urgency in his analysis that Horowitz did not. He considers the peaceful end of the Crisis a "triumph" for the United States and for Kennedy.<sup>7</sup> Both Horowitz and Bernstein present their beliefs very quickly and precisely, whereas some other historian writers delve deeper into their actual thought processes.

Robert Dallek writes in his book *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963*, "he (Khrushchev) decided to turn Cuba into a missile base from which he could more directly threaten the United States... The forty missiles would double the number in the Soviet arsenal that could reach the continental United States."<sup>8</sup> The fear experienced by American citizens was very real and many believed that the USSR was getting ready to bomb the country, and all the United States could do in defense was fire back and hope to take out as many of their people as they did Americans. Dallek

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 386.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 385.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 397.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 397.

<sup>6</sup> Irving Bernstein, *Promises Kept: John F. Kennedy's New Frontier* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1991), 290.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 291.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1991), 535-536.

writes with a sense of doom when discussing the military strategy of having certain missiles placed in different places and the closeness and proximity of it all to the U.S. He also goes on to discuss the political gains that the Soviet Union could acquire from having missiles pointed at the U.S., but he doesn't really suggest that they wanted to remove the United States from their place of power.<sup>9</sup> Unlike other historians, Dallek chooses to not take a side as to who won or lost, but instead praises President Kennedy for his work in handling the situation, "October 1962 was not only Kennedy's finest hour in the White House; it was also an imperishable example of how one man prevented a catastrophe that may yet afflict the world."<sup>10</sup>

Graham T. Allison takes a very analytical view of the Crisis in his book *The Essence of Decision*.<sup>11</sup> In it, he lengthens the President's thought process into looking at what his decision would mean for the long-term future. Amidst two very cut and dry ideas of what the missiles meant in Cuba, this theory broadens the context of the times. The book goes more into analyzing the actual action that the United States took against the Soviets and the Cubans, but the basis for all of the actions comes back to why any action was so necessary at all and why the missiles were in Cuba.

Throughout the book, Allison hints that the missile placement and the actions the world leaders took were all done for political gains in the eyes of the world. Keeping with the analytical tone of the book, he states, "on the assumption that actors do what they intended, the details of actions taken and comparisons of the costs and benefits of the different options provide evidence about intent."<sup>12</sup>

In 2012, historian David Barrett released his book *Blind Over Cuba: The Photo Gap and the Missile Crisis*.<sup>13</sup> In it, he takes a look at the photo gap that delayed the discovery by the United States of the missiles in Cuba. His stance on why the missiles were placed in Cuba is not very clear, rather he presents a very interesting statement that seemed to reflect the analytical mindset of the most recent writers about the Cuban Missile Crisis: "Regardless of the exact reasons for the surprise emplacement of Soviet missiles in Cuba—whether to protect the nascent socialist state from a US invasion or to redress the nuclear imbalance—once the missiles were detected, it was instantly recognized that the crisis threatened to make or

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 536.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 574.

<sup>11</sup> Graham T. Allison, *The Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Addison-Wesley Longman, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>13</sup> David M. Barrett, *Blind Over Cuba: The Photo Gap and the Missile Crisis* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2012).

break the Kennedy presidency.”<sup>14</sup> This take on the reasons behind the Cuban Missile Crisis defies what historians have said over the years, even those who have written books solely about President Kennedy, and turns the entire conflict into a story of political gain, not for any country, but for a man. In the end, Barrett awards the Kennedy administration with the “victory” of the Cuban Missile Crisis, in that they kept Americans in the dark and ended as heroes.<sup>15</sup>

Over time, the reasoning behind why Khrushchev put the missiles in Cuba went back and forth, literally. It’s hard to see a clear correlation between year and theories. It is clear to see that as the years go on, and more information becomes available to the public, historians become more critical and analytical of both the event and the leaders involved. As evident with Barrett’s book, more and more theories have surfaced as to what really happened during that week. It is clear to see that the views of the outcome of the Cuban Missile Crisis have ranged from thankful and triumphant, to questioning the motives of the “triumph.” Who ACTUALLY triumphed, if anyone?

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 111.