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The @#\$\$%& Missile Crisis:
(Or, What Was "Cuban" about U.S. Decisions
during the Cuban Missile Crisis?)

The documents concerning the Cuban missile crisis, declassified by the Office of the Historian of the U.S. Department of State, reveal quite effectively a key theme in the conduct of U.S. foreign policy in 1962–63: Cuba's bizarre role within the context of U.S. government decision making. This role had somewhat contradictory dimensions.

Cuba seemed to be both an afterthought and an obsession for U.S. decision makers. Its exclusion from the diplomatic negotiations over the missile crisis was an instance of negligence, though it came about in part from a deliberate decision. Such Cuban exclusion reduced the likelihood that the United States could accomplish all of its goals in the missile crisis settlement. Moreover, information included in these documents only to some degree (or not at all) calls attention to Cuba's much greater substantive importance before and during the missile crisis than U.S. officials thought at the time. This documentary record, therefore, reminds us that the outcome of the missile crisis was so positive for the United States, to a significant degree, thanks to Soviet statesmanship in managing and controlling its unhappy Cuban ally.¹

The Absent Negotiating Partner: Negligence

In the first instance, for some purposes Cuba is best rendered @#\$\$%& in the sense that it was absent from the diplomatic negotiations.² The documents

*I am grateful to Raymond Garthoff for comments on an earlier draft. I am solely responsible for errors of fact or interpretation, however.

1. For an interesting account published in Cuba about U.S. policy toward Cuba during the missile crisis see Ricardo Berthaut, "Administración Kennedy (1961–1963)," in *De Eisenhower a Reagan: La política de Estados Unidos contra la revolución cubana* [From Eisenhower to Reagan: U.S. policy against the Cuban Revolution] (Havana, 1987), 104–33.

2. Cuba was also virtually absent from the early scholarship on the Cuban missile crisis. In the fifteen years that followed the crisis, the only scholar who devoted significant attention to the Cuban role was Herbert S. Dinerstein in *The Making of a Missile Crisis, October 1962* (Baltimore, 1976). But the Cuban government played virtually no role in the most influential book on the missile crisis published in the United States, Graham Allison's *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston, 1971). Nor was the subject of Cuba a part, at first, of the most thorough, sustained examination of the missile crisis, namely, the multiyear research project led by James

reveal no instance when the government of the United States took the initiative to address the government of Cuba with regard to the events of the missile crisis – not before, during, or after the crisis.

There were two partial exceptions. First, on 16 October in the morning, at the first full meeting called at the White House to discuss the just-gathered photographic evidence of the construction of medium-range and intermediate-range ballistic missile sites in Cuba, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, in a long and rambling statement, suggested: "I think also that we ought to consider getting some word to Castro, perhaps through the Canadian ambassador in Havana, or through his representative at the U.N." (p. 32). Later that same day, Rusk and Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs Edwin Martin brought up this tactic again. As Rusk put it, there could be "the chance that this might be the issue on which Castro might elect to break with Moscow if he knew he were in deadly jeopardy" (pp. 53–54). Although Rusk would turn out to be off the mark, Secretary Martin presciently raised an issue that would, in the end, matter greatly for Castro: "the Soviets are talking to other people about the possibility of bargaining this support and these missiles against concessions in Berlin and elsewhere, and therefore are threatening to bargain him away" (pp. 53–54).³ A draft message to Castro was prepared and discussed briefly on 20 October (p. 131). But all consideration of sending a direct message to Cuba was swept aside as consensus built around the utility of surprise. The key decision on the question of whether to communicate directly with Cuba was made on 21 October: no. The United States would address the Soviet Union, its allies, the world – but not the government of Cuba (pp. 143, 150).

After the U.S. government announced its naval "quarantine" of Cuba, on 25 October Secretary Rusk revived a version of his and Martin's idea. This time he sought and secured approval for an approach to the Cuban government through the Brazilian government (pp. 205, 228–29, 278). But the request to the Brazilians was transmitted only during the early hours of 28 October – this initiative had been overtaken by the Kennedy-Khrushchev agreement, Castro's exclusion from it, and his subsequent fury, to be discussed later.

There was a second partial exception to the proposition that Cuba was absent from the negotiations. During 1962, the U.S. government was still negotiating indirectly through lawyer James B. Donovan, counsel for the Cuban Families Committee, for the release of the Cuban invasion brigade members, held in Cuban prisons since the failed invasion at the Bay of Pigs (April 1961), and subsequently for the release of a much smaller number of U.S. citizens also in

Cuban jails for various reasons. The Donovan negotiations did not, according to these documents, serve as a back-channel for negotiations concerning the missile crisis, however.

After the crisis passed, the first evidence in the documentary record that a high U.S. government official thought it odd that the United States had no direct communication, even if informal, with the Cuban government is a memorandum of 4 January 1963 from McGeorge Bundy, the president's special assistant for national security affairs, to President Kennedy: "We should intensify our investigation of ways and means of communicating with possibly dissident members of the Castro regime, perhaps even including Fidel himself. Donovan, for example, has an invitation to be Castro's guest at the beach of Varadero" (p. 650). Delicious as it is to contemplate that Castro might have been a dissident in his own government, nonetheless this train of thought reappears gradually within the U.S. government during 1963. In April 1963, Donovan had fourteen hours of discussion with Fidel Castro, and other discussions with Castro's close associates. In these talks, the possibility of improved relations with the United States surfaced, although they did not proceed far (p. 756). McGeorge Bundy, once again, was the high official most willing to think boldly: "A Titoist Castro is not inconceivable" (p. 778).

A more sustained effort to establish direct bilateral communication developed between September and November 1963 through discussions between U.S. Ambassador William Attwood and Cuban Ambassador Carlos Lechuga at the United Nations. Kennedy's assassination stopped this initiative; to that date, however, the Attwood-Lechuga talks had not proceeded much past preliminary conversations (pp. 879–83, 892–93, 903–4).⁴

In short, the U.S. government was, to some degree, negligent. It failed to establish direct contact with a government with which it was about to be at war. It failed to develop in a timely fashion a normal tactic of governments that face coalition partners (as proposed by Rusk and Martin): contact both separately in order to seek to divide them. The lack of direct contact with the Cuban government may have delayed the settlement of the crisis. It almost certainly contributed to Castro's well-known decision to refuse to accept any on-site inspection. And it placed the entire burden of coping with Cuba on the Soviet government which, in effect, was being asked to serve as a U.S. ally in the handling of relations with Cuba.

The Absent Negotiating Partner: Deliberate Choice

The Soviet Union consistently held that its deployment to Cuba was motivated by its desire to help Cuba defend itself in the face of U.S. aggression. This point was made repeatedly, before, during, and after the crisis. It was

G. Blight. See discussion in James G. Blight, Bruce J. Allyn, and David A. Welch, *Cuba on the Brink: Castro, the Missile Crisis, and the Soviet Collapse* (New York, 1993), 6–10. This book, of course, addressed that omission head on, and remains the best single work on the Cuban role in the missile crisis. See also Bruce J. Allyn, James G. Blight, and David A. Welch, "Essence of Revision: Moscow, Havana, and the Cuban Missile Crisis," *International Security* 14 (Winter 1989–90): 136–72.

3. On October 17, the former ambassador to the Soviet Union, Charles Bohlen, also argued in favor of writing to Castro. See memorandum for the file, 17 October 1962, *FRUS, 1961–1963* 11:96.

4. For subsequent accounts see William Attwood, *The Reds and the Blacks: A Personal Adventure* (New York, 1967); and Carlos Lechuga, *In the Eye of the Storm: Castro, Khrushchev, Kennedy, and the Missile Crisis*, ed. Mirta Muñoz (Melbourne, 1995).

apparently never believed by U.S. officials. The consensus view was well summarized by the 19 October Special National Intelligence Estimate on the Soviet deployment: "to demonstrate that the world balance of forces has shifted so far in their favor that the US can no longer prevent the advance of Soviet offensive power even into its own hemisphere." A second reason, according to the estimate, was the possibility that the USSR might use these missiles in Cuba "in bargaining for U.S. concessions elsewhere" (p. 123).⁵

As a consequence, Kennedy and his advisers deliberately chose to exclude the Cuban government from the negotiations to settle the missile crisis. Cuba was truly @#\$\$%. It was not part of the origin of the missile crisis because that was to be found in Soviet worldwide strategic ambitions. Nor, therefore, could Cuba be part of the solution of the missile crisis since it had no bearing on the Soviet decision to deploy missiles to the Caribbean. This conceptual framework explains the negligence just discussed in failing to contact Cuba. And it also explains the disconnect between U.S. and Soviet interpretations about the crisis itself.

This interpretive difference is captured well by the record of conversations between Kennedy and Soviet First Deputy Prime Minister Anastas Mikoyan upon the latter's return from difficult month-long negotiations in Havana. Mikoyan argued that the missiles were sent to Cuba "to defend the island against invasion and for no other purpose" (p. 548). Consequently, Mikoyan also argued forcefully on behalf of President Fidel Castro's five points for the settlement of the missile crisis and attendant factors leading to the crisis.⁶ Kennedy would have none of it: "The President said that the Cuban government must be left out of the negotiations" (p. 552).

A similar exchange occurred on 9 January 1963 between Kennedy and the leading Soviet negotiator during the entire crisis, Vasily Kuznetsov, first deputy foreign minister. Kuznetsov, too, pressed Cuba's case, arguing for a general normalization of U.S.-Cuban relations, but he added an intriguing bait for the United States: "During the New York talks, the Soviet side had mentioned a tripartite protocol in which the head of the Cuban government would have obliged himself to abide by the United Nations Charter and not to interfere with the internal affairs of other countries" (p. 662).

5. For a good discussion of this U.S. government consensus and contrary Soviet views see Allyn, Blight, and Welch, "Essence of Revision," 138-44. For a clear statement of the U.S. official view of Soviet motivations by someone who participated in aspects of U.S. decision making during the crisis see Roger Hillsman, *To Move a Nation* (New York, 1967), 201-2.

6. These five points were: 1) "cessation of the economic blockade and of all the commercial and economic measures being carried out by the United States against our country throughout the world; 2) cessation of all subversive activities, of the dropping and landing of weapons and explosives by air and sea, of the organization of invasions by mercenaries, and of the infiltration of spies and saboteurs . . . ; 3) cessation of piratical attacks . . . ; 4) cessation of all violations of our air space and territorial waters by United States aircraft and warships; and 5) withdrawal from the naval base at Guantánamo and return of the Cuban territory occupied by the United States." *Revolución*, 29 October 1962.

Cuba's so-called export of revolution had been a major U.S. concern with regard to Cuba since 1959. On 20 November 1962, Kennedy announced and explained the agreement he had reached with Khrushchev. In describing assurances he gave that the United States would not invade Cuba, Kennedy noted that, from the outset, it had been conditioned on agreeing simultaneously to on-site inspection in Cuba, which President Castro had barred. Kennedy went on to say that, notwithstanding those conditional assurances, the United States would "not, of course, abandon the political, economic and other efforts in this hemisphere to halt subversion from Cuba nor our purpose and hope that the Cuban people shall some day be truly free. But these policies are very different from any intent to launch a military invasion of the island."⁷ The documentary record makes it abundantly clear that this Cuban behavior remained one of Kennedy's major concerns. Nonetheless, in Kennedy's conversation with Kuznetsov, he shut the door on this Soviet offer to assist the United States to curtail Cuba's support for revolutionary movements overseas: "The President reiterated that the United States was not concerned with Cuba but with the Soviet military presence there" (p. 662).

Kennedy's decision to exclude Cuba from the negotiations reduced the likelihood that U.S. objectives could be fully reached in the settlement of the crisis. It certainly made it virtually impossible for Cuba to agree to on-site inspection. And it left unexplored the possibility, however remote, that Cuba might bind itself in 1962 not to support revolutionary movements in other countries and that the Soviet Union might have willingly assisted the United States in enforcing this pledge. One of the major points of contention between Cuba and the Soviet Union in the years that followed was, precisely, Soviet discomfort and, at times, opposition to Cuban support for revolutionary movements. It was not inconceivable that Soviet leaders could have seen such a tripartite agreement to constrain Cuban overseas actions as serving Soviet interests as well.⁸ Alas, it was also not inconceivable that Fidel Castro himself would have proposed mutual self-restraint: Cuba would forego support for revolutionary movements aimed at overthrowing U.S. allies if the United States would forego support for attempts to overthrow the Castro government. That is, in fact, exactly what Castro proposed in July 1964 - an option that the U.S. government ignored yet again.⁹

7. U.S. Department of State, *Bulletin* 47, no. 1224 (1962): 874-75.

8. See Jorge I. Domínguez, *To Make a World Safe for Revolution: Cuba's Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA, 1989), chaps. 3 and 5; Cole Blasier, *The Giant's Rival: The USSR and Latin America*, rev. ed. (Pittsburgh, 1987), 86-92; W. Raymond Duncan, *The Soviet Union and Cuba* (New York, 1985), 51-75; Arkady N. Shevchenko, *Breaking with Moscow* (New York, 1985), 122-25, 141-43; and Jacques Levesque, *L'URSS et la révolution cubaine* [The USSR and the Cuban Revolution] (Montreal, 1976).

9. *New York Times* 6 July 1964; Lee Lockwood, *Castro's Cuba, Cuba's Fidel* (New York, 1969), 220-23.

The Obsession with Cuba

The Kennedy administration was, nevertheless, obsessed with Cuba and with the hoped-for overthrow of the Castro government.¹⁰ From this perspective, @#\$\$%& was a less polite version of "Damn!" These documents make this well-known point unmistakably clear, but the evidence is nonetheless noteworthy. On the afternoon of 16 October, soon after the adjournment earlier that same day of the first full meeting at the White House to discuss the discovery of Soviet missiles in Cuba, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy convened in his office a meeting on Operation Mongoose, the code name for a U.S. policy of sabotage and related covert operations aimed at Cuba. The attorney general opened the meeting by expressing the "general dissatisfaction of the President" with Operation Mongoose because "there had been no acts of sabotage, and that even the one which had been attempted had failed twice." Kennedy concluded that "in view of this lack of progress, . . . he will hold a meeting every morning at 0930 with the Mongoose operational representatives from the various agencies" (pp. 45-46). The desire to overthrow the Castro government in this way at this time could have escalated to general war. Fortunately, President Kennedy himself on that evening ordered that sabotage actions be put on hold for the duration of this crisis, thereby containing temporarily the effects of this policy (p. 75).

President Kennedy made it clear, even when important details of the crisis remained to be settled, "that an assurance covering invasion does not ban covert actions or an economic blockade or tie our hands completely. We can't give the impression that Castro is home free" (p. 436). On 20 November 1962, Khrushchev made the major concession of agreeing to withdraw the IL-28s in addition to the missiles from Cuba; Kennedy consequently lifted the naval and aerial "quarantine" on Cuba, gave the qualified no-invasion assurances quoted above, and in effect announced the termination of the missile crisis. On the next day, however, Kennedy revealed to the Executive Committee of the National Security Council just how much he wished to qualify those assurances. The minutes record that Kennedy "felt that the proposed no-invasion assurances were too hard. He said our objective is to preserve our right to invade Cuba in the event of civil war, if there were guerrilla activities in other Latin American countries or if offensive weapons were re-introduced into Cuba. We do not want to build up Castro by means of a no-invasion guarantee" (p. 509).

10. It is unfortunate that this volume sheds no light on U.S. policies to organize and support assassination plots aimed at killing Fidel Castro. Not a single document in this large volume touches on this subject; the word "assassination" is not in the index. Nor are assassination plots discussed in U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962* (Washington, 1992). The standard source remains U.S. Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with respect to Intelligence Activities, *An Interim Report*, 94th. Cong., 1st. sess. (Washington, 1975). For a Cuban documentary record see "Twenty-five Years of Aggression," *Tricontinental*, no. 88 (April 1983): 33.

On 22 January 1963, the president told the National Security Council that "Cuba might be our response in some future situation — the same way the Russians have used Berlin. We may decide that Cuba might be a more satisfactory response than a nuclear response. . . . We should be prepared to move on Cuba if it should be in our national interest. The planning by the US, by the Military . . . should be advanced always keeping Cuba in mind" (p. 669). Moreover, in Kennedy's meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff on 28 February, "the President expressed particular interest in the possibility of getting some troops quickly into Cuba in the event of a general uprising" (p. 712). And on 29 April Kennedy wrote to Defense Secretary Robert McNamara to ask "are we keeping our Cuban contingency invasion plans up to date" (p. 791). Even if it did remain Kennedy's intention not to invade Cuba, he certainly interpreted the assurances he had given in the narrowest of terms.

The Kennedy administration returned to its policy of sponsoring terrorism against Cuba as the confrontation with the Soviet Union lessened. On 6 December, McGeorge Bundy forwarded to the president summary recommendations on future U.S. policy toward Cuba. "Our ultimate objective with respect to Cuba remains the overthrow of the Castro regime and its replacement by one sharing of the aims of the Free World." To that end, the Executive Committee of the National Security Council recommended various courses of action including using "selected Cuban exiles to sabotage key Cuban installations in such a manner that the action can plausibly be attributed to Cubans in Cuba" as well as "sabotage Cuban cargo and shipping, and [Soviet] Bloc cargo and shipping to Cuba" (pp. 587, 589). The special office for Operation Mongoose would be disbanded, its chief General Edward Lansdale would be reassigned, and a new Office of the Coordinator for Cuban Affairs would be created in the State Department that would, among other responsibilities, have overall coordination for covert operations in Cuba (pp. 648-50).

The new organizational design was no guarantee against silly ideas, of course. For example, on 3 April 1963 the CIA reported that plans were "well under way" to "release balloons containing 300,000 to 500,000 leaflets on May day . . . to attack Castro's henchmen and contain cartoons illustrating sabotage techniques" (p. 748).¹¹ Most covert operations were no laughing matter, however. On 9 April sabotage actions were approved against a railway bridge, some petroleum storage facilities, and a molasses storage vessel. Actions were subsequently carried out against a petroleum refinery, a power plant, a sawmill, and a floating crane in a Cuban harbor (pp. 761, 846, 887).

There was remarkably little opposition within the high ranks of the Kennedy administration to these sabotage operations. The first high-level opposition surfaced from Secretary Rusk on 12 November 1963. Rusk argued that external

11. President Kennedy rejected the balloon project, however. See memorandum from the secretary of the army's special assistant (Califano) to the secretary of the army (Vance), 9 April 1963, *FRUS, 1961-1963* 11:754.

"hit-and-run sabotage tactics [are] unproductive, complicating our relationships with the Soviets and also with our friends." Rusk also believed that such sabotage "might result in an increase in [Soviet] troops," many of which were still in Cuba (pp. 884–85). Nonetheless, later that same day the president and the senior members of his administration concluded: "The consensus was that since CIA's sabotage operation is in the main low cost and since it does worry the Castro regime, denies him some essential commodities, stimulates some sabotage inside Cuba, and tends to improve the morale of the Cubans who would like to see Castro removed, CIA should proceed with those operations" for the days that fatefully would end with yet another terrorist act, this time John Kennedy's assassination (p. 888).

Only once in these nearly thousand pages of documentation did a U.S. official raise something that resembled a faint moral objection to U.S.-government sponsored terrorism. On 12 September 1963 Gordon Chase, a member of the National Security Council staff, reported himself as finding "the case for stopping raids from the U.S. vaguely convincing because the possibility of Russian reaction to our direct involvement is greater." Among his supplementary reasons for reaching this unorthodox conclusion Chase listed that such raids are "haphazard and kill innocents. Inter alia, this might mean a bad press in some friendly countries" (p. 864). Indeed.

U.S.-government sponsored sabotage in Cuba accomplished virtually none of the goals of the Kennedy administration but caused considerable damage nonetheless. It put at risk U.S.-Soviet relations, as Secretary Rusk in particular pointed out. And it certainly put at risk U.S. claims of moral leadership.

Why Cuba Did Matter in the Missile Crisis

In 1962, Cuba's revolutionary government felt under assault from the United States. In April 1961, the United States sponsored Brigade 2506's invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs; the brigade was constituted of Cuban exiles organized, funded, trained, and supported by the United States. The United States had been supporting acts of sabotage against Cuba and assassination plots aimed at Prime Minister Fidel Castro. As McNamara put it at a retrospective conference in Moscow in January 1989, "If I was a Cuban and read the evidence of covert American action against their government, I would be quite ready to believe that the U.S. intended to mount an invasion," even if, as McNamara insisted, the United States had no such intention.¹²

As a consequence, Cuba asked the Soviet Union for a heightened military commitment to its defense.¹³ The Soviets were the first to think that the deployment of strategic weapons would be an appropriate response, whereupon Cuba formally requested it. The Cuban missile crisis would not have

happened—shock of shocks—without Cuba, no matter how much U.S. officials thought otherwise. The crisis was much more dangerous than ever thought in 1962 because, unknown to U.S. officials at the time, the Soviets succeeded in deploying to Cuba not just intermediate- and medium-range ballistic missiles but also nuclear warheads and tactical nuclear weapons; the Soviets were prepared to use the latter in the event of a U.S. invasion of Cuba with conventional forces.¹⁴

Fidel Castro was ready for nuclear war. On 26 October, he recommended to Khrushchev that the Soviet Union should launch a first-strike nuclear attack on the United States in the event that the United States would invade Cuba with conventional forces.¹⁵ Castro's request may well have influenced Khrushchev's decision to proceed with a settlement with the United States, notwithstanding the many political, military, and practical difficulties this would entail.

One of the more dangerous moments of the entire crisis was the shooting down of a U.S. U-2 reconnaissance airplane. Ready for war, Castro had ordered Cuban anti-aircraft to shoot at low-flying U.S. airplanes. At the time of the crisis, however, Soviet officers controlled and operated all surface-to-air equipment and installations capable of shooting down a U-2. But Soviet officers in Cuba identified so closely with the Cuban government's cause that the Soviet field commander gave the order to shoot at the U-2, thinking as an ally supporting Cuban comrades at war.¹⁶

The resolution of the Cuban missile crisis was rendered much more difficult by the U.S. government's refusal to include Cuba in negotiations. Castro was furious that the Soviets had not consulted him before reaching an agreement with the United States, and equally furious that the agreement required the withdrawal of the missiles from Cuba. Three years after the crisis, Castro reported: "We were . . . advocates of keeping the missiles in Cuba. Furthermore, the possibility that the Soviet Union would withdraw them as an alternative had never entered our minds."¹⁷ In part because he believed in them and in part to prevent the withdrawal of the missiles, Castro formulated his five-point program for a settlement of the missile crisis, noted earlier. Castro refused to agree to on-site inspection as part of a settlement to which he had not been a party.

The Soviet government's decision to allow the United States to inspect its ships turned out to be, consequently, a critical turning point, for it substituted

14. Domínguez, *To Make a World Safe for Revolution*, 34–39; Blight, Allyn, and Welch, *Cuba on the Brink*, x–xi, 16–20, 344–58. For a debate on this point, however, see Mark Kramer, "Tactical Nuclear Weapons, Soviet Command Authority, and the Cuban Missile Crisis," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 40, 42–46; and James G. Blight, Bruce J. Allyn, and David A. Welch, "Kramer vs. Kramer: Or, How Can You Have Revisionism in the Absence of Orthodoxy," *ibid.*, 41, 47–50.

15. The Castro-Khrushchev correspondence was published in Havana. See *Granma*, 2 December 1990, 1–4. The texts are also available in Blight, Allyn, and Welch, *Cuba on the Brink*, 474–91.

16. Blight, Allyn, and Welch, *Cuba on the Brink*, 104–15.

17. Lockwood, *Castro's Cuba, Cuba's Fidel*, 223, 225.

12. Quoted in Allyn, Blight, and Welch, "Essence of Revision," 145.

13. For a thoughtful analysis of Cuban policy at the time of the missile crisis see Philip Brenner, "Cuba and the Missile Crisis," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 22 (1990): 115–42.

sufficiently for on-site inspection in Cuba. Moreover, although as we have seen the Soviet government dutifully advocated Castro's five-point settlement program not just in public but also in private negotiations with U.S. officials, the Soviets never required the United States to agree to Castro's points or to include Cuba as an active party in the final settlement. The Soviet Union was quite reckless in escalating the conflict with the United States over Cuba to the edge of nuclear war, but Soviet leaders displayed statesmanship in their willingness to settle the crisis even if it meant sacrificing some of the preferences of the ally it had sought to defend so dramatically.

Soviet willingness to accommodate U.S. interests was especially noteworthy in the eventual agreement to remove the IL-28s from Cuba. The United States insisted that the Soviet Union had agreed to the withdrawal of these bombers when it agreed to take out the weapons that the United States called offensive. The Soviet Union insisted just as forcefully that the IL-28s were not included in the original agreement (pp. 397-400, 437-41). (This volume of declassified documents is particularly rich in documents pertaining to the negotiations over the IL-28s.) In addition, the Soviets argued that the IL-28s were twelve years old and no longer in production. Khrushchev wrote to Kennedy that they were brought "to Cuba only because they can be used as a mobile means of coastal defense under the cover of anti-aircraft fire from their own territory. They cannot, however, fly beyond the limits of that cover since they will be immediately destroyed either by modern anti-aircraft means or by simple conventional artillery; not to speak of interceptors before which they are entirely defenseless." Therefore, in the Soviet view, they could not be considered offensive weapons. As additional assurance to the United States, Khrushchev argued, "these bombers are piloted solely by our fliers" (p. 439).

Khrushchev noted an additional difficulty in the bargaining over these aircraft: "We share the desire of the Government of Cuba to possess defensive weapons which would permit [it]" to defend itself (p. 439). Indeed, Carlos Lechuga, Cuba's ambassador to the United Nations, stated publicly on 8 November that the IL-28s belonged to Cuba, that a transfer of ownership had occurred, and that their status was no different from that of any other Soviet-supplied military aircraft that Cuba owned, even if only Soviet fliers were piloting these airplanes for the time being.¹⁸ The IL-28s could thus not be withdrawn from Cuba without its government's consent. The U.S. government took note of this Cuban statement; in fact, on 1 November Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze had reported his belief that the IL-28s had been given to the Cubans (pp. 416, 340).¹⁹

18. *New York Times*, 9 November 1962.

19. Nitze did not have factual information to back up his belief, however. The assertions by Cuban officials dealt exclusively with formal ownership. As a practical matter, the IL-28s remained a part of the Soviet contingent throughout the crisis. I am grateful to Raymond Garthoff for these points.

The breakthrough occurred thanks to Soviet Deputy Prime Minister Anastas Mikoyan, who arrived in Havana on 2 November and would stay through 26 November, seeking to calm Fidel Castro and induce him to go along with the settlement. As Mikoyan eventually would tell Secretary Rusk, Castro refused to see Mikoyan for nine days, and at one point threatened to make an arrangement with the People's Republic of China (p. 583, n. 1). On 12 November, Mikoyan publicly endorsed Castro's five points as a "program for peace," but not as a substitute for the U.S.-Soviet settlement.²⁰ On that same day, Khrushchev wrote to Kennedy that "we will not insist on permanently keeping those planes in Cuba. We have our difficulties on this question. Therefore we give a gentleman's word that we will remove the IL-28 planes . . . although not now but later" (p. 440). President Kennedy realized that the full achievement of U.S. objectives (on-site inspection, removal of IL-28s) was impeded by the Cuban government. In writing to Soviet Prime Minister Nikita Khrushchev on 15 November 1962, for example, Kennedy acknowledged that "we suppose that part of the trouble here may be in Cuba" but Kennedy continued to insist on a more specific commitment to withdraw these airplanes swiftly (p. 460).

On 19 November Castro announced that Cuba "will not object" if the Soviet Union chooses to withdraw the IL-28s.²¹ On the morning of 20 November, Khrushchev wrote to Kennedy that the Soviet Union would withdraw the IL-28s from Cuba within a month (p. 496). During a press conference that evening, the president made this Soviet commitment public. On 12 December, Khrushchev reported to the Supreme Soviet that the IL-28s had been removed and endorsed Castro's five points as a "long term" solution to the crisis in the Caribbean.

Conclusion

Cuba mattered enormously to the initiation, risk, conduct, and settlement of the missile crisis, in ways that were only dimly perceived by President Kennedy and his closest associates. For them, Cuba was, for many reasons, just @#%&. U.S. policies might have been more effective had U.S. leaders focused on Cuba's significance more seriously. The crisis could have been settled sooner and at lower cost. There might have been better prospects for on-site inspection. There might have been an agreement on the limits of Cuban support for revolutionary movements. These are all plausible counterfactuals that can be inferred from the historical record.

The Soviet Union emerges in this analysis as the key player. It brought the world to the edge of nuclear warfare and, reversing its policies, it did the most to settle the conflict. A key to its success was its willingness and ability to coerce its Cuban government ally into compliance.

20. *Revolución*, 13 November 1962.

21. Domínguez, *To Make a World Safe for Revolution*, 43.