

Military realities vs. the 'missile gap' of '62

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NEW YORK — The meaning of the October 1962 Cuban missile crisis has been misread and its lessons obscured.

For 25 years, two aspects of the crisis have been given priority attention: the Soviet withdrawal of their missiles from Cuba and the style and strategy of the White House deliberations during the fateful week of Oct. 22-28, 1962. The celebration of these accomplishments left a core question virtually unattended: What was the cause of this crisis in the first place? Gen. Maxwell G. Taylor, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under Kennedy, has asked: "Why, oh, why did he [Khrushchev] put the missiles in Cuba in the first place?" If the Soviets had succeeded in replacing short- and intermediate-range missiles in Cuba in 1962, what would they have accomplished?

In his account of President Kennedy's short tenure, Theodore Sorenson, the president's speech writer and confidant, listed 14 possible reasons that were conjectured in the White House to explain the Soviet move. But that list meant no explanation.

The attempt to replace short- and intermediate-range missiles in Cuba made solid sense for the Soviets. For their leaders, it was a necessary response to a desperate military situation into which the Soviets had been cornered by a series of remarkable American successes with military material and military intelligence.

US vs. Soviet Union

By the end of 1962, the United States had more than 300 land-based intercontinental missiles and a fleet of Polaris missile submarines. The Soviets had four to six land-based ICBMs (1962 White

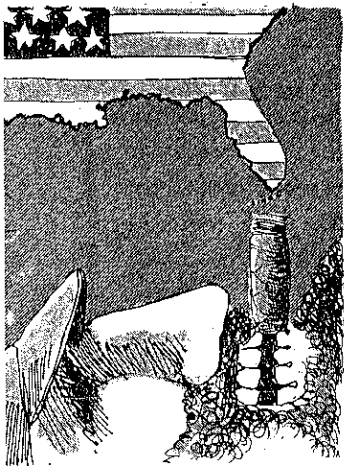
Soviet military-technical information, apart from many hours of talk with Western agents during several trips to Western Europe. His trial and execution in April 1963 were followed by shakeups in many top military assignments and by a worldwide upheaval in Soviet military-intelligence operations.

Between August, when Penkovsky was placed under close surveillance, and October 1962, the Soviet high command had strong grounds for concluding that knowledge in the hands of Penkovsky was also in the hands of the US government. Soviet top officers, trained in nuclear military doctrine had to conclude that the United States then possessed decisive advantage in arms and intelligence, and that the Soviet Union no longer wielded a credible nuclear deterrent. That inference was surely reinforced by open discussion among American "defense intellectuals" about the merits of a "first strike" in nuclear war, and by the confident adoption of a flexible nuclear war-fighting strategy by the president and his secretary of defense.

The Cuban site

All this meant that the restoration of a credible Soviet nuclear weapons threat was urgently required. This was almost obtained by the Soviet effort to place short and intermediate-range missiles in Cuba.

The Cuban site was especially suited. It was 90 miles from the US mainland, bypassing the main US ICBM warning system located to the north; it was within range of southeastern US cities and bases; it afforded secure control of missiles even if warheads were stored in Soviet submarines offshore, and it assured a coordinated operation for transporting and emplacing the missile batteries could be carried off within two months.



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The understanding of the missile crisis does not accord with the characteristic hubris of the Kennedy White House staff and its overconfident judgment — to the point of self-deceit — about the shrewdness and wisdom of the negotiation scenario that finally