



DOCUMENTING HISTORY

The Cuban Missile Crisis

Below is an excerpt from a memorandum dated October 17, 1962, *The Cuban Situation*, written by John McCone, director of the CIA, for discussion by ExCom, the group President Kennedy brought together to help him deal with the Cuban missile crisis.

The Cuban missile crisis is one of the most studied events of the Cold War. In particular, it is examined by analysts and policy makers interested in decision making. This memo provides a window on the Kennedy administration's thinking. It and other documents related to the crisis can be found in *The Cuban Missile Crisis: 1962*.

1. The establishment of medium range strike capability in Cuba by the Soviets was predicted by me in at least a dozen reports since the Soviet buildup was noted in early August.
2. Purposes are to:
 - a. Provide Cuba with an offensive or retaliatory power for use if attacked.
 - b. Enhance Soviet strike capability against the United States.
 - c. Establish a "hall mark" of accomplishment by other Latin American countries, most particularly Mexico, and other Central American countries within strike range of the United States.
3. The MRBM capability we have witnessed will expand and the defensive establishments to protect this capability likewise will be expanded. There appears to me to be no other explanation for the extensive and elaborate air defense establishment.
4. In my opinion the missiles are Soviet, they will remain under Soviet operational control as do ours, they will be equipped with nuclear warheads under Soviet control (because conventional warheads would be absolutely ineffective). Cubans will supply most of the manpower needs with the Soviets permanently exercising operational command and control. Nevertheless, there will be a substantial number of Soviets on site at all times.
5. Soviet political objectives appear to me to be:
 - a. The establishment of a "trading position" to force removal of U.S. overseas bases and Berlin.
 - b. To satisfy their ambitions in Latin America by this show of determination and courage against the American Imperialist.
6. Consequences of action by the United States will be the inevitable "spilling of blood" of Soviet military personnel. This will increase tension everywhere and undoubtedly bring retaliation against U.S. foreign military installations, where substantial U.S. casualties would result, (remains secret)
7. The situation cannot be tolerated. However, the United States should not act without warning and thus be forced to live with a "Pearl Harbor indictment" for the indefinite future. I would therefore:
 - a. Notify Gromyko and Castro that we know all about this.
 - b. Give them 24 hours to commence dismantling and removal of MRBMs, coastal defense missiles, surface to air missiles, IL 28s and all other aircraft which have a dual defensive-offensive capability, including MIG 21s.
 - c. Notify the American public and the world of the situation created by the Soviets.
 - d. If Khrushchev and Castro fail to act at once, we should make a massive surprise strike at air fields, MRBM sites and SAM sites concurrently.

Looking Back/Looking Forward

As was typical for most Cold War foreign policy crises, decision making on what to do about Soviet missiles in Cuba occurred out of the spotlight. Policy makers do not have that luxury today. They must make important foreign policy decisions under the glare of a media concerned with ratings and driven by deadlines. In the United States, foreign policy has also become more partisan as leaders in the opposition party are less likely to defer to presidents except on major crises such as the response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Select a contemporary foreign policy crisis. Who would you involve in the decision-making group? What options would you present to the president? What advice would you give the president in dealing with the media?