

Reflections on Cuba

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ON October 22, President Kennedy boldly seized an opportunity given few statesmen: to change the course of events by one dramatic move. His action achieved far more than the immediate goal of dismantling Soviet missile bases in Cuba. It exploded the myth that in every situation the Soviets were prepared to run greater risks than we. This myth had been the basis of Soviet atomic blackmail and had transformed too many conferences into opportunities for the Soviets to set the terms of negotiations. The President's stroke demonstrated that a great power leads not so much by its words as by its actions, that initiative creates its own consensus.

It is clear that we took skillful advantage of a serious Soviet miscalculation. But even this success does not free us from the need to understand how we arrived at the point where such a dramatic and risky action was necessary. What tempted the Soviets into so rash, so foolhardy an adventure as establishing missile bases on an island

only ninety miles from our shores?

Part of the answer probably lies in a fault common to many dictatorships: the Soviets began to take their own propaganda too seriously. The Soviet leaders had spoken so insistently and so confidently of their capacity to protect "national liberation movements" that they overlooked the difference between supporting guerrilla warfare in Southeast Asia and establishing a missile base in the Western Hemisphere. In the one case, the Communists could engage us in highly ambiguous situations and with a mode of warfare that is very difficult for us to deal with quickly. In Cuba, the only purpose the Soviet action could possibly serve was to threaten United States territory directly, an issue that lent itself to decisive resolution.

Another reason for the Soviets' behavior may have been a crude interpretation of the possibilities of nuclear deterrence. The Soviet leaders may really have believed that a limited number of nuclear missiles in Cuba would make the risks of an

American attack on Cuba seem out of proportion to the gains to be achieved. This argument, however, does not explain why the threat of nuclear retaliation had to be mounted from Cuba. As long as the bases remained under exclusive Soviet control, they were after all only an extension of Soviet nuclear power and not relevant to a local defense of Cuba. If the Soviets felt that missiles based on Cuban territory were necessary to redress the over-all strategic balance, then the Soviet arsenal of intercontinental rockets must be much smaller than had generally been believed. If, on the other hand, the Soviets consider their arsenal of intercontinental rockets adequate, then nuclear bases in Cuba were irrelevant to the security problem in Cuba. Given the vulnerability of these bases, it is difficult to understand to what military problem they were addressed.

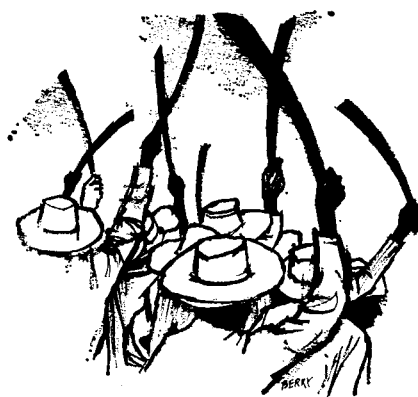
The chief benefit the Soviets would have obtained from these bases was political, not military. Missiles in Cuba would have been an over-

whelming proof of the inexorable advance of Soviet power and of U.S. impotence. Such a success would have emboldened all the extremist elements in Latin America and would have disheartened our allies. A U.S. government incapable of preventing the establishment of Soviet missile bases in Cuba would certainly have been thought incapable of defending interests farther from its shores. Had the Soviets succeeded in their gamble in Cuba, another critical showdown on Berlin would not have been long delayed. Perhaps Khrushchev counted on a dramatic unveiling of the projection of Soviet nuclear power into the Western Hemisphere to force us into a diplomatic settlement on his terms in Berlin, disarmament, and other issues.

WITH THE STAKES SO high, what made the Soviets believe they could get away with it? Over the past decade Khrushchev may well have become convinced that the United States would never run risks to protect its interests, either because it did not understand its interests or because it did not have the appropriate doctrine for using its power. In Suez we collaborated with the Soviets to humiliate our closest allies. Our intervention in Lebanon did not prevent the displacement of the only Middle Eastern government that had accepted the Eisenhower Doctrine. A year and a half ago in Cuba, we gambled on indirect intervention and accepted failure when it miscarried. In Laos we pretended a readiness to intervene, only to settle for a solution that is at best ambiguous. Our reaction to the building of the Berlin Wall may have indicated a propensity to accept just about any *fait accompli*. All this may have led the Soviet leaders to the conviction that given a face-saving formula, the United States would choose retreat rather than a head-on confrontation.

This judgment may have been confirmed by our first reactions to the Soviet arms build-up in Cuba. Though President Kennedy made it clear in his press conference of September 13 that we would take a grave view of the introduction of offensive weapons, this distinction was in itself nebulous and the statement

was in the context of an explanation of why we would not intervene at that time. From then until October 22, administration spokesmen emphasized the risks of both blockade and invasion. They pointed out that we possessed perfect intelligence about Cuban affairs and had detected no offensive build-up. Senator Keating's allegation on October 10



that offensive missiles were being installed in Cuba was denied. It must be assumed that preparations for the installation of those missiles had been going forward for some weeks, even if the actual missiles were not put in place until the middle of October. The Soviet leaders may well have decided that the administration knew of these preparations and had decided to acquiesce by denying their existence.

Where They Went Wrong

Nevertheless, even making allowance for all past U.S. vacillations, it is difficult to explain Soviet actions except as a colossal blunder. The Russians clearly misjudged the character of the President and the mood of the country. They failed to understand that it is highly unlikely for any man to be nominated or elected President who does not have a strong will to prevail—a consideration particularly crucial in the case of a President who has had to overcome handicaps of youth and religion to achieve his position. Moreover, even if they thought that the President meant to ignore the existence of the missile sites, they should have realized that this would have provided only a brief respite. No President could have avoided taking action in the face of such a challenge, and the public would not have tolerated

acquiescence. If Soviet diplomats and intelligence personnel failed to warn of the possibility of a U.S. riposte, the Soviet system has fallen prey to a common disease of dictatorships: that the top leaders are told only what they wish to hear.

The original misjudgment was compounded by many others. As we have seen, the bases were of only marginal military use in a defensive war. In an offensive war their effectiveness was reduced by the enormous difficulty—if not impossibility—of co-ordinating a first strike from the Soviet Union and Cuba. If the Soviets thought that they required bases closer to the United States, it is not clear why they did not choose safer launching platforms than Cuba—ships and submarines, for example. Militarily, the action was confused; its gains hardly justified the risks.

Politically, the Soviet miscalculation was equally great. The purpose of the missile bases in Cuba may well have been to force us into accepting Soviet terms over such issues as Berlin. However, an attempt to connect any issue outside the Western Hemisphere with Cuba was bound to make us increasingly intractable. We could not have left the impression that we were trading the vital interests of our allies for our own without undermining any claim to leadership in the West.

If the Soviets counted on allied disunity to provide an interval of hesitation to consolidate their bases, this was foiled by the President's decisiveness. After the President's speech, the only way other nations could gain an influence over our actions was by supporting us. The Soviets even misunderstood the temper of the uncommitted. Most of them are glad enough to play off both sides against each other, but their attitude is bound to be very different if the protection of "national liberation movements" takes the form of nuclear missile bases that would project them into the very center of the East-West conflict.

PERHAPS the most fundamental mistake was in assessing the reason for their earlier successes. They had expanded in Eurasia, above all, because they were able to choose the battlefield and the issue. They had generally confronted the United

States with ambiguous challenges whose threat to U.S. security seemed vague and remote. The area of conflict was usually close to the center of Communist strength. Thus the Communists were capable of increasing their commitment—"escalating," as the technical term has it—by small increments while the United States could escape its difficulties only by threatening nuclear war.

In Cuba, however, the Soviets chose to challenge us in the most direct and brutal fashion. Here the threat was not remote or the issue confused. The secrecy and the rapidity of the build-up underlined the menace. But ruthlessness and deception do not necessarily bring their own reward. The challenge took place in an area close to our strength, on an island easily accessible to our overwhelmingly superior sea power. This time we were able to escalate gradually while the Soviets could respond, if at all, only with the threat of nuclear war. Thus the Soviets threw away their traditional advantages in a gamble that left them no recourse if it failed.

The result was a demonstration that the over-all strategic balance was far from being as favorable to the Communists as their propaganda had painted it. In fact, the course of events proved that the statements of Defense Secretary McNamara and Deputy Secretary Gilpatric have made about our nuclear superiority are essentially correct. The crisis could not have ended so quickly and decisively but for the fact that the United States can win a general war if it strikes first and can inflict intolerable damage on the Soviet Union even if it is the victim of a surprise attack.

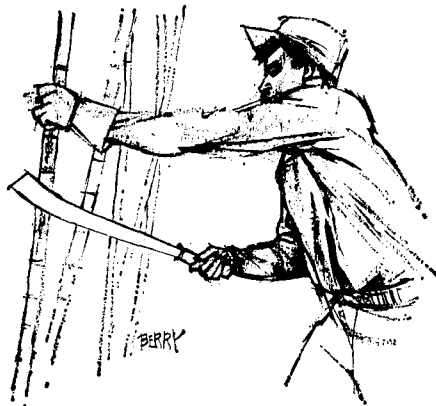
Whatever one's reservations about the counterforce strategy enunciated by Secretary McNamara for the long term, it proved its efficacy in the Cuban crisis. The Soviet leaders did not dare invoke the threat of nuclear war against our blockade. If we believed the threat, even a nation like ours might feel compelled to strike pre-emptively. And if the Soviets struck first, they would only bring about the destruction of their homeland—without being able to affect the outcome in Cuba. Moreover, the Soviets refrained from starting crises in places where they enjoyed local

superiority, such as Berlin or Turkey. They obviously calculated that two crises occurring simultaneously, particularly if one of them involved bases in Cuba, carried with them an exorbitant risk of nuclear war. In short, for this crisis at least, the credibility of our deterrent was greater than theirs.

As a result, contrary to their usual practice, the Soviet leaders did not assume a posture of belligerency. Messages of conciliation chased each other. The demand for dismantling our Turkish bases was barely turned down before Khrushchev sounded the retreat in Cuba. He had drawn the correct conclusion that the best thing he could do was cut his losses. He could not credibly invoke the threat of general war over Cuba. And he could not menace other areas closer to the source of Soviet power because these were protected by our strategic superiority.

Back to the Treadmill?

Where do we go from here? We have a unique opportunity. The hesitations of the past years can be turned into an asset for us in the eyes of those who have come to realize that we exhausted all means of concilia-



tion before taking decisive steps. The doubts expressed, particularly in Europe, about our capacity for leadership have been significantly reduced. We have the best opportunity in a decade to establish unity among our allies, particularly in the Atlantic area and the Western Hemisphere. And in the uncommitted nations, some second thoughts are likely to develop about the reliability of Soviet guarantees or about the purposes

for which they are given. The overweening self-confidence of the Soviets, which has turned almost all diplomatic contacts into probing operations for another advance, must have suffered a severe blow. We should now be able to confront the Soviets with both confidence and moderation. Henceforth, moderation will appear an act of policy, for it is a virtue only in those who are thought to have a choice.

But in order to draw the proper lessons from the Cuban crisis, we owe it to ourselves not to confuse ourselves with irrelevancies. Already one reads about the need to save Khrushchev from the hard-line Stalinists. According to one version, Khrushchev has faced down the militant generals in a dramatic confrontation. Surely the time has come to declare a moratorium on such trivial speculations. It should be plain that our ability to play domestic politics in the Kremlin is extremely limited. Nor is there any evidence of a "peaceful" Khrushchev facing down hard-line Stalinists. If Khrushchev planned the Cuban adventure, it is difficult to see how much more reckless hard-line Stalinists could have been. If the Cuban policy was imposed on Khrushchev, he does not need any further assistance to prove that such tactics are bound to be disastrous.

Indeed, the administration might well take this opportunity to compare the expectations of the past two years with the actual course of events. It may be useful to consider what influence the confusion of a conciliatory tone with a conciliatory policy by so many self-appointed emissaries to the Kremlin—and by some official ones as well—had on Khrushchev's expectation that his gamble in the Caribbean would succeed.

These considerations bear also on the question of whether the lesson of Cuba is that the "tough" line has prevailed over the "soft" one in our own national councils. For too long, adjectives such as these have served as substitutes for thought. Rather than debate abstract words like "tough" and "soft," we now have an opportunity to clarify the substance of the programs to which any such words must refer. Those who press for immediate resumption of nego-

tiations do not generate a program; the reverse is true. In the absence of a clear purpose, negotiating tactics predominate over substance. This leads to the exaltation of "negotiability," which is often merely a way of trying to discover the minimum terms the Soviets will settle for. It produces the constant demand for "new ideas" which, while unexceptionable in itself, may only serve to prevent the Soviets from accepting any American proposal, since a better one may be coming along any minute.

No purpose would be served if we returned to the weary treadmill of proposals that have been repeated so often that their tired phrases seem to have become ends in themselves. We now have the opportunity to define what we stand for rather than go through a shopping list of Soviet demands in an effort to determine which of them may be tolerable. In particular, the best time to articulate our notion of a settlement in Central Europe is *before* another Berlin crisis is upon us and while the impetus of our action in Cuba still invigorates the alliance.

The desirability of lessening international tension requires no debates. But the prerequisite is that the Soviet leaders come to see the perils for mankind as well as for themselves of turning all diplomacy into harassment, pressure, and political warfare. We, in turn, have an obligation to make it clear that we do not propose to threaten legitimate Russian national interests. Responsible Russians should be given every chance to understand that the obstacle to coexistence is the Communist quest for world domination. On such a basis negotiations are highly desirable.

Prudence and Intuition

For too long the Western Alliance has been beset by doubts, recriminations, and uncertainty. In strategy and diplomacy it has failed to establish its priorities. The President's handling of the Cuban crisis has given us another chance to vindicate the leadership of the West. And here is where our greatest opportunity lies. The "great design" for Atlantic partnership still remains to be realized, but for the first time in years the moral basis for it exists. The

Alliance for Progress can also be pursued with greater mutual conviction. Even the uncommitted nations should have been shaken out of their complacency and shallowness by the concurrent shocks of Cuba and the Chinese invasion of India. There is now therefore a possibility for us to free our relations with the new nations from the inhibitions of a dialogue between opportunism and sentimentality.

Whether we can seize this opportunity depends on an intangible issue: the attitudes of our government toward the most difficult problem of policymaking, that of conjecture. The dilemma of any statesman is that he can never be certain about the probable course of events. In reaching a decision, he must inevitably act on the basis of an intuition that is inherently unprovable. If he insists on certainty, he runs the danger of becoming a prisoner of events.

His resolution must reside not in "facts" as commonly conceived but in his vision of the future.

The Cuban crisis raises some questions in this respect. The administration has demonstrated skill, daring, and decisiveness in dealing with a problem once it was recognized. A number of doubts remain about the time required to assess the nature of the Soviet build-up. This is not exclusively a problem of our intelligence setup. It is above all a question of the criteria of certainty by which a government operates. We shall not be able to wait everywhere for "hard" intelligence about Soviet intentions. Most situations will prove more ambiguous, most opportunities will appear less clear. The challenge, then, is to couple the prudence, calculation, and skill of a government of experts with an act of imagination that encompasses the opportunities before us.



Where Do We Go from Victory?

MAX FRANKEL

PITY the Washington Policy Maker. He is burdened, after Cuba, with new prowess, respect, and momentum and therefore with guilt. Unexpected challenge has suddenly turned into unwanted opportunity. But Policy Maker wants to be a gracious winner, to be loved, not feared. Initiative seems almost as unwelcome as it is unaccustomed. He goes to his analyst, the Kremlinologist.

For the Kremlinologist, as for any analyst, business is good when times are bad. He is trained to see danger, not opportunity. And he treats the

ailment, not the patient. He is today less concerned with what else Washington might do to the Kremlin than with what the Kremlin might now do to Washington. And with what Washington might do for the Kremlin.

Policy Maker, thy guilt is just, he says. For to the Kremlinologist, Communism is schizophrenic. Some Communists are better than other Communists, and the trouble with the Cuban affair was that Washington was forced to triumph over the better ones. So there is danger