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ESSENCE OF DECISION

Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis

Graham T. Allison
Harvard University

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Little, Brown and Company
Boston

To my mother and father

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Preface

My aims in this book are two. On the one hand, I examine the central puzzles of the Cuban missile crisis. Several participants in this nuclear confrontation have already told the story, each from his own point of view. None of these accounts directly addresses the major questions of the crisis. I try to in this book.

On the other hand, I explore the influence of unrecognized assumptions upon our thinking about events like the missile crisis. Answers to questions like why the Soviet Union tried to sneak strategic offensive missiles into Cuba must be affected by basic assumptions we make, categories we use, our angle of vision. But what kind of assumptions do we tend to make? How do these assumptions channel our thinking? What alternative perspectives are available? This study identifies the basic frame of reference used by most people when thinking about foreign affairs. Furthermore, it outlines two alternative frameworks. Each frame of reference is, in effect, a conceptual lens. By comparing and contrasting the three frameworks, we see what each magnifies, highlights, and reveals as well as what each blurs or neglects.

The structure of this book reflects my dual objectives. Three conceptual chapters sketch three rough-cut frames of reference. These chapters are separated by three case studies, each of which uses one of the frames of reference in searching for answers to the major questions of the Cuban missile crisis. By addressing central issues of the crisis first from one perspective, then from a second, and finally from a third, these chapters not only probe more deeply into the event, uncovering additional insights; they also demonstrate how alternative conceptual lenses lead one to see, emphasize, and worry about quite different aspects of events like the missile crisis.

On the one hand, substantive instance; on the other, concep-

on this variant.¹⁰⁴ This variant suggests the relations among uses of the classical model for (1) explanation, i.e., answering the question of why X rather than Y happened; (2) problem solving, i.e., answering the question of what is the preferred way for a national government to achieve certain goals; and (3) evaluating, i.e., determining what grade a nation's performance deserves, given certain criteria. Uses of this model for purposes other than explanation will be considered in the final chapter.

Each of these forms of the basic paradigm constitutes a formalization of what analysts typically rely upon implicitly. In the transition from implicit conceptual model to explicit paradigm, much of the richness of the best employments of this model has been lost. But the purpose in raising loose, implicit conceptual models to an explicit level is to reveal the basic logic of an analyst's activity. Perhaps some of the remaining artificiality that surrounds the statement of the paradigm can be diluted by noting a number of the standard additions and modifications used by analysts who proceed *predominantly* within the Rational Actor Model. First, in the course of a document, analysts shift from one variant of the basic model to another, occasionally appropriating in an *ad hoc* fashion aspects of a situation that are logically incompatible with the basic model. Second, in the course of explaining a number of occurrences, analysts sometimes pause over a particular event about which they have a great deal of information and unfold it in such detail that they create an impression of randomness. Third, having employed other assumptions and categories in deriving an explanation or prediction, analysts will present their product in a neat, convincing rational policy package. This accommodation is a favorite of members of the intelligence community who are often very familiar with the details of a process but who feel that by putting an occurrence in a larger rational framework they make it more comprehensible to their audience. Fourth, in attempting to offer an explanation — particularly in cases where a prediction derived from the basic model has failed — the notion of the actor's "mistake" is invoked. Thus, the inaccurate prediction of a "missile gap" is written off as a Soviet mistake in not taking advantage of an opportunity. Both these and other modifications permit Model I analysts considerably more leeway than the paradigm might suggest. But such accommodations are essentially appendages to the basic logic of these analyses.

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Cuba II: A First Cut

The "missiles of October" offer a fascinating set of puzzles for any analyst.¹ For thirteen days in October 1962, the United States and the Soviet Union stood "eyeball to eyeball," each with the power of mutual annihilation in hand. The United States was firm but forbearing. The Soviet Union looked hard, blinked twice, and then withdrew without humiliation. Here is one of the finest examples of diplomatic prudence, and perhaps the finest hour of John F. Kennedy's Presidency.

In retrospect, this crisis seems to have been a major watershed in the Cold War. Having peered over the edge of the nuclear precipice, both nations edged backward toward detente. An understanding of this crisis is thus essential for every serious student of foreign affairs.

To understand how — at a time when war could have meant the destruction of both societies — these superpowers moved to the brink of nuclear war, and, having got there, how they managed to retreat, it is necessary to answer three central questions. Why did the Soviet Union attempt to place offensive missiles in Cuba? Why did the United States choose to respond to the Soviet missile emplacement with a blockade of Cuba? Why did the Soviet Union decide to withdraw the missiles? Fortunately, the openness of the crisis makes it possible to reconstruct the calculations of both nations with a certain amount of confidence.²

Why Did the Soviet Union Decide to Place Offensive Missiles in Cuba?

The Soviet Union had never before stationed strategic nuclear weapons outside its own territorial borders — either in the Communist nations of Eastern Europe or in Red China.³ On September 11, 1962, the Soviet government authorized Tass to reiterate the government's policy on the transfer of nuclear weapons to third nations:

The Government of the Soviet Union authorized Tass to state that there is no need for the Soviet Union to shift its weapons for the repulsion of aggression, for a retaliatory blow, to any other country, for instance Cuba. Our nuclear weapons are so powerful in their explosive force and the Soviet Union has such powerful rockets to carry these nuclear warheads, that there is no need to search for sites for them beyond the boundaries of the Soviet Union.⁴

Through the most confidential channels of communication, at the highest levels, the Soviet Union sought to assure the United States concerning this policy. On September 4, Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin called on Attorney General Robert Kennedy with a confidential message from Chairman Khrushchev.⁵ In that message Khrushchev promised that the Soviet Union would create no trouble for the United States during the election campaign. To minimize the chance of any misunderstanding — especially since some Congressmen were pointing to Soviet activity in Cuba — the President responded that very day with a firm warning: the introduction of offensive missiles into Cuba would raise the gravest issue.⁶ On September 6, Dobrynin urgently requested a meeting with Special Counsel to the President Theodore Sorensen. At that meeting he delivered a second personal message from Chairman Khrushchev to President Kennedy: "Nothing will be undertaken before the American Congressional elections that could complicate the international situation or aggravate the tension in the relations between our two countries. . . . The Chairman does not wish to become involved in your internal affairs."⁷ Sorensen challenged the sincerity of the Chairman's wishes, pointing out that the late summer shipments of Soviet personnel, arms, and equipment into Cuba were already generating international tensions and aggravating American domestic politics. But Dobrynin reiterated his assertion that the Soviets

were doing nothing new in Cuba: the steps taken were entirely defensive.⁸ Georgi Bolshakov, a Soviet official who had established a working relationship with several New Frontiersmen, including Robert Kennedy (and through whom Khrushchev's personal letters to the President had first arrived) relayed a message from Khrushchev and Mikoyan: "No missile capable of reaching the United States would be placed in Cuba."⁹ On October 13, in response to questioning by Chester Bowles about the presence of Soviet "offensive weapons" in Cuba, Dobrynin emphatically and convincingly denied any such possibility.¹⁰ The Soviet signal was clear.

Nor was the American warning faint. Through private channels, Robert Kennedy warned Dobrynin that the United States would not tolerate offensive weapons in Cuba; Sorensen emphasized the message to Dobrynin on September 6; Bowles reiterated it. The United States staked its public prestige on the warning. In response to Khrushchev's private note, the President's public statement of September 4 drew a distinction between "offensive" and "defensive" weapons. The President acknowledged that there was no evidence of Soviet offensive weapons in Cuba but warned: "Were it to be otherwise, the gravest issues would arise."¹¹ On September 7, Congress granted the President standby authority to call up additional reservists.¹² On September 13, the President made a major public statement on the Communist build-up in Cuba. If Cuba should "become an offensive military base of significant capacity for the Soviet Union," he proclaimed, "then this country will do whatever must be done to protect its own security and that of its allies."¹³

Some analysts have suggested that though loud, the warning was nevertheless vague, since the distinction between "offensive" and "defensive" could be a matter of intent or purpose as well as of capability.¹⁴ (Indeed, in the midst of the crisis, Khrushchev claimed that the missiles stationed in Cuba were "defensive in purpose."¹⁵) But the record demonstrates that the American warning was explicit and that the Soviets understood it. The President's September 4 statement not only drew the distinction between offensive and defensive weapons. It specified the meaning of *offensive* — "offensive ground-to-ground missiles" — and it warned that "the presence of offensive ground-to-ground missiles or of other significant offensive capability either in Cuban hands or under Soviet direction and guidance" would be a sufficient condition for U.S. action.¹⁶ The Soviets could not have mis-

understood this warning. They repeatedly assured the United States, both privately and publicly, that no missile capable of reaching the United States would be stationed in Cuba.

These moves and countermoves seem like a textbook case of responsible diplomacy. The United States formulated a policy stating precisely "what strategic transformations we [were] prepared to resist."¹⁷ The Soviet Union acknowledged these vital interests and announced a strategy that entailed no basic conflict. This would also seem to be a model case of communication, or signaling, between the superpowers. By private messages and public statements, the United States committed itself to action should the Soviets cross an unambiguous line (by placing offensive missiles in Cuba). All responses indicated that the Soviets understood the signal and accepted the message.¹⁸

Flowing from these warnings, promises, and assurances, U.S. expectations converged in the now notorious "September estimate."¹⁹ Approved by the United States Intelligence Board (USIB) on September 19, this National Intelligence Estimate concluded that Soviet emplacement of offensive missiles in Cuba was highly unlikely.²⁰ When, on October 14, the United States discovered Soviet offensive missiles in Cuba, the U.S. government was shocked. What President Kennedy's announcement of the crisis called "this secret, swift and extraordinary build-up of Communist missiles . . . this sudden, clandestine decision to station strategic weapons for the first time outside of Soviet soil," posed for the policy makers — and poses for any analyst — a troubling question.²¹ Why did the Soviet Union undertake such a reckless move? What objective could the Soviets have had that would have justified a course of action which entailed a high probability of nuclear confrontation? What was the Soviet intention in placing offensive missiles in Cuba?

These questions were the first to be considered at the initial meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExCom), which convened at 11:45 A.M. on Tuesday, October 16. Discussion at that meeting generated five alternative hypotheses, which were more precisely defined in the days that followed. Subsequent analyses have typically emphasized one or another of these alternatives. Careful examination of the details of Soviet action should allow us to distinguish among the hypotheses more clearly than the policy makers could in the heat of the crisis, and perhaps to understand more accurately what the Soviet Union really had in mind.

Hypothesis One: Bargaining Barter

Khrushchev installed missiles in Cuba with the intent of using them as a bargaining counter in a summit or U.N. confrontation with Kennedy. Withdrawal of Soviet missiles in Cuba would be traded for withdrawal of U.S. missile bases in Turkey. On Thursday, October 25, this analogy provided the pivot of Walter Lippmann's column in *The Washington Post*. How could this crisis be peacefully resolved? According to Lippmann:

The way is to try to negotiate a face-saving agreement. The only place that is truly comparable with Cuba is Turkey. This is the only place where there are strategic weapons right on the frontier of the Soviet Union. . . . There is another important similarity between Cuba and Turkey. The Soviet missile base in Cuba, like the U.S.-NATO base in Turkey, is of little military value. . . . The two bases could be dismantled without altering the world balance of power.²²

Similar proposals were made by members of the European press and by a number of U.N. delegates from nonaligned nations.

The Soviet statements and behavior also point toward a hypothesis of this sort. The encirclement of the Soviet Union by American bases, especially missile bases, constituted a long-standing and serious threat. The Soviet statement on September 11, which declared that the Soviet Union had no need to station offensive missiles in any other country, zeroed in on U.S. missile bases.

The whole world knows that the United States of America has ringed the Soviet Union and other Socialist countries with bases. What have they stationed there — tractors? . . . No, they have brought armaments there in their ships, and these armaments stationed along the frontier of the Soviet Union — in Turkey, Iran, Greece, Italy, Britain, Holland, Pakistan, and other countries belonging to the military blocs of NATO, CENTO, and SEATO — are said to be there lawfully, by right. They consider this their right! But to others the U.S. does not permit this even for defense, and when measures are nevertheless taken to strengthen the defenses of this or that country, the U.S. raises an outcry and declares that an attack, if you please, is being prepared against them. What conceit! . . . Equal rights and equal opportunities must be recognized for all countries of the world.²³

On the very day that the President first learned of the missiles, Khrushchev stressed this point in a conversation with the new

American Ambassador to Moscow, Foy Kohler. As Sorensen summarizes the memorandum of conversation: "The one ominous note in that otherwise genial conversation had been a sharp reference to the U.S. Jupiter bases in Turkey and Italy."²⁴ During the crisis, Soviet delegates at the United Nations proposed a mutual withdrawal of missiles from Cuba and Turkey; Soviet contacts in Britain made this proposal; the head of Soviet intelligence (KGB) in Washington pressed it in private conversations. Indeed, the Saturday (October 27) letter from Khrushchev to the President focused on this analogy, pointing out that the United States had "stationed devastating rocket weapons, which you call *offensive*, in Turkey literally right next to us."²⁵ A number of analysts have therefore concluded that the Soviet action must have been designed as a counter to U.S. missiles in Turkey.

Careful examination of the details of the Soviet operation casts doubt upon this hypothesis. First, whether the Soviets would have accepted the cost and risk of this operation merely to provide an exchange for U.S. missiles in Turkey is questionable. The United States was already committed to withdrawal of the missiles in Turkey — without any *quid pro quo*.²⁶ In fact, President Kennedy was greatly perturbed when he learned that the United States still had missiles in Turkey. On two previous occasions he had directed that they be removed.²⁷ While it might be argued that the Soviets could not be sure of U.S. intentions, the fact that American Thor missile installations in England were in the process of being dismantled was certainly suggestive.²⁸ Second, a Cuban base for Soviet missiles would be incomparably more valuable to the Soviet Union's nuclear delivery capability than the Turkish missile bases were to U.S. strategic forces: Turkish missiles constituted less than 3 percent of the United States' overwhelming capability to deliver first-strike nuclear payloads on Soviet territory and were virtually useless for a second strike because of their extreme vulnerability. Conversely, the missiles under construction in Cuba would have doubled the Soviet Union's first-strike nuclear delivery capability against the United States. Third, the magnitude and character of the Soviet strategic weapon deployment in Cuba is disproportionate to the hypothesis that the Soviets intended simply to buy a bargaining counter. The United States had only one squadron of Jupiters (fifteen missiles) deployed in Turkey.²⁹ How could a trade have possibly embraced the forty-two medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) and twenty-four to thirty-two intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs), which the Soviets were installing?

Finally, the costly and essentially unsalvageable sites being prepared for IRBMs seem superfluous for any Cuban-Turkish missile base exchange, since the United States had no equivalent missiles in Turkey.

The evidence is compatible with the hypothesis that, after the crisis erupted, the Soviet Union seized on a Cuba-Turkey bargain as the best hope in a bad situation. But the characteristics of the operation cannot sustain the claim that the Soviets made the initial move with this in mind.³⁰

A stronger version of the hypothesis maintains that the trade envisaged included other U.S. bases around Russian borders (missiles in Italy and bases in Iran) and even in Berlin.³¹ While these stakes more adequately balance the character of the Soviet action and the risks involved, this version of the hypothesis still does not adequately explain the facts. First is the size of the Soviet missile deployment: given the American commitment to act against any installation of offensive missiles, a smaller number of MRBMs alone would have provided a sufficient agenda for action. Second, if the intention had been to withdraw the missiles, the expense of permanent IRBM sites should have been avoided. Third, Khrushchev had earlier found the American commitment to Berlin unshakable. He had been, and presumably continued to be, unwilling to act in Berlin for fear that an American response would mean war. The proximity of the United States to Cuba and promises to act to prevent Cuba from becoming a Soviet offensive missile base were unambiguous. Thus, the Russians had more reason to believe that the United States would demand withdrawal of the Soviet missiles without yielding in Berlin (as in fact happened), or that war would come, than that the United States would trade for Berlin.

If Khrushchev had succeeded in completing the offensive missiles and springing on the United States a *fait accompli*, it is conceivable that the President would have wobbled. In that case, the shakiness of political will itself, rather than any explicit deal, would have provided the opportunity for eventual Soviet action in Berlin and elsewhere. That, however, is an alternative hypothesis.³²

Hypothesis Two: Diverting Trap

Berlin was the linchpin of a second hypothesis, according to which the Soviets intended the missiles in Cuba to stand as a lightning rod. If the United States responded by striking "little

Cuba," NATO would be split and the world horrified. Such an act would fuel anti-Americanism in Latin America for years to come. It would prove to Soviet Stalinists and to the Chinese as well that the United States was no paper tiger. While the U.S. government was distracted by adverse public opinion at home and abroad, the occasion would be ripe for a strong Soviet move against Berlin. Another "Suez" would trap the United States in confusion, while Khrushchev moved in a second "Hungary."

This hypothesis can account for a number of the aspects of Soviet behavior that otherwise seem inexplicable. Why did the Soviet Union move in the face of the American President's unmistakable warnings? To make the United States act. Why were the Soviets seemingly sloppy in their coordination of the constructing of missiles in Cuba and the camouflage of the missiles at the sites? Because they wanted the United States to discover their activity. In the ExCom, advocates of this hypothesis argued that even the substantial presence of Soviet troops might be a crude, but nonetheless realistic, effort to construct a mirror image of Berlin. Finally, this hypothesis certainly answers the persistently bothersome question: Why Cuba *instead* of Berlin?

In spite of these merits, however, this hypothesis about Soviet plans is not tenable. Nothing could have been calculated to make an American strike against the missiles less attractive than the presence of over ten thousand Russian military personnel near the missile sites. A surprise attack on the missiles could not have avoided killing large numbers of Soviet citizens. If the Soviets' objective had been to dangle irresistible bait, they could have turned over a smaller number of missiles to the Cubans and let it be known that they would not respond to a U.S. attack. But the notion of trading thousands of Soviet lives in Cuba for the lives of thousands of American soldiers in Berlin, without further repercussions, is mad. Second, this hypothesis is not consistent with actual Soviet behavior. Khrushchev withdrew the missiles before an American attack. Had the Soviets wanted an American strike on their missiles in Cuba, they could simply have prolonged the crisis for several more days. (The United States was prepared for an attack on October 30, if the Soviet Union had not announced withdrawal of the missiles on the twenty-eighth.) Third, because of the strength of the American commitment, and the presence of American troops, the analogy between Berlin and Hungary is very weak. A Soviet move against Berlin would almost automatically have meant a major war.

Hypothesis Three: Cuban Defense

Though the Bay of Pigs (Cuba I) was a rather frail effort, the Soviet Union had substantial reason to believe that the United States might attempt to do the job right. The Bay of Pigs demonstrated that the United States could act. Hawkish congressional speeches, the words and actions of Cuban refugee groups, and exaggerated reports of CIA activities reaching Moscow from Havana supported this fear. Moreover, the United States had permitted some publicity about a military exercise called Philbriglex-62, which was to take place in the Caribbean in the fall of 1962. The exercise called for a force of 7,500 Marines, supported by four aircraft carriers, twenty destroyers, and fifteen troop carriers, to storm the coral beaches of Vieques Island, off the southeast coast of Puerto Rico. The announced purpose of the exercise was to liberate a mythical Republic of Vieques from the tyranny of a mythical dictator named Ortsac — a name, which, spelled backward . . .³³ **CASTRO**

If the Marines attacked, Castro's defeat was certain. The Soviet Union could not provide enough conventional support to make a difference in such a distant war. In the battle, which might last several weeks, the Soviet Union would be forced to sit idly by: a Hungary in reverse. Rattling their missiles, which, as the Soviets now knew, the United States had discovered were few, held little promise. If there was a significant probability of U.S. action against Cuba, the Soviets had to act first in order to deter it. The decision to send missiles to Cuba came in answer to this threat.

Khrushchev explained Soviet action in just these terms. His letter of October 28, which announced that the missiles would be dismantled and withdrawn, stated the purpose for which they had been installed. In the face of the threat of U.S. invasion, "The Soviet government decided to render assistance to Cuba with means of defense against aggression — only with means for defense purposes. . . . We supplied them to prevent an attack on Cuba — to prevent rash acts."³⁴

In reporting to the Supreme Soviet in December 1962, Khrushchev asserted: "At the request of the Cuban government we shipped arms there. . . . Our purpose was only the defense of Cuba."³⁵ Weeks after the crisis, Mikoyan insisted in an informal conversation with the President that these weapons were purely defensive and that they were justified, given the threat posed by

former Vice-President Richard Nixon and certain Pentagon generals.³⁶

The temptation to dismiss these statements lightly should be resisted.³⁷ There is powerful evidence that, from the Soviet point of view, Cuban defense was not a negligible matter. Though a self-proclaimed socialist state, Cuba nonetheless stood as the Communists' only showcase in the Western world. By the summer of 1962, the Soviet Union had given Castro \$750 million in aid as well as large amounts of military equipment. Prior to the summer build-up, Soviet military supplies included jet fighters, military boats, and approximately 100,000 tons of ground weapons and equipment, which made the Cuban army the best equipped in Latin America. The summer build-up of weapons preceding the installation of missiles involved large amounts of expensive, essentially irretrievable, first-line defensive equipment. In addition to more modern infantry armaments, the Soviets sent modern supersonic MIG-21 fighters, coastal defense cruise missiles, surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) and large quantities of transportation, electronic, communications, radar, and construction equipment.

Events in Cuba also support the hypothesis that Moscow provided the missiles for Cuban defense. Since 1960, Moscow had resisted Cuban demands for specific military-security guarantees. Even after the Bay of Pigs, Soviet spokesmen were careful to refer to the Soviet *capability*, rather than to commitment, to come to Castro's defense. But Castro's demands, combined with an internal Cuban struggle between Communists and Castroites, created tensions that severely strained Cuban-Soviet relations through the spring of 1962. This dispute peaked at the end of March with Castro's purge of Annibal Escalanté, the man who had been organizing the Communist Party cadres around him. In the late spring, there was a shift in Soviet policy. Cuba's position in the 1962 May Day slogans was improved.³⁸ In a speech to a group of Cubans in Moscow, Khrushchev stated for the first time publicly that the Soviet Union was providing weapons to Cuba.³⁹ Castro made a strange apology to a group of Soviet technicians for the "poor treatment" they had received in Cuba.⁴⁰ In July a steady stream of ships bearing Soviet arms began to flow to Cuba.⁴¹ In late July, on returning from a visit to the Soviet Union, Raul Castro (Fidel's brother) boasted that the only serious threat to Cuba was an American invasion, which "we can now repel."⁴²

If Cuban defense was the Soviet objective, the adventure succeeded. The President's pledge that Cuba would not be invaded — either by the United States or by any other nation in the Western Hemisphere — removed the threat that the Soviet missiles were sent to deter. Thus, the missiles could be withdrawn.⁴³

Though persuasive, this account of Soviet motives will not withstand careful examination. If deterrence of an American attack on Cuba had been the Soviet's primary objective, they had no need to install MRBMs in Cuba. The equipment they supplied to the Cuban Army certainly precluded an American attempt to destroy Castro discreetly — without a major attack. No amount of conventional arms in Cuban hands could defeat a major American attack on Cuba. If deterrence of a major attack had been their problem, the presence of a sizeable contingent of Soviet troops would have been the solution. As a deterrent, the value of Soviet troops in Cuba would be roughly equivalent to that of American troops in Berlin. This line of reasoning might seem to neglect the very expensive nature of troop commitments — as the Soviets had learned in East Germany. But in fact the Soviet deployment of nuclear-tipped missiles included 22,000 Soviet personnel, nearly 10,000 of whom were there to guard the offensive weapons.⁴⁴

A second objection to the Cuban-defense hypothesis centers on the nuclear question. If for some reason the Soviets felt a nuclear deterrent was necessary, tactical nuclear weapons could have been emplaced more quickly, at less cost, and with considerably less likelihood of being discovered. Moreover, this deterrent came complete with an established principle of limited war justifying its employment: the right to strike bases from which an attack is launched. (In the Korean War the United States had maintained this right of reprisal against airfields used by planes bombing South Korea.)⁴⁵ Third, if for some reason strategic rockets were thought necessary, a much smaller number of MRBMs, with none of the more expensive and more easily detectable IRBMs, would have sufficed. Indeed, it is difficult to conceive of a Soviet deployment of weapons less suited to the purpose of Cuban defense than the one the Soviets made. Finally, by moving offensive strategic missiles into Cuba, in the face of the President's firm warning and the Soviets' solemn promises, the Soviet Union assumed risks manifestly out of proportion to the objective of Cuban defense. In undertaking a course of action

that in Gromyko's words "brought the world one step, perhaps only a half step, from an abyss," the Soviets had to be fishing for something much larger.⁴⁶ Cuban defense might have been a subsidiary effect of the Soviet gamble, but not its overriding objective.

Hypothesis Four: Cold War Politics

The magnitude of the risk assumed by the Soviet Union has provided the most compelling argument for a fourth hypothesis. Believing, as he told the poet Robert Frost several months earlier, that the American people were "too liberal to fight," Khrushchev embarked on "the supreme Soviet probe of American intentions."⁴⁷ Undertaken in secrecy, sustained by duplicity, the success of Khrushchev's plan required a *fait accompli*. Confronted with operational missiles, the United States would react indecisively. Protests through diplomatic channels or in the United Nations would simply advertise the hollowness of the Monroe Doctrine, the Rio Treaty, and, most important, the President's own word. By unmasking an irresolute America, the Soviet Union would drastically reduce the credibility of U.S. commitments to other nations. After the failure to act here, who could expect the United States to act elsewhere? European suspicions of America's willingness to fulfill its pledges would multiply. Potential Castros in Latin America and other parts of the world would be encouraged. More aggressive Communists in China would see the real effectiveness of Soviet leadership. Though obviously risky, a victory in this case would demonstrate that the tide in the Cold War had turned. This hypothesis was put most forcefully in an early ExCom meeting by Ambassador Charles Bohlen's quotation of a Lenin adage comparing national expansion to a bayonet thrust: "If you strike steel, pull back; if you strike mush, keep going."⁴⁸

President Kennedy accepted this hypothesis, acted on the basis of it in choosing the blockade, and, in retrospect, explained the Soviet action in these terms.⁴⁹ On Sunday, October 21, in response to a question by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., concerning why the Soviets might have done such an amazing thing, Kennedy pointed to the potential Soviet political gains in (1) drawing Russia and China closer together, or at least strengthening the Soviet position in the Communist world by showing that Moscow was capable of bold action in support of a Communist revolu-

tion, (2) radically redefining the setting in which the Berlin problem could be reopened after the election, and (3) dealing the United States a tremendous political blow.⁵⁰ His announcement of the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba to the nation and the world underlined this hypothesis. Kennedy argued that the clandestine attempt to station strategic weapons for the first time outside the Soviet Union constituted a deliberate, provocative, and unjustified change in "the status quo, which cannot be accepted by this country if our courage and our commitment are ever to be trusted again by either friend or foe. The 1930s taught us a clear lesson: aggressive conduct, if allowed to go unchecked and unchallenged, ultimately leads to war."⁵¹ At the end of 1962, when called upon to interpret these events, he emphasized the importance of *appearance* of change in the balance of power: "It [the Soviet emplacement of missiles in Cuba] would have politically changed the balance of power. It would have appeared to, and appearances contribute to reality."⁵²

This hypothesis represents the most widely accepted explanation of the Soviet move. The central phrase of Schlesinger's account has already been quoted: "the supreme Soviet probe of American intentions."⁵³ Sorensen accepts the President's choice of this hypothesis.⁵⁴ And there can be no doubt that political advantages would have accrued to the Soviet Union if the United States had acquiesced in the accomplished fact with protest alone.⁵⁵

Indeed, of even greater importance would be the fact that in placing missiles in Cuba the Soviet Union flew in the face of hard words from the President about the grave consequences that such an action would set in motion. In the statements of September 4 and 13 the President drew a clear line between the defensive weapons already in Cuba (which the United States was presumably willing to tolerate) and weapons with offensive capability — specifically ground-to-ground missiles — that would constitute a direct threat to the United States. At the second press conference he reiterated his previous warning, stating specifically that U.S. action would not await an overt act but would occur if Cuba should "become an offensive military base of significant capacity for the Soviet Union."⁵⁶ Therefore, the first explicit statement on surface-to-surface missiles appeared several days before the first arrival of Soviet missiles and equipment. The second — again warning of action in response to mere presence, even without overt action — preceded the initia-

tion of site construction and deployment. Before its plan to emplace strategic missiles in Cuba entered its final and decisive stage, then, the Soviet Union had two opportunities to reconsider its action. This blatant challenge to the American President's explicit, solemn announcements to his constituents and the world had to be primarily a political probe.

In spite of the persuasiveness of these arguments, it is necessary to consider several salient aspects of the situation that this hypothesis ignores. First, as Robert McNamara, former Secretary of Defense and an advocate of this hypothesis, has wondered publicly on several occasions, why did the Soviet Union need to probe the firmness of American intentions any further after the strong American stand in Berlin in 1961? The initial Soviet decision to send nuclear missiles to Cuba must have been made soon after the United States had refused to flinch at Khrushchev's Berlin ultimatum, forcing him to back down. Certainly the evidence suggests that, during the Berlin campaign, "the Soviet leaders became sufficiently convinced of the quality of the West's will to resist."⁵⁷ But why, then, another test? Second, the size and character of the Soviet weapon deployment was asymmetric with a mere political probe. To challenge American intentions and firmness, even a few MRBMs, threatening the entire southeastern United States (including Washington) should suffice. What could the IRBMs possibly add to the achievement of this objective? Finally, why choose Cuba as the location for a probe? At no point on the globe outside the continental United States were the Soviets so militarily disadvantaged vis-à-vis the United States as in the Caribbean. As President Kennedy, an advocate of the hypothesis, put the difficulty: "If they doubted our guts, why didn't they take Berlin?"⁵⁸

Hypothesis Five: Missile Power

Having been tried and found wanting in the missile gap game, the Soviets faced two quandaries. In the short run, they seemed doomed to a paralyzing strategic inferiority. In the long run, the gap could be closed, but at considerable cost. The purchase of ICBMs and submarine-based missiles would require a sizeable allocation of scarce Soviet resources. If Cuba could be converted into a missile launcher, the Soviets might escape both problems. MRBMs and IRBMs based in Cuba would provide a swift, significant, and comparatively inexpensive addition to the

Soviet capability to strike the United States. Over the longer haul, this "unsinkable carrier" promised more rumble for the ruble. The Cuban missile deployment was thus a bold effort to alter the unhappy strategic environment in which the Soviet Union found itself in 1962.

Having failed twice in his offensives against Berlin — to some extent because of the adverse strategic balance — Khrushchev required some "chips" as a prerequisite to any further political initiatives. After the United States announced its awareness of the marked Soviet nuclear delivery inferiority, Khrushchev must certainly have been concerned about the weakness of his base for international moves. Indeed, he may well have worried lest the American superiority tempt the United States to more provocative uses of its power. The Cuban missile base afforded a significant opportunity.

Though Castro's statements about this issue have displayed a characteristic lack of consistency, a number of his remarks to friendly inquiries support this hypothesis. Claude Julien quotes him: "They explained to us that in accepting them [the missiles] we would be reinforcing the socialist camp the world over, and because we had received important aid from the socialist camp, we estimated that we could not decline."⁵⁹

But what was the *military worth* of the Cuban missile base? As Albert and Roberta Wohlstetter state in their incisive analysis of these events, the beginning of wisdom on questions of this sort is a recognition that "it is not very sensible to talk with great confidence on these subjects."⁶⁰ Responsible judgment is difficult, even with complete access to privileged information. The classified data are uncertain, the public data still more so, and few of the commentators have looked carefully at the quantitative implications of even the public data.⁶¹ Nevertheless, several tentative points are clear. What the Soviet Union could hope to achieve in terms of missile power is sensitive to a number of calculations. First, the performance of an offensive missile varies with distance, improving significantly with proximity. Guidance accuracy is especially affected by distance. Second, in the short run, the only choice open to the Soviet leaders confronting an awesome missile inferiority was a move of this sort. The missiles sent to Cuba represented a marked addition to Soviet forces capable of reaching the United States, since the United States was outside the range of MRBMs and IRBMs that were based in the Soviet Union. Moreover, the Soviet Cuban deployment — forty-eight

MRBMs and twenty-four IRBMs — amounted to a doubling of Soviet first-strike capabilities.⁶² Third, there is no reason to believe that the Russian build-up would stop with seventy-two missiles. The Soviet Union had numerous MRBMs, which, if transported to Cuba, could provide additional capability to strike the United States. If the United States offered no interference, further installations at a similarly impressive speed might have reversed the Soviet Union's position of missile inferiority. Fourth, attacks from Cuba would outflank the U.S. Ballistic Missile Early Warning System (BMEWS). These missiles could cover virtually the entire United States before an effective warning could be sounded. American strategic bombers, which were on a fifteen-minute alert, would become extremely vulnerable. Though the Soviet missiles could be destroyed by a U.S. first strike, they would provide the Soviet Union with a significant first-strike capability. Finally the Cuban missile base offered the Soviet Union the opportunity to acquire missiles capable of striking the United States by buying the cheaper MRBMs and IRBMs rather than the more expensive ICBMs. The serious Soviet resource constraint, which had hindered their development as a first-rate missile power, could thus have been overcome.

According to this hypothesis, the Cuban missile episode was an attempt to achieve missile power parity by doubling the Soviet missile capability against the United States. The introduction of IRBMs — which is not explained by any of the other hypotheses — can be understood as a way of targeting strategic bomber and missile bases in the United States that could not be reached by MRBMs. That this strategic power might have been utilized later for political capital need not be denied. The act of missile emplacement, however, was not a political probe, but rather was a necessary prerequisite to any successful political move.⁶³

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., dismisses this hypothesis in favor of the political-probe theory, maintaining that the missiles shipped to Cuba, though representing a doubling of the Soviet strategic capability against the United States, still left the United States with a substantial superiority: "Since this would still leave the United States with at least a 2 to 1 superiority in nuclear power targeted against the Soviet Union, the shift in the military balance of power would be less crucial than that in the political balance."⁶⁴ This assertion depends on the assumption that the missiles that arrived constituted the entire Soviet program. Schlesinger offers no argument to support this assumption and there

seem to be no grounds for it. Moreover, even if the Soviet build-up had ended with a two-to-one Soviet inferiority, this amounted to an order-of-magnitude improvement in the Soviet position: from a dangerous inferiority they could restore a credible balance of terror at a single stroke.

The missile power hypothesis thus offers the most satisfactory explanation of the thinking behind the Soviet move. It incorporates more of the critical details about the characteristics of the Soviet action. It molds these facts into the most plausible account of the Soviet choice. It permits an understanding of the Cuban venture as another application of the strategy that the Soviets had been pursuing for the previous five years: the strategy of bluff and deception designed to rectify the adverse strategic balance.⁶⁵ But it must be acknowledged that this hypothesis, as well as the other four, is subject to another class of difficulties.

First, each of the five hypotheses assumes that a Soviet decision to emplace missiles led to a developed plan for implementing that decision.

Moscow evidently saw the operation in two stages — first, the augmentation of Cuban defensive capabilities by bringing in surface-to-air anti-aircraft (SAM) missiles and MIG-21 fighters; then, as soon as the SAMs were in place to protect the bases and deter photographic reconnaissance (a SAM had brought down the U-2 over Russia in 1960), sending in offensive weapons, both ballistic missiles and Ilyushin-28 jet aircraft able to deliver nuclear bombs.⁶⁶

But Soviet actions are not entirely compatible with this reconstructed plan. MRBMs were installed *before* the SAM covers were completed. Sorensen expresses forcefully the bewilderment of both the President and the intelligence community over this fact: "Why the Soviets failed to coordinate this timing is still inexplicable."⁶⁷

Khrushchev's grand plan for unveiling his *fait accompli* presents a second difficulty. He had announced privately his intention to visit the United Nations in the second half of November.⁶⁸ His message of September 6 (delivered via Dobrynin and Sorensen) stated that such a trip, if it proved necessary, "would be possible only in the second half of November. The Chairman does not wish to become involved in your internal affairs."⁶⁹ The Soviet Central Committee Plenary session was set for November 19–23.⁷⁰ If he could come to that session fresh from a major international victory, he would have the initiative. But that

would necessitate a visit to the United Nations, unveiling of the missiles, and return to Moscow between November 15 and 19. On the other hand, if he postponed his U.N. display until after the Central Committee meetings, he would visit the United Nations between November 23 and 31. In either case, one major fact fails to fit. The *fait accompli* gambit required that the missile installation be completed. But even on the round-the-clock schedule adopted after the U.S. announcement that the missiles had been discovered, the IRBM complexes would not have achieved operational readiness until after the fifteenth of December.⁷¹ This further failure of coordination is difficult to understand.⁷²

A third puzzle arises about the Soviet omission of camouflage at the missile sites. Immediately after the crisis, commentators speculated at great length about the Soviet plan for the United States to discover the missiles during construction. How else can one explain the fact that the SAMs were constructed in the standard four-slice pattern for the protection of strategic missiles, a pattern with which U.S. intelligence men had become familiar from interpreting U-2 films of construction sites within the Soviet Union?⁷³ But a Soviet desire to be found out hardly squares with the clandestine fashion in which the missiles were transported to Cuba and from the docks to the sites.

Fourth, why did the Soviet Union fail to take into account the American U-2 flights over Cuba?⁷⁴ The Soviets certainly knew about the U-2s and their capabilities, having captured the U-2 in which Gary Powers was downed over the Soviet Union. They should have known about the semimonthly overflights of Cuba by U-2s. But if they did, how could they expect the United States not to discover their missiles in the process of construction?

Finally, why did the Soviet Union persist in the face of the President's repeated warnings? Was the signal not heard? Was the warning not credible? How could the Soviets have believed that President Kennedy would not react to their move?

Why Did the United States Respond to the Missile Deployment with a Blockade?

U.S. response to the Soviet Union's emplacement of missiles in Cuba must be understood in strategic terms as simple value-maximizing escalation. American nuclear superiority could be

counted on to paralyze Soviet nuclear power. Soviet transgression of the nuclear threshold in response to an American use of lower levels of violence would be wildly irrational, since it would mean virtual destruction of the Soviet Communist system and the Russian nation. American local superiority was overwhelming: it could be initiated at a low level while threatening, with high credibility, an ascending sequence of steps short of the nuclear threshold. All that was required was for the United States to bring to bear its strategic and local superiority in a way that demonstrated American determination to see the missiles removed, while at the same time allowing Moscow time and room to retreat without humiliation. The naval blockade (euphemistically called a quarantine to circumvent the niceties of international law) did just that.⁷⁵

The process by which the U.S. government selected the blockade exemplified this logic. Informed of the presence of Soviet offensive missiles in Cuba, the President assembled his most trusted advisers. The principal members of this group, which was later christened the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExCom), included Attorney General Robert Kennedy, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency John McCone, Secretary of the Treasury Douglas Dillon, Special Assistant for National Security Affairs McGeorge Bundy, Special Counsel Theodore Sorensen, Undersecretary of State George Ball, Deputy Undersecretary of State U. Alexis Johnson, Assistant Secretary of State Edwin Martin, Soviet expert Llewellyn Thompson, Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric, Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Maxwell Taylor.⁷⁶ The President charged this group to "set aside all other tasks to make a prompt and intensive survey of the dangers and *all possible courses of action*."⁷⁷ The group functioned as "fifteen individuals on our own, representing the President and not different departments."⁷⁸ As one of the participants recalls, "The remarkable aspect of those meetings was a sense of complete equality. Protocol mattered little when the nation's life was at stake. Experience mattered little in a crisis which had no precedent. Even rank mattered little when secrecy prevented staff support."⁷⁹ Most of the following week was spent canvassing all the possible tracks and weighing the arguments for and against each. Six major categories of action were considered.

times of crisis:
different positions

1. **DO NOTHING.** American vulnerability to Soviet missiles was not new. Since the United States already lived under the gun of missiles based in Russia, a Soviet capability to strike the United States from Cuba too made little real difference. Indeed, the real danger was that the United States might over-react to this Soviet move. The Soviet action would be announced by the United States in such a calm, casual manner that it would deflate whatever political capital Khrushchev hoped to make of the missiles.

This proposal fails on two counts. First, it grossly underestimates the military importance of the Soviet move. Not only would the Soviet Union's missile capability have been instantly doubled and the U.S. early warning system outflanked but the Soviet Union would have had an opportunity to reverse the strategic balance by further installations and, indeed, in the longer run, to invest in cheaper, shorter-range, rather than more expensive longer-range, missiles. Second, the political importance of the Soviet move was undeniable: it challenged the American President's solemn warning. If the United States failed to respond, no American commitment would be credible.

2. **DIPLOMATIC PRESSURES.** Several forms were considered: an appeal to the United Nations or Organization of American States for an inspection team, a secret approach to Khrushchev, and a direct approach to Khrushchev — perhaps at a summit meeting. The United States would demand that the missiles be removed, but the final settlement might include neutralization of Cuba, with U.S. withdrawal from the Guantánamo base or withdrawal of U.S. Jupiters from Turkey or Italy.

Each form of the diplomatic approach had its particular drawbacks. To arraign the Soviet Union before the U.N. Security Council held little promise since the Russians could veto any proposed action. (Zorin of the Soviet Union happened to be chairman of the Council for October.) While the diplomats argued, the missiles would become operational. To send a secret emissary to Khrushchev demanding that the missiles be withdrawn would pose untenable alternatives. On the one hand, this would invite Khrushchev to seize the diplomatic initiative, perhaps committing him to strategic retaliation in response to an attack on tiny Cuba, while waiting for left-wing opinion in the United States and overseas to force a conference à la Munich. On the other hand, this would tender an ultimatum that no great power could accept. To confront Khrushchev at a summit would

guarantee demands for U.S. concessions, and the similarity between U.S. missiles in Turkey and Russian missiles in Cuba could not be ignored.

But why not trade the Jupiters in Turkey and Italy for the missiles in Cuba? The United States had already chosen to withdraw these missiles (in order to replace them with superior, less vulnerable Polaris submarines in the Mediterranean). The middle of a crisis, however, was no time for concessions. The offer of such a deal might confirm suspicions that the West would yield and thus tempt the Soviets to demand more. It would undoubtedly confirm European suspicions about American willingness to sacrifice European interests when the chips were down. Finally, the basic issue had to be kept clear. As the President stated in reply to Bertrand Russell's plea for concessions, "I think your attention might well be directed to the burglars rather than to those who have caught the burglars."⁸⁰

3. **A SECRET APPROACH TO CASTRO.** The crisis provided an opportunity to divorce Cuba from Soviet Communism by offering Castro the alternatives: "split or fall." This approach had a formidable drawback: the missiles belonged to the Soviet Union. Soviet troops transported, constructed, guarded, and controlled the missiles. Their removal would thus depend on a Soviet decision.

4. **INVASION.** The United States could take this occasion not only to remove the missiles but also to rid itself of Castro. A Navy exercise had long been scheduled in which Marines would liberate the imprisoned island of Vieques.⁸¹ Why not simply shift the point of disembarkation? (The Pentagon's foresight in planning this operation would be an appropriate antidote to the CIA's Bay of Pigs.)

Preparations were made for an invasion, but only as a last resort. An invasion would force American troops to confront 20,000 Soviets in the Cold War's first case of direct contact between troops of the superpowers. Such brinksmanship courted nuclear disaster, practically guaranteeing an equivalent Soviet move against Berlin.

5. **SURGICAL AIR STRIKE.** The missile sites should be removed by a clean, swift, conventional air attack. This was the firm, effective counter-action that the attempted deception deserved. A surgical strike would remove the missiles and thus eliminate both the danger that the missiles might become operational and the fear that the Soviets would realize the American

discovery and act first. Preceded by Presidential announcement of the missiles' presence on Saturday and accompanied by an explanatory address, increased surveillance of the island to prevent further installations, and a call for a summit, this would settle the matter.

Several difficulties blunted this alternative's initial appeal. First, could the strike really be "surgical"? Even if the missile sites could have been destroyed, the Soviet MIGs and IL-28 bombers might attack Guantánamo or the southeastern United States. Moreover, as the Air Force warned, destruction of all the missiles could not be guaranteed.⁸² Some might be fired during the attack; some might not yet have been pin-pointed. To assure destruction of Soviet and Cuban means of retaliation, what was required was not a surgical but rather a massive attack — of at least 500 sorties. This might result in chaos and political collapse, eventually necessitating a U.S. invasion. Second, a surprise air attack would of course kill Russians at the missile sites — and elsewhere, if the attack were more massive. An attack on the military troops and citizens of a superpower could not be regarded lightly. Pressures on the Soviet Union to retaliate would be so strong that an attack on Berlin or Turkey was highly probable. Third, the chief flaw in this track stemmed from the question of advance warning. Could the President of the United States, with his memory of Pearl Harbor and his vision of future U.S. responsibility, order a "Pearl Harbor in reverse"? For 175 years, unannounced Sunday-morning attacks had been an anathema to U.S. tradition.⁸³ The United States could not betray its heritage. No way could be found to solve the problem of advance warning. To attack without warning was no live option. A warning would give the Soviets the opportunity to commit themselves publicly to a response, to hide the missiles — in short, to tie us in knots.⁸⁴

6. BLOCKADE. Indirect military action in the form of some type of blockade became more attractive as the ExCom dissected the other alternatives. An embargo on military shipments to Cuba enforced by a naval blockade was not, however, without its own problems. Even the term presented a formidable difficulty. Vice-President Johnson had recently maintained that a blockade was "an act of war."⁸⁵ A blockade would deny the traditional freedom of the seas demanded by several of our close allies and might be held illegal, in violation of the U.N. Charter and international

law, unless the United States could obtain a two-thirds vote in the OAS.

Second, could the United States blockade Cuba without inviting Soviet reprisal in Berlin? Joint blockades would probably result in the lifting of both, bringing the United States back to the present point and allowing the Soviets additional time to complete the missiles. Third, the possible consequences of the blockade resembled those that ruled out the air strike. If Soviet ships did not stop, the United States would be forced to fire the first shot, inviting retaliation. Moreover, Castro might attack American ships blockading his island. Finally, how could a blockade be related to the problem: namely, the existence of missiles already on the island of Cuba and approaching operational readiness daily? A blockade offered the Soviets a spectrum of delaying tactics with which to buy time to complete the missile installations. Did this situation not call for an American *fait accompli*?

In spite of these enormous difficulties the blockade had comparative advantages: (1) It was a middle course between inaction and attack, aggressive enough to communicate firmness of intention, but still not so precipitous as a strike. (2) It placed on Khrushchev the burden of choice for the next step. He could avoid a direct military clash by keeping his ships away. His was the last clear chance. (3) No possible military confrontation could be more acceptable to the United States than a naval engagement in the Caribbean. At our doorstep, a naval blockade was invincible. (4) This move permitted the United States, by flexing its conventional muscles, to exploit the threat of subsequent non-nuclear steps in each of which the United States would enjoy significant superiority.⁸⁶

Particular arguments about advantages and disadvantages were powerful. An explanation of the American choice of the blockade, however, must take into account more general principles. As President Kennedy stated in drawing the moral of the crisis:

Above all, while defending our own vital interests, nuclear powers must avert those confrontations which bring an adversary to the choice of either a humiliating defeat or a nuclear war. To adopt that kind of course in the nuclear age would be evidence only of the bankruptcy of our policy — or of a collective death-wish for the world.⁸⁷

D-1 "Assessment"

Considered in this light, the blockade was the only real option.

Why Did the Soviet Union Withdraw the Missiles?

On Sunday morning, October 28, the Soviets broadcast the message that ended the critical phase of the crisis. Khrushchev announced the Soviet decision to "dismantle the arms which you describe as offensive and to crate and return them to the Soviet Union."⁸⁸ The American objective was achieved. Obviously the United States had done something right. The reason the Soviet Union decided to withdraw the missiles is, however, not so obvious.

To many analysts of the crisis — particularly to analysts within the American military establishment — the answer is simple.⁸⁹ The United States possessed overwhelming strategic and tactical superiority. Tactically, American ships, planes, and manpower were sufficient for any possible action in the Caribbean. Strategically, U.S. capability could pose a credible threat of nuclear holocaust to the Soviet Union. Because of this overwhelming strategic and tactical superiority, once the United States credibly communicated its determination to have the missiles withdrawn, the outcome was certain. The President's statement on October 22 and the blockade set in boldface the firm American commitment to force withdrawal of the missiles. All that remained was for the Soviet Union to calculate its only remaining move and withdraw. As the major U.S. government postmortem on the crisis — written by Walt Rostow and Paul Nitze in February 1963 — reportedly concluded: the principal error of Kennedy and his advisers was that they laid

too much stress upon the danger of nuclear war. . . . This exaggerated concern had prompted consideration of improvident actions (an air strike by American bombers to take out all the missile installations) and counseled hesitations where none were necessary. Since the United States could get its way without involving nuclear weapons, the burden of choice rested entirely on the Soviets.⁹⁰

As Weintal and Bartlett report, "In the aftermath, it seemed clear to the planners that a Soviet nuclear initiative was a negligible prospect throughout the crisis because its consequences would have been suicidal to the Soviet Union."⁹¹

This explanation has been refined by a number of strategic analysts of the Soviet withdrawal. Herman Kahn analyzes the events as a "traditional crisis" in which U.S. "preemptive escala-

tion" in surprising the Soviet Union with a blockade saddled the Soviets with the choice between withdrawal and puncture of a provisional threshold.⁹² Thomas Schelling's analysis of these events singles out the blockade as a successful "compellant threat," after earlier "deterrent threats" had failed to prevent Soviet nuclearization of Cuba.⁹³ Perhaps the most careful, sustained strategic analysis is provided by the Wohlstetters:

What was threatened was a local non-nuclear action, a measure of very limited violence, only the boarding of ships. On the staircase of ascending steps in the use of force, there would have been many landings, many decision points, at which either side could choose between climbing higher or moving down. The United States nuclear retaliatory force would have made a Soviet missile strike against the United States catastrophic for Russia.⁹⁴

Why did the Soviet Union withdraw the missiles? "*Chairman Khrushchev stepped down to avoid a clash of conventional forces in which he would have lost. To avoid this level of loss, he would have had irresponsibly to risk very much higher levels.*"⁹⁵

The major problem with this explanation of Soviet withdrawal of the missiles lies in its focus on the *blockade* as the sufficient demonstration of U.S. determination. Did the blockade work? Or was it rather the case that the blockade failed in just the way that many of its opponents had predicted? For, after all, what did the blockade have to do with the missiles already on the island of Cuba and rapidly approaching operational readiness? The blockade exhibited U.S. willingness to escalate this crisis to the point of risking a local, non-nuclear naval encounter — with all the possible diplomatic ramifications of such a confrontation. It forced Khrushchev to choose among three alternatives: (1) avoid a showdown by keeping Soviet vessels out of the area, (2) submit to the quarantine by permitting ships to be stopped and searched, and (3) provoke the United States to a first use of force by violating the quarantine. But if he chose the first, why could he not also proceed to complete the forty-two missiles already present?

Indeed, this is precisely what happened. The Soviet tanker *Bucharest*, which obviously could not be carrying outlawed contraband, was allowed to cross the blockade after identifying herself.⁹⁶ A Soviet-chartered, Panamanian-owned, American-built liberty ship of Lebanese registry, the *Marcula*, which carried only trucks, sulfur, and spare parts, submitted to being stopped and

searched.⁹⁷ Sixteen of the eighteen Soviet dry-cargo ships steaming toward Cuba, including five with large hatches, came to a halt well outside the perimeter of the blockade.⁹⁸ Construction of the missiles in Cuba rushed feverishly toward completion.⁹⁹ The facts would seem to belie explanation of Soviet missile withdrawal in terms of the blockade alone.

President Kennedy's announcement of the blockade emphasized that it was an *initial* step. No attempt was made to disguise the massive build-up of over 200,000 invasion troops in Florida.¹⁰⁰ Squadrons of U.S. tactical fighters moved to airports within easy striking distance of targets in Cuba. The State Department press officer, in making an announcement on Friday, referred reporters to a passage in the President's Monday night speech that read, "Further action will be justified if work on the missiles continues."¹⁰¹ At 9 P.M. Saturday, Defense Secretary McNamara called to active duty twenty-four troop-carrier squadrons of the Air Force Reserve, approximately 14,000 men.¹⁰² Thus the blockade was but the first step in a series of moves that *implicitly* threatened air strike or invasion. The blockade allowed Khrushchev time to adjust to the American discovery of his bold attempt before it became an accomplished fact. It added firmness to the initial commitment of the United States to see the missiles withdrawn. The alert of American forces around the globe articulated U.S. intention to act elsewhere if necessary. But what forced stoppage of the construction of the missiles — work that proceeded rapidly up until Khrushchev's Sunday morning announcement — was the threat of further local steps posed by the extraordinary build-up and readiness of American air-strike and invasion forces.¹⁰³ The blockade constituted an effective and wise initial step. But only when coupled with the implicit threat of further action — action in the form of alternatives rejected during the first week for reasons that have already been discussed — did it succeed in forcing Soviet withdrawal of the missiles. Without the implicit threat of air strike or invasion, the blockade alone could have prevented Soviet ships from bringing additional missiles to Cuba, but would not have forced the removal of the missiles already present.

Khrushchev's report of this crisis to the Supreme Soviet attributed even greater importance to the threat of air strike or invasion: "We received information from Cuban comrades and from other sources on the morning of October 27th *directly stating* that this attack would be carried out in the next two or

three days. We interpreted these cables as an *extremely alarming warning signal*."¹⁰⁴ Khrushchev's report maintains that the threat was not left to the Soviet imagination or to its interpretation of the American military build-up. He asserted that the threat was "explicitly stated" and there is considerable evidence to suggest that in this he spoke accurately.¹⁰⁵

On the final Saturday, after the U.S. government had hammered out its reply to the Soviet letters, the President's brother, at the request of the President, delivered a copy of this public letter to the Soviet Ambassador. The public reply contained no explicit threat. But Robert Kennedy warned the Soviet Ambassador that "the point of escalation was at hand," that the United States would take "strong and overwhelming retaliatory action . . . unless [the President] received immediate notification that the missiles would be withdrawn."¹⁰⁶ As Robert Kennedy himself recalled:

Saturday, October 27 was the most serious time. A note was sent to Mr. Khrushchev on Saturday night saying that President Kennedy and the U.S. government would have to receive notification by the next day that the missiles were going to be withdrawn or the consequences would be extremely grave for the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁷

Testifying before a subcommittee of the House Committee on Appropriations in February 1963, Secretary of Defense McNamara confirmed the fact that the threat of air strike or invasion was not left implicit:

We had a force of several hundred thousand men ready to invade Cuba. . . . Khrushchev knew without any question whatsoever that he faced the full military power of the United States, including its nuclear weapons. . . . We faced that night the possibility of launching nuclear weapons. . . and that is the reason, and the only reason, why he withdrew those weapons.¹⁰⁸

← Khrushchev withdrew the Soviet missiles not because of the blockade, not because of the implicit threat of "further action," but because of an *explicit* threat of air strike or invasion on Tuesday — unless he served immediate notice that the missiles would be withdrawn. The middle road — i.e., the blockade — may have provided time for Soviet adjustment to the fact of American commitment to withdrawal of the missiles, but it also left room for the Soviet Union to bring the missiles to operational readiness. What narrowed that room was no pantomime.

Though the U.S. build-up in Florida may have been required to convince the Soviet Union of U.S. ability to move up the ladder of escalation, the Soviets were not left to guess what the next step would be or when it would come. Rather, an explicit threat, with a specific time limit, was conveyed by Robert Kennedy to Dobrynin and through him to Chairman Khrushchev.

3

Model II: Organizational Process

For some purposes, governmental behavior can be usefully summarized as action chosen by a unitary, rational decisionmaker: centrally controlled, completely informed, and value maximizing. But this simplification must not be allowed to conceal the fact that a government consists of a conglomerate of semi-feudal, loosely allied organizations, each with a substantial life of its own. Government leaders do sit formally and, to some extent, in fact, on top of this conglomerate. But governments perceive problems through organizational sensors. Governments define alternatives and estimate consequences as their component organizations process information; governments act as these organizations enact routines. Governmental behavior can therefore be understood, according to a second conceptual model, less as deliberate choices and more as outputs of large organizations functioning according to standard patterns of behavior.

To be responsive to a wide spectrum of problems, governments consist of large organizations, among which primary responsibility for particular tasks is divided. Each organization attends to a special set of problems and acts in quasi-independence on these problems. But few important issues fall exclusively within the domain of a single organization. Thus government behavior relevant to any important problem reflects the independent output of several organizations, partially coordinated by government leaders. Government leaders can substantially disturb, but not substantially control, the behavior of these organizations.

To perform complex routines, the behavior of large num-