

# The Iraq Crisis Compared to the Cuban Missile Crisis

By

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Watching day-by-day the build-up to war against Iraq, my thoughts keep wandering back to the Cuba Missile Crisis. Since I was a member of what was essentially the “2<sup>nd</sup> tier” of the 30 or so people fully involved in the American government activities relating to the war as a member of what was rather pompously called “the Crisis Management Committee” and worked closely with William Bundy (then Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs) and Robert Komer (then Deputy Director of the National Security Council) in a three-man subcommittee, I had a certain perspective on the unfolding of that crisis.

Comparisons and contrasts of that crisis and the way we handled it with events and pronouncements today are, I believe, significant as those of us outside government attempt to make sense of the pronouncements and actions of the Bush administration. For convenience I will number what I see as the major categories:

1) The reality of the crisis: During the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union had probed one another’s capacities and intentions. Many of the actions were highly provocative and dangerous. As is now well known, the United States had for years penetrated Soviet airspace with aircraft. A number of these were shot down by Soviet air defenses. The Russians flew aircraft along the American coast but did not penetrate American airspace. The Russians did, of course, blockade Berlin and subsequently built the Wall, both of which the U.S. regarded as provocative acts. Both of us built military alliances (NATO and the Warsaw Pact) and when the Soviet alliance was challenged internally in 1956, the Eisenhower Administration was on the verge of dropping personnel into Central Europe when the Suez Crisis diverted it. Both the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. sought to enhance their positions, and to undercut one another, in the “Third World” through provision of arms and development aid. America regarded the Communist take-over of Cuba under Castro as tilting the balance of security and the Russians apparently so regarded the build-up of American military power in Europe and particularly placement of nuclear-armed missiles in Turkey.

The missiles in Turkey were more significant than many then realized. I happened to be somewhat involved since I was the Member of the Policy Planning Council dealing with Turkey. What was significant about them was that they were liquid-fired. That is, they took a relatively long time to be launched. So, viewed in the arcane world of nuclear strategy, they were “offensive” rather than “defensive.” That is, they had to be a “first strike” weapon or they would be destroyed before they could be used. Thus, they were highly provocative. Ironically, they were also redundant. We then had nuclear-armed fighter bombers (F-100s) stationed in Turkey on constant alert and programmed for targets in the Soviet Union.

I urged that the missiles be removed. Military planners, always reluctant to give up any “advantage,” were strongly opposed. They were still in place at the time of the Cuba Missile Crisis.

If we attempt to understand the motivation of the Russians in deploying missiles in Cuba, we must take into account our shared concern with “balance.” Since we regarded our having missiles on the Soviet border in Turkey as right and proper, they presumably thought it right and proper for them to have missiles on our border in Cuba. We, of course, did not: we trusted ourselves and not them, and we regarded ours as defensive and theirs as offensive. In the jargon of the day, we felt that missiles in Cuba would “tilt” the balance of power whereas ours in Turkey, already in place, were by then a part of that balance.

Whatever our views of one another’s actions, and motivations, we agreed that the potential damage of nuclear confrontation was overwhelming. In the vivid phrase of my former colleague at the University of Chicago, Albert Wohlstetter, we lived in a “balance of terror.” Simply put, we each had the capacity to destroy the other.

The trick was to avoid doing so.

If we weigh Iraq in the Soviet scale, disproportion is evident, indeed almost laughable:

The Soviet Union was a vast part of the world, comprising well over 200 million people, with a huge and well-equipped army and air force, producing its own nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them and run by an experienced, capable and centrally controlled military and civil bureaucracy.

In contrast, Iraq is a tiny country about 2/3<sup>rd</sup>s the size of Texas of which 70% is desert or steppe inhabited by less than 20 million people who are deeply divided religiously and ethnically. Moreover, 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the country (Kurdistan) is now, *de facto*, a separate state. Under boycott, Iraq’s revenue (particularly in foreign currency) has been drastically reduced, and its small and comparatively obsolete armed forces, badly mauled in the 1990 war, have never been fully rebuilt. There is no indication (despite vague accusations) that Iraq has – or could have in the foreseeable future – access to nuclear weapons. It almost certainly does have chemical and biological weapons. (So does virtually every other country.) Finally, unlike the Soviet Union, Iraq is ringed with actual or potential foes: Iran to the east, Turkey to the north, Israel to the west and Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to the south. Each of these is more modern armed forces; Turkey and Israel have much larger armed forces; and Israel has, it is believed, about 400 nuclear bombs and the means to deliver them.

- 1) The nature of the response: Whatever provocative actions it may have taken before (attempts to assassinate Castro and to sponsor an invasion by Cuban

exiles), the U.S. government's reaction to the Cuba Missile Crisis was essentially defensive. We sought to avoid war.

True we were prepared, if necessary, to invade or bomb Cuba to destroy the missiles, and quickly mobilized forces to do so, but from the opening of the crisis throughout the critical days, everyone in the circle around the President was attempting to find ways short of military action to end what we all perceived to be an unacceptable threat.

Moreover, our objective was limited. While we did not approve of the Castro government, we sought only to remove the missiles. "Change of regime" or occupation of Cuba was never, to my knowledge, considered. This was crucial to the success of American actions since only if Chairman Khrushchev could back down without unacceptable loss of prestige could he withdraw his missiles.

In short, the aim was limited, discrete and achievable without destruction of Cuba or the replacement of its government.

Turn now to Iraq.

First, consider the objectives insofar as these have been disclosed:

- A) to rid Iraq of nuclear weapons;
- B) to prevent Iraq from engaging in terrorist actions; and
- C) to prevent Iraq from endangering its neighbors.

Second, are these real dangers?

- A) There is no credible evidence that Iraq has (or could have for many years) the capacity to produce nuclear weapons and no evidence of any likely source for acquisition abroad that cannot be otherwise controlled by America and its allies;
- B) Despite attempts to link Iraq to the al-Qaida organization, there is no evidence of such a link; indeed, we know that Usama bin Ladin was so strongly opposed to the Iraqi regime that in 1990 he offered to form an international brigade to attack it; and
- C) Iraq today has very limited military capacity. The only weak point on its frontier is Kuwait which is under an American guarantee. Saddam moved against it in 1990 only when the first Bush Administration gave him what he took to be (and which an independent observer would agree was) a green light to do so.

Third, what means of action are contemplated?

The Bush Administration has announced its intent to invade the country and overthrow the government. Rather than seeking to avoid military action, as we did in the Cuban Missile Crisis, its announced intent is to undertake it.

This is a critical point and requires announcing an ancillary analytical consideration:

Looking at the way nations interact, we often fail to distinguish “national interest” from “interest of government.”

In the Cuba Missile Crisis, we tried not to so humiliate (and therefore endanger) the Soviet leadership that it could not do what we wanted it to do. That is, we tried to make the Russian national interest (to avoid a destructive war) coincide with interest of government (to keep from being overthrown as unpatriotic). Thus, we were able to accomplish our key objective, to get the missiles out of Cuba.

Some months after the Missile Crisis, senior officials of the American government played a war game to try to understand it more fully. At the usual crucial point in war games, action was taken: “Blue Team” (the Americans) “took out” a Russian city; “Red Team” (the Russians), to whom I was acting as political adviser, had, within 7 or 8 minutes (the time set by the constraints of nuclear exchange), to decide what to do. We identified three options:

First, retaliate in kind and destroy one American city of comparable size. But we believed that no American leader could accept this as an end to the confrontation; he would “escalate.” We would have to reply and so on until someone went to general war.

Second, to do nothing. But we concluded that such a policy would result in the overthrow and murder of the Soviet leaders. They obviously would not adopt that policy.

Third, the only other alternative was to strike with everything we had in the hope of so disabling or discouraging “Blue Team” that it could not inflict unacceptable damage on us. A very experienced team of senior military, intelligence and other officials opted for general war.

The important lesson was that in a conflict between “national interest” (Red Team having a national interest in receiving as little damage as possible) and “interest of government” (Khushchrev and company having an interest in staying alive), it was often interest of government that won out. History is full of examples of that lesson.

What about today? How should that lesson guide us?

We have told Iraq that even if it allows us full access to ascertain that it has no nuclear potential, that is insufficient; we insist on the overthrow of the existing

government. If those in power are almost certain to be “replaced,” that is killed, they have no incentive to allow inspection or to reduce their military potential or otherwise conform to our desires. Quite the contrary, they may conclude that their best chance of survival lies in adopting the very policies we want them to put aside.

They do not, of course, have the option adopted by “Red Team,” but they probably will try to deter us by making attack unacceptably expensive. Thus, they have a strong incentive to try to acquire nuclear weapons (from the Russians, or its mafia, the Chinese or the Pakistanis), to produce as much chemical and biological material as they can, to develop means of delivery and to engage in, encourage or position themselves to be able to carry out terrorist acts. We may regard these policies as irrational or ugly, but, if we are honest, we must admit that they are policies we also adopted vis-à-vis the U.S.S.R.. We can, I presume, be sure the Iraqi leadership is aware of this.

In short, our current policy appears likely to produce exactly the result we should seek to avoid.

To summarize: our handling of the Cuba Missile Crisis was certainly not perfect – we made mistakes, we misread Russian intentions and our information was sometimes faulty -- but we accomplished our objective and we made the maximum effort to avoid endangering our society whereas the policy now announced by the Bush Administration certainly does endanger the American way of life and, moreover, could be self defeating.

1) The modalities of government action:

A) During the Cuba Missile Crisis, as I remember it, four features stood out:

First, although the number of people in the inner circle was very small, it was diverse. The President was, of course, a Democrat; his Ambassador to the United Nations (Adlai Stevenson) was a liberal Democrat; his Secretary of State (Dean Rusk) was a very conservative Democrat; both his Secretary of Defense (Robert McNamara) and Director of the National Security Council (McGeorge Bundy) were Republicans; he drew in as advisers men with impressive records of service in previous administrations from both parties.

Second, consultation and full information to America’s overseas allies was emphasized. Elaborate measures were taken to ensure that the British, French and German governments were kept abreast of thinking in Washington and the unfolding of events in Cuba and elsewhere.

Third, beginning with the President’s speech on the Monday of the crisis, in the writing of which I played a very minor part, the American public was given an honest and fairly complete and up-to-date account of the crisis and the dangers inherent in the action the President proposed.

Fourth, the government did not feel itself beholden to or constrained by any domestic lobby or pressure group. Although there was a vociferous community of Cuban exiles in Florida, and although they felt traduced by the Administration's failure in the Bay of Pigs fiasco, they exercised no discernible influence on decision-making.

B) The contrast today with each of these items is telling:

First, to judge by press reports, the only people who exercise any influence in the presidential circle are men to the far right of the Republican Party. To the best of my knowledge not a single Democrat is among the President's advisers.

Second, with the single exception of the British Prime Minister, there seems to be no serious attempt to consult with any other government. Except, that is, for Israel which appears not only to have been consulted but to have played a key role in setting American policy. This is, ironically, far more openly discussed in Israel than in America; indeed, Israeli accounts suggest that even joint military action against Iraq (and Iran) has been extensively discussed between the American and Israeli governments.

Third, while speeches and press releases are a daily occurrence, surprisingly little "hard" information has been given out by the Bush Administration. References have been made to "highly classified" information but they are vague. Whereas Kennedy released aerial surveillance photographs of Cuba, showing precisely what the danger was, Bush has not released any comparable materials. In a previous essay on secrecy, I argue that, if such materials exist, there should be no reason not to release them. They will not be a surprise to the Iraqis, who not only know what they have and what they are doing but also are quite familiar with our satellite reconnaissance since, during the first Bush administration, we shared its results with them. In short, the Bush Administration has not made a case for its policy.

Fourth, whereas Kennedy was able to operate on the sole criterion of his (and his advisers') best judgment of what was in the American national interest, the Bush Administration has been quite open in catering to a lobby. That is, of course, the lobby that supports Israel.

One of the weak points of democracy, particularly in dealing with foreign policy, is that "grease goes to the squeaking wheel." Just as the cotton lobby, the butter lobby, and other interest groups are effective because they alone deeply care about their pet issues, and are prepared to use their money to further the interests of those who support them, so the Jewish lobby, in its determination to stand for Israel, acts virtually without countervailing forces. Particularly today when "Arab" and "Muslim" have become bad words, and when any hint of criticism of Israel is taken as proof of anti-Semitism, pro-Israel opinion drowns all other.

Moreover, the administration draws almost exclusively on the personnel of various “research” centers that are dedicated to furthering Israeli policy.

Finally, this policy makes good domestic political sense: the American Jewish community has always been generous and is particularly generous to those who support its causes. In the past, most of those supporters were Democrats and the Democratic party drew massive financial support from Jews. Today, Bush’s pro-Israel stance is almost certain to take away from the Democrats this major source of funding and, since the Republicans already draw major support from corporations, this should give them an overwhelming advantage in the up-coming elections.

2) Motivation: Even President Kennedy’s strongest critics never suggested that in his policy on the Cuba Missile Crisis, electioneering played any role. Indeed, it could hardly have done so since the crisis was not of his making and came upon us suddenly and without warning. I do not recall during the crucial week anyone ever considering the impact of what we were doing on the chances of reelection of the Democratic party.

I would like to think that the same could be said today, but there are indications that make one doubt. First, as mentioned, the Bush administration has restricted itself to the far right of the Republican party and has excluded from its councils all others. Second, it is widely discussed, even in that group, that Bush Sr. lost his election over Iraq and that, therefore, “grudge” figures into calculations on Iraq. Third, there has been widely publicized calculation, by no means restricted to Bush’s opponents, on the timing of an attack on Iraq: should it be before the November Congressional elections or afterwards, near to or well before the presidential elections in 2004? Fourth, the President has himself fueled speculation by taking the position that we are in a war and that failure to support him is unpatriotic. There are those who believe that this will be his strategy for the elections. And, finally, since considerable doubt as to the necessity of confronting Iraq has been expressed by former senior (Republican and Bush Sr.) officials (Brent Scowcroft, Henry Kissinger, and others) and by military men (General Wesley Clark, former NATO Supreme Allied Commander for one), there is doubt that any military action is justified. In short, it is widely believed that a major motivation of the build-up to war in Iraq has more to do with American politics than with Iraq’s threat to the United States.

3) Expertise: Since I have identified myself as one of the Cuba Missile Crisis team, let me say only that I found those members of the team with whom I worked the most able, experienced and dedicated group I have ever known.

In contrast, the group today seem more ideologically motivated than informed. That is a subjective opinion, but consider four objective points:

First, there is a report, unsubstantiated but from very good sources, that the White House has disbanded the office of the State Department charged with Iraqi affairs and

scattered its professional officers. If this is true, it suggests that those in charge of American activities do not want to listen to professional advice;

Second, there is a similar report that the former head of the C.I.A. counter-terrorist office has been told to keep quiet and not venture his opinions;

Third, while virtually every former senior professional from the C.I.A. and the State Department believes our current policy to be wrong-headed, none has been consulted whereas almost always in the past the incumbent administration has sought a variety of opinions and particularly those of former senior officials; and

Fourth, there are persistent reports that the Secretary of State has disagreed strongly enough to have twice offered his resignation.

- 3) Negotiation: During the Cuba Missile Crisis, negotiation with the Russian government continued.

Most “negotiation” was like primitive forms of trade: a move was made, in effect “goods” were put out to be seen, and the other side then reacted or did not; it was negotiation more by gesture than by word. Care was taken not to have any move appear either as a sign of weakness or of bellicosity. The one major exception, and the one most worrying to me at the time, was boarding Russian ships. This could have been construed as an act of war, but was, to everyone’s relief, accepted by Chairman Khushchev.

At the time, the President’s brother created a “back- stair channel” to the Soviet Government through a Russian emissary in which at least some of the key issues could be discussed.

Neither of these forms of negotiation are being used with the Iraqi government. That government has been told, in fact, that we will not negotiate with it but intend to destroy it.

The only other time in my experience when something like this happened was under President Lyndon Johnson during the 1967 war. I had been brought into the White House and given the task of writing a draft peace treaty. When I submitted it, McGeorge Bundy, to whom I was acting as an adviser, handed it back, saying, “the President does not intend to negotiate with Nasser. Draft a peace treaty that does not require his participation.” I remonstrated that it was difficult or impossible to make an agreement when the other party was not to be allowed to participate. Bundy did not argue the logic but simply repeated that the President had made up his mind and that I should not “fight the issue.” I tried to comply but could not produce anything within that restriction that had a chance of success. So I left the White House and returned to the Adlai Stevenson Institute.



It is perhaps worth emphasizing, however, that while Johnson would not negotiate, he also did not attempt, to the best of my knowledge, to do what the Bush administration has proclaimed its intent to do, to overthrow the government.

Putting all this together, it seems to be that what is happening today is indeed shooting craps with destiny, is not carefully or professionally considered; will likely result in the needless death of thousands of people; may well create conditions not only in the Middle East but throughout the world in which terrorism will flourish; will cause even our allies to regard us as a “rogue” state; and is likely to cause enormous internal damage to our country and particularly to our tradition of civil liberties, democracy and the rule of law.

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