



Shaping a Statesman

Between the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis, John Kennedy transformed his approach to handling opportunities and crises abroad.

by Scott D. Reich

The story of John F. Kennedy and Cuba is a familiar one. In April 1961, the president authorized an invasion at the Bay of Pigs that proved to be an unmitigated disaster. He redeemed himself 18 months later in his masterful handling of a missile crisis that threatened nuclear war.

Seen together, these trials vividly highlight Kennedy's transformation from inexperienced leader to problem-solving visionary.

Removing Castro From Power

Kennedy had been a war hero in World War II. His experience fighting in the Pacific turned him into an ardent Cold Warrior. He took an aggressive stance against communism while in Congress, which included criticizing the Truman administration for permitting the fall of China, voting for a law requiring communists to register with the government and supporting, for a time, the anticommunist activities of Sen. Joseph McCarthy.

On the 1960 campaign trail, the Cold War infused much of Kennedy's rhetoric. In his inaugural address, Kennedy spoke of the realities of a divided world, imploring "both sides" to pursue new quests for peace while reminding the Soviet adversary that the Western Hemisphere intended "to remain the master of its own house."

Meanwhile, the CIA had been developing a plan to remove Fidel Castro, a Soviet ally in Cuba, from power. As a Cold Warrior seeking to substantiate campaign claims that he would combat communist

advances, Kennedy was intrigued by the idea.

The operation envisioned CIA-trained Cuban exiles storming the island and inciting a revolution. Despite his interest in removing Castro, Kennedy was never entirely comfortable with the plan. He had not been involved in the planning and didn't think the exiles would succeed without American aid. Nonetheless, his military advisors assured him that the exiles' success was likely. After long deliberation, Kennedy, relying on the advice of his experts, rather reluctantly ordered the assault in April 1961. It was just three months into his presidency.

Total Failure

Unfavorable weather conditions, intelligence leaks and what turned out to be poor planning all contributed to the complete failure of the mission. Perhaps worse, it quickly grew apparent to the world that America had sponsored the attack, making the president look ineffectual at home and abroad and lending credence to Richard Nixon's campaign criticism that Kennedy was too inexperienced to be president.

Kennedy accepted responsibility for the failure at a press conference. "There's an old saying that victory has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan," he said, stating that he was the responsible officer of the government. Kennedy was furious with himself for not trusting his instincts.

A subsequent meeting with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev did not assuage the new tensions that were brewing. Khrushchev accused Kennedy of being an aggressor and signaled that the Soviets would



Kennedy sought former President Eisenhower's counsel shortly after the Bay of Pigs. Eisenhower later wrote, "He explained in detail where things began to go awry and stated that the whole operation had become a complete failure."

act accordingly, paving the way for the construction of the Berlin Wall in August 1961 and heightening the risk of armed conflict. All this made Kennedy question the direction in which the world seemed to be headed: Did it make sense to be a Cold Warrior in the nuclear age? Was there not a better approach to meeting global challenges than promoting policies that invited escalation and fear?

A Shot at Redemption

Over the ensuing months, the relationship between the superpowers remained openly adversarial, including low-intensity conflicts in Laos and Vietnam, rising tension in Berlin and the resumption of nuclear testing and new armament by both sides.

Yet circumstances soon presented Kennedy with a fresh chance to reverse the overall trend of events — in Cuba, of all places. In October 1962, U.S. intelligence sources detected the construction of offensive nuclear missile sites in Cuba capable of striking the entire Eastern Seaboard — and that more Soviet arms shipments were en route.

Hawkish advisers again urged Kennedy to take military action — a plea that only amplified when an American pilot was shot down over Cuba amid the crisis. Kennedy had learned from his earlier mistake, however. Rather than play a form of Russian roulette by taking dangerous actions in which mutual destruction became more likely, he sought a different approach that could resolve the issue and move the nations away from armed confrontation.

Rejecting calls for a military strike, Kennedy issued a quarantine order in which American ships would surround Cuba, preventing the arms from arriving. To Kennedy and the world's great relief, the strategy worked: The Soviet ships turned around, and back-channel negotiations between Kennedy and Khrushchev led to the removal of the missiles from Cuba. It was a major victory for Kennedy.

Defining a New World Order

While the Bay of Pigs failure revealed the scope of Kennedy's inexperience, the missile crisis underscored the depth of his resolve, illustrating how far he had come and the new direction in which he hoped to lead. Rather than frame global diplomacy as a zero-sum game in which one side's victory was another's defeat, Kennedy learned that he could move away from his erstwhile hawkish tendencies and toward a new framework based on cooperation and mutual concern. To achieve peace was not an American victory or a Soviet victory but a global triumph. Both sides could benefit from reasoned action.

The president's vision for peace signaled the end of one era and the beginning of another. Instead of threatening military confrontation to spur negotiation, mutual understanding could be the basis for progress. Rational people could act rationally. Kennedy's new approach was borne out in the Limited Test Ban Treaty of August 1963. By highlighting their commonality as individuals and nations in an interdependent world, rivals could look past their differences — even working together in the new spirit of collaboration that Kennedy aimed to foster.

It requires mutual self-enlightenment to recognize the interrelatedness of people's concern and to stress that individuals, regardless of where they live, are connected to one another. As Kennedy said on June 10, 1963: "In the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal." Kennedy had indeed become a statesman. [JFK]

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