

The Deadly Nuclear Game Continues, 50 Years After Cuba

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The headlines in the newspapers and on BBC radio – even for young man in distant Sri Lanka – were ominous as they reported the Cuban missile [crisis](#) of October 1962 – 50 years ago. There was no television in my country at the time to make the situation more tense; for the vast majority in [Sri Lanka](#) – called Ceylon then – ignorance of how close we were to nuclear Armageddon seems incredible now in the hindsight of history.

How could the two superpowers of the time place millions of innocent citizens in nonnuclear weapon and nonaligned states in danger of the blast, radiation, climatic and genetic effects of such a weapon exchange? Sri Lanka, having barely emerged from four and half centuries of crippling colonialism, was threatened along with other countries by a contest for global supremacy in which it wanted no part.

Years later, as a diplomat dedicated to the cause of peace and disarmament, I learned from personal conversations with [Robert McNamara](#), President [John F. Kennedy](#)'s secretary for defense, [Ted Sorensen](#), Kennedy's speechwriter and others that we were all saved by sheer luck. The record of the crisis – dramatized in films, documentaries and interviews with the actual participants in that macabre dance of death – proves beyond doubt that the policymakers on both sides had no access to the facts and were groping in the cold war fog.

A recent [paper](#) by [Martin Hellman](#), an emeritus professor of electrical engineering at Stanford University, highlights "little-known events which demonstrate that 1962 was a significantly more dangerous year than generally realized." These include:

- During the crisis, American destroyers unknowingly attacked Soviet submarines armed with nuclear torpedoes.
- American decision-makers who wanted to invade Cuba did not know that the Soviets had deployed battlefield nuclear weapons for repelling an invasion.
- In March 1962, the [Joint Chiefs of Staff](#) recommended sinking an American ship in Guantánamo Bay and blaming Fidel Castro, the Cuban leader, to create public support for an American invasion of the country. Even after the crisis ended, the Joint Chiefs of Staff proposed attacking the Soviet Union.
- It was later revealed that during the crisis, Kennedy was taking massive doses of amphetamines for his back pain, which could have impaired his judgment.

The crisis began on Tuesday, Oct. 12, 1962, when President Kennedy was told that U-2 photographs showed that Soviet missiles were being installed in Cuba. The 13-day crisis ended on Oct. 28, when the Soviet premier, [Nikita Khrushchev](#), agreed to remove the missiles. Earlier in the spring of that year, nuclear-armed American missiles became operational in Turkey, provoking Khrushchev to base similar Soviet weapons in Cuba. It

has been revealed that Kennedy had forgotten this and had to be reminded about the placing of US missiles in Turkey by [McGeorge Bundy](#), his national security adviser.

How did Khrushchev regard the crisis? Writing in his [memoirs](#) about a decade later he said: "Our position was this: we would withdraw our missiles from Cuba on the condition that the United States would make a public statement, pledging not to invade Cuba and promising to restrain its allies from doing so. President Kennedy said that in exchange for the withdrawal of our missiles, he would remove American missiles from Turkey and Italy."

Addressing an American audience in his paper, Hellman cites examples of what should be done today in terms of risk reduction by the US, which together with Russia accounts for 95 percent of the nuclear weapons in the world:

- "Warning times have shrunk to virtually zero," he writes. "Recommendation: take our missiles off hair-trigger alert, and de-emphasize the role that first use of nuclear weapons currently plays in our war-fighting plans.
- Nuclear terrorism has added a dangerous new dimension. Recommendation: reduce the number of nuclear weapons and the amount of fissile material that is vulnerable to theft by terrorists.
- American conventional military superiority causes Russian war-fighting plans to rely on the early use of nuclear weapons. Recommendation: recognize that any war with Russia runs an unacceptable risk of going nuclear, and start acting accordingly.
- Actions taken by Congress and some of our NATO allies reinforce Russian fears that our missile defense system is aimed at them. Recommendation: Ensure that our actions are consistent with our repeated claims that Russia is not the target."

Five decades since October 1962, we have seen the introduction of hot lines, [permissive action links](#) (nuclear-weapon security devices) and other technological brakes ostensibly restraining the launch-warning of nearly 2,000 nuclear weapons on high operational alert. This is just a part of the total arsenal of 19,000 owned today by nine nuclear weapon-armed states in the world.

But this has not decreased the threat of nuclear war. That threat has, in fact, increased and the use of nuclear weapons by deliberate intention or accident, computer error, cyberattack or terrorism is only too real – with no guarantee that we will be lucky once more.

We are still playing a deadly game of nuclear poker, running an unacceptably high risk of our bluff being called again and finding ourselves teetering on the brink of an abyss.