



HARVARD Kennedy School

BELFER CENTER

FOR SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS



First Place WINNERS and Their LESSONS

Grades 6-12

Eden Rose Niles, Colorado Academy High School, Denver, CO



Lesson: “During a crisis, when military action is viable as a first response, the morality of using weapons to reach a resolution must be considered in order to prevent a catalyst for greater conflict and subsequent death.”

Essay: “RFK initially believed an air strike was the only option. However, after considering the morality of a strike, RFK recognized that it could turn crisis into global conflict. Consequently, his decision to oppose the strike allowed for a patient approach and consideration of the broader moral issue. This provided time for Kennedy’s administration to weigh non-lethal options, eventually culminating in the quarantine, and more importantly allowing for international diplomacy to be the source of resolution. My lesson draws from how missiles and other modern weapons do not require tedious preparations but rather can be deployed at the push of a button. Accordingly, leaders must consider morality carefully before choosing military action as a first response. This ensures that empathy for fellow humans remains in our actions. Due to the empathy cultivated through the moral question, Kennedy knew violent actions would receive violent reactions. Deciding to refrain from weapons and working with the Soviets diplomatically resolved tensions without losing lives.

In today’s crises, weapons evolve to allow even less connection between those who employ violence and those who receive its consequence. Maintaining the question of morality is increasingly important to ensure that military action does not abandon the human element and thus inspire new enemies. This is especially true when there is seemingly less time to consider non-lethal options before media and politics drown out sober and patient approaches to resolution.”

General Public

Zachary Elias, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH



Lesson: “The Cuban Missile Crisis taught the United States what containment feels like.”

Essay: “The lesson from the crisis is the extent to which containment is terrifying for the country being contained. Because the U.S. had been a global military superpower since the end of World War II, it had never faced an existential threat close to its borders. At the time, U.S. nuclear missiles were stationed in range of Soviet cities as a means of containment – but, for U.S. policymakers, it was unthinkable that the U.S. could end up in a similar position. So, when the USSR decided to raise the stakes by placing its own nuclear missiles in range of American cities, U.S. policymakers were inclined to compromise with the Russians on containment policy – trading nuclear warheads in Turkey for those in Cuba – to lessen the direct military threat posed to each nation by one another.

This is a lesson to keep in mind when deliberating the best means of dealing with rising powers. When making policy concerning the rise of China, for example, one would do well to remember that military containment and antagonism makes the contained country feel threatened, which in turn makes aggression more likely in response to U.S. provocations. It took trust, diplomacy, and compromise to resolve a crisis that was precipitated by military buildup, as dictated by standard realist power calculus. While it is unlikely that China will be able to challenge U.S. power as the USSR did during the Cold War, one should remain cognizant of the fact that surrounding another state with military threats is less likely to spur long-term trust and cooperation – which, in an era of cooperative globalization, is more important than ever.”

Scholars and Practitioners

Reid Pauly, Research Assistant, Center for International Security and Cooperation (CISAC) at Stanford



Lesson: “Multilateralism is key.”

Essay: “One rarely hears scholars or policymakers cite the CMC as a success of multilateralism, but we would be wise to reflect on its importance during October 1962.

While hindsight can tell us that a naval blockade of Cuba was a good decision, recall that blockades constitute acts of war. The ExComm thus made two important decisions on October 22, 1962 regarding the blockade: (1) they softened the label to “quarantine” (also the term “blockade” brought back memories of 1948 Berlin); (2) they sought legal justification of the quarantine through the Organization of American States. Of course, the U.S. could have imposed a blockade without approval, but instead it aligned its decision with international norms by invoking the OAS charter’s right to take collective action in the face of an “armed attack or...an act of aggression that is not an armed attack” in the hemisphere. These nuanced decisions made it difficult for Khrushchev to justifiably interpret American actions as escalatory acts of war.

Furthermore, Adlai Stevenson’s presentation of photographic evidence to the UN Security Council legitimized American military mobilization by framing the crisis as an act of Soviet aggression in front of, as Stevenson said, “the court of world opinion.” The U.S. then made good use of UN channels to facilitate clear communication of messages to the Soviets, like specifications for the size of the quarantine zone.

These decisions, while minimized in the retelling of such a dramatic tale, were crucial to the successful receding of tensions. Multilateralism provides added benefits, such as creating a marketplace of policy ideas, testing the morality of alternatives, and the legitimating of threats and the use of force.

While there are many important lessons to learn from the dark days of October 1962, one we often ignore is that multilateralism is key.”

RUNNERS-UP and Their LESSONS

Grades 6-12

Marija Trajanoska, NOVA International School, Skopje, Macedonia

Lesson: “Avoidance of nuclear confrontation has no alternatives and therefore alternatives to nuclear confrontation should be sought; forethought leaders know that some decisions may as well be – final.”

Essay: “My lesson from the crisis is reduced to a universal truth that the world just cannot afford to resort to nuclear confrontation. All other lessons are secondary: no subsequent lesson holds any worth if reckless decisions lead to self-destruction.

Fifty years since the Cuban missile crisis, however, this universal truth is still not universal enough as the world continues to be terrified from the power of weapons for mass destruction. In 1962, key players took their time to think about the alternatives, see through what was not

obvious, and respond with foresight and leadership. Back then, people seemed to have gone back to their senses.

Today, 50 years of high technology and innovation in between, statesmen can still choose to appeal to their own reason to decide what decisions they make. Today, more than ever, leaders should be reminded that some decisions can only be made once and for all. Evidently, some human species-generated decisions may as well turn out to be truly and finitely – final.

So, statesmen should remember to seek creative solutions to the peace and war challenges of today, while honoring the lessons from the Cuban missile crisis and keeping consequences in perspective. A sense of urgency is due, of course, before we all face one nuclear crisis too many.”

Oliver Xie, Newton South High School, Newton, MA

Lesson: “Have a nuke to grind? Think again...”

Essay: “My lesson from The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 is that valuing pride and zero-sum mentality will only result in apocalyptic events. The engine that choo-choo’ed the Cold War to the Missile Crisis was pride. As Russia and the United States fought their zero-sum game of proxy wars that would later devastate Pakistan and create Al Qaeda, they were blinded by nationalism and pride. Had Russia and America come to cooperate earlier, hegemony and psychological, soft power would no longer be the current day criterion for success.

As such, American statesmen of today should learn that cooperation is the only path to a brighter tomorrow. Today’s Congress shows what happens when the quest for pride supersedes cooperation. The recent political deadlock is caused by statesmen who reject or pass bills before even reading them because they simply have no intention in letting the opposing party gain power. This zero-sum mentality cannot sustain itself over long periods of time without bipartisanship.

The scope of such a lesson should be further extended into foreign policy. Whether it be the conflicts with our frenemy, China, or the Middle East, statesmen must always recognize that countries can mutually benefit from diplomacy. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, the effective negotiations between RFK and Dobrynin were possible because they valued common ground, allowing them to set aside win-loss mentality and nationalistic pride for a desperate yet effective solution.

The Cuban Missile Crisis was not an issue of good versus evil. It stands now as a test of how far Humans would go before abandoning zero-sum mentality and pride. However, it shouldn’t take risking millions of lives before coming to an agreement. Find the common ground right from the beginning.”

General Public

Robert Walsh, Global Financial Crime Officer, AXA Group, New York, NY

Lesson: “In a democracy, the need for broad public support to engage in a dangerous confrontation can have lasting unintended foreign policy consequences. One example is foreign policy tunnel vision that can last for generations because of "accepted truths" trumpeted to justify the confrontation.”

Essay: “Since 1962 US foreign policy stewards have been hamstrung on Cuba, because so much patriotic capital was invested in villainizing Soviet Cuba and Fidel Castro. The martyrdom of JFK compounded this by making it unholy to question his taking us to the brink. It remains near-treasonous to suggest negotiations with Fidel Castro.

Two comparisons help make this argument: Vietnam and Japan.

While the Vietnam War traded on American patriotism in a similar way to the Missile Crisis, the success of that rallying cry was mixed, and petered out feebly at the end. Yet that enabled, in only 40 years, the US to make friends with the same regime in Vietnam as was in power at the end of that war.

Contrast that with Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The US patriotism necessarily invoked at that time, and since, has rendered it verboten in polite company to ask if perhaps the US should not have dropped those bombs. It is not politically astute to disagree with the notion that the use of such bombs "is justified in the right circumstances".

Today the US enjoys tremendous solidarity with the EU, the UN and other countries on international embargo programs regarding Iran, Syria, North Korea, and Sudan - but the US stands alone on Cuba. Not even our closest allies agree with the US sanctions on Cuba.

In 1962, in priming its population for a dangerous confrontation, the US painted itself into a corner with respect to future dealings with Cuba and Fidel Castro.”

Jacob Schroeder, Advertising Copyeditor in Chicago, IL

Lesson: “As a conflict develops, minor actors play the biggest roles.”

Essay: “A man who made one of the most remarkable decisions during the Cuban Missile Crisis did not have the famed name of John Kennedy or Nikita Khrushchev, but rather the unremarkable name of Vasili Arkhipov. As deputy commander of a Soviet submarine in need of oxygen and perilously encircled by the U.S. Navy, he urged his superior to take the vessel to the surface for air instead of engaging American warships with its armed nuclear torpedo in an attempt to flee.

What if Arkhipov had chose to say nothing? That alternative outcome is easy, yet horrific, to imagine. It is true, a single man smoking a cigarette can burn an entire parched forest and likewise, during crisis, one minor actor can effect major sequences.

While world leaders command in crises, they do not sail the ships or pull the triggers. Thus, it is imperative that statesmen be aware of minor actors in the background or better yet, in military terms, the minor actors on the ground -- be it generals or privates, diplomats or secretaries, or in today's interconnected world galvanized by social media, a single citizen -- and the roles that they play. Inevitably, they are bigger than one would surmise. Unfortunately, however, the name of an actor like Arkhipov will always live in obscurity under the shadow of actors named Kennedy or Khrushchev."

Scholars/Practitioners

LT Douglas Gates, Instructor, US Naval Academy, Annapolis, MD

Lesson: "A flexible and varied military force, including a strong navy, gives policymakers a wide range of response options."

Essay: "A few years before the Cuban Missile Crisis, the military underwent a significant debate to determine its post-war future. Would the advent of new technologies, specifically strategic bombers and nuclear weapons, make other weapons obsolete, or would there continue to be a role for the infantry and warships?"

The Cuban Missile Crisis demonstrated that continuing to equip the nation's military with a vast array of capabilities and warfare specialties was still valuable because it gave the president several options with which to respond to the situation. While the Air Force immediately demanded offensive air strikes and the Army suggested a ground invasion, the Navy provided a scaled response that sent an effective signal without the use of violence. A naval option kept Americans off of Cuban soil and out of immediate danger, and yet showed enough American resolve to convince the Soviets that the battle wasn't worth fighting. Because the American response was offshore and out of sight of the Cubans, it deescalated tensions while simultaneously applying pressure on Soviet leadership."

Dr. Christopher Bright, Staffer on Armed Services Committee, House of Representatives, Oakton, VA

Lesson: "Crisis management may require upending long-established military doctrine, plans, and policies."

Essay: "By the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, thousands of nuclear anti-aircraft weapons were deployed around dozens of cities and defense sites in the United States. These surface-to-air missiles and air-to-air arms existed because the large and lethal aerial blast they produced offered the greatest chance of destroying nuclear-laden attacking Soviet bombers. The military had the authority to use these weapons without presidential consultation if commanders believed an attack was underway. For five years, the widespread and ready expenditure of defensive nuclear

arms to counter a nuclear air raid had been the basis upon which air defense units had been trained, equipped, and operated.

The crisis spurred military leaders to make changes. The discovery of IL-28 bombers (erroneously believed to be conventionally armed) in Cuba induced quick preparations to guard against a non-nuclear strike on the southeastern U.S. Existing arrangements, with the possibility of defensive nuclear expenditure, dangerously raised the risk of escalation. This was so, especially if nuclear use resulted from a lower-level decision, and even if it occurred over the United States.

Therefore, despite objections from the North American Air Defense Command, air defense forces protecting Florida were prohibited from using nuclear arms. Unlike units at permanent emplacements in other states, the Army antiaircraft battery hurriedly established near Miami was equipped only with conventional missiles. Similarly, Air Force fighters flown to Florida did not carry nuclear weapons like those fitted to the balance of the interceptor force. These actions required overcoming many challenges, including instituting new directives and obtaining sufficient munitions.

The new arrangements contravened long-standing procedures. However, leaders thought they were necessary. Rather than being rigidly devoted to existing plans, officials acutely perceived their limitations and deftly ensured that alternatives were properly developed and implemented.”