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Khrushchev and the Cuban Missile Crisis

William Taubman, a Professor of Political Science at Amherst College and a Senior Fellow at the Harriman Institute last autumn, spoke to Institute faculty and students December 10 on Nikita Khrushchev's role in the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Three vital questions structured the discussion: "Why did Khrushchev put the missiles in? What led him to think he could get away with it? And why did he pull them out?" Taubman sought to give a survey of what is currently known about the crisis, including new theories which have come out of a conference he took part in last year at the Kennedy School for Government at Harvard University. The conference was attended by Fyodor Burlatsky, a Khrushchev speech writer, by Sergo Mikoyan, son of Khrushchev's closest Politburo colleague, Anastas Mikoyan, and by one other Soviet official.

Taubman discussed conventional Western views of the events of October, 1962, went over Soviet revelations and examined new information available on Khrushchev. He noted that there are two levels at which the questions can be answered. The first level involves Khrushchev as "a rational actor" in the situation; the second shows him as "a non-rational actor." The former depicts a "clear and recognizable relationship between the ends and means of foreign policy," while the latter supposes that "a decision maker is driven by imperatives deep in domestic politics—or deep in the psyche of the individual decision-maker."

The Rational Actor

The classic "rational actor" explanations of Khrushchev's role assume a direct connection between motives and actions. Thus he put the missiles in to "get a quick fix for the problem of strategic inferiority," or to set the stage for a Berlin settlement, or to defend Cuba (the reason Khrushchev himself gave but which Westerners have not taken seriously), or "as part of a grand design to deprive both Germany and China of nuclear weapons" through a U.S.-U.S.S.R. settlement.

The General Secretary thought he could get away with placing missiles in Cuba because the rules of the Cold War

allowed it, because the United States had put missiles along his border in Turkey, or because he saw President John F. Kennedy as weak. Khrushchev decided to withdraw the arms because the Americans had "turned the tables on him by confronting him with a *fait accompli*" (rather than the Soviets showing up the U.S. with a *fait accompli* in the form of constructed missile bases), because he was surprised by the quarantine and by support for the U.S. position from the Organization of American States, and because of "apparent American conventional and strategic superiority."

The Non-Rational Actor

But there are "deeper answers" to all of these questions which relate more to Khrushchev's own mode of thinking. Regarding the first question Taubman stated that "various writers, such as Carl Linden and Richard Ned Lebow, have pointed to the answer I have in mind. This answer is that Khrushchev had a deep need for a victory—any victory. He was in trouble at home; his policies were failing and his political power was eroding. If not Cuba, he would have seized on something else." Thus the decision to put the missiles in Cuba was not a "coolly, rationally-conceived decision," but a "desperate, impulsive improvisation." Lebow emphasizes Khrushchev's emotions overcoming his thinking; the Soviet leader's desperate need for a victory led to "self-deception" and "reckless confidence in what turned out to be just another one of his harebrained schemes."

How do these explanations relate to deterrence and crisis management? "The first level answers are more corrigible and less somber in their implications," Taubman noted. "First level answers refer to misperceptions which did occur [between the superpowers] but need not have occurred and could be avoided in some future situation." Second level answers are far more serious since they "suggest that if your adversary is desperate enough, then even if you have the strength and resolve, he may proceed to do what you are trying to deter anyway." This is a fundamental contradiction of deterrence theory.

At the Kennedy School conference, the Soviet participants said that Khrushchev's primary aim was to defend Cuba from the United States. The Soviets also mentioned as secondary motives the desire to rectify strategic inferiority and that "he was trying to buttress his domestic position." They characterized his actions as "impulsive" and "not thought through." But, they said, he soon realized his mistake and "from the very moment he got caught with his hand in the cookie jar" was looking for a settlement.

Khrushchev's World

Professor Taubman proceeded to outline his own "map" of Nikita Khrushchev's world. He emphasized that "Khrushchev was a reformer—erratic and inconsistent,

but a reformer nonetheless. Yet as he discovered and as Gorbachev has also discovered, this is not an easy task. The problems he faced were intractable." The decision to put the missiles in Cuba was a "last desperate attempt to achieve the kind of success that had eluded him at home and abroad until then."

There was also Khrushchev's political situation. "It is wrong to focus on opposition to his political *power*. It was his *authority*, or his own sense of his authority, the way he was viewed, that was eroding." The doubts about Khrushchev did not come necessarily from the Politburo, but from the elite and the mass public. By putting missiles in Cuba he was seeking a victory "to bolster his authority at home." And international factors played a part, since Khrushchev believed that it was easier to be successful in foreign policy than domestic policy. But this strategy backfired when international relations "proved to be as intractable as domestic problems."

Khrushchev's Personality

Khrushchev's personality helps to explain why he was in such trouble at home in 1962. It wasn't just that he faced

major domestic problems but that his "erratic, impulsive style had made them worse." The Soviet leader was "personally mortified at what was happening" during the missile crisis. His image, which was vital to him, was at risk. Placing the missiles in Cuba was a "quintessential Khrushchevian move — a big, reckless gamble, an attempt to achieve a miracle on the cheap."

Taubman concluded by saying, "on the political level and reform dimension, I'm struck by the similarity between Khrushchev and Gorbachev." Gorbachev is another reformer coming up against the "problems of Soviet reality and the resistance that the Soviet system poses to change." But he added that "the international situation is not nearly as desperate today." And the personal dimension is not similar. Taubman believes that Khrushchev was unique and that no other leader in Soviet history would have put missiles in Cuba, or taken them out so fast. Therefore, "we should not expect another Cuban Missile Crisis around the corner."

Reported by Paul Lerner with assistance from Robert Monyak

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