**WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #11**

**JFK Announces Cuban Blockade during Missile Crisis**

The climactic Cold War confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union occurred in October 1962. Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev posed another challenge to President John F. Kennedy and the United States – this time ninety miles off the coast of Florida. Kennedy’s unwillingness to commit the forces necessary to overthrow Fidel Castro during the Bay of Pigs fiasco in April 1961 as well as Kennedy’s acquiescence to the erection of the Berlin Wall by the Communist regime in East Germany during mid-August, 1961, seemed to signify a failure of will on the part of the American government. The Russians apparently reasoned that they could install missiles in Cuba with relative impunity. Their motives were to protect Cuba from another American-backed invasion, which Castro believed to be imminent and to redress the strategic imbalance caused by the presence of American missiles in Turkey aimed at the Soviet Union.

American officials feared that Russian missiles in Cuba would come from a direction not covered by radar systems and arrive too quickly for warning. More important to Kennedy was the psychological effect of the United States yielding to a Soviet presence on its doorstep. This might weaken the credibility of the American deterrent for Europeans and demoralize anti-Castro elements in Latin America. At the same time, the installation of missiles served Khrushchev’s purpose of demonstrating his toughness to both Chinese and Russian critics of his earlier advocacy of peaceful coexistence. But he misjudged the American response.

On October 14, 1962, American intelligence experts discovered from photographs made on high-altitude U-2 flights that Russian missile sites were under construction in Cuba. From the beginning, the Kennedy administration decided that they had to be removed. The only question was how. In a series of secret meetings the Executive Committee of the National Security Council narrowed the options down to a choice between a “surgical” air strike and a blockade of Cuba. Kennedy and his advisors opted for a blockade, which was carefully disguised by the euphemism “quarantine,” since a blockade was technically an act of war. This policy offered the advantage of forcing the Soviets to shoot first, if it came to that, and left open the further options of stronger action.

Monday, October 22, began one of the most anxious weeks in world history. On that day, first to members of Congress and then in a somber televised address to the American people, Kennedy revealed that the United States reconnaissance planes had spotted Soviet-built bases for intermediate-range ballistic missiles in Cuba. Some of those weapons had already been installed, and more were on the way. Kennedy also announced that the United States would impose a “quarantine on all offensive military equipment on its way to Cuba.

Tensions grew as Khrushchev blustered that Kennedy had pushed humankind “to the abyss of a world missile-nuclear war.” Soviet ships, he declared, would ignore the quarantine. The world held its breath waiting to see if the conflict would escalate into war. On Wednesday, October 24, five Soviet ships, presumably with missiles aboard, stopped short of the quarantine line. The next day they turned back. The world watched as the two nations had gone to the brink of war. But Kennedy’s threat to intercept Soviet missile shipments with American naval vessels had forced the Cold War adversary to back down. On October 27 an agent of the Soviet embassy privately approached an American television reporter with a proposal for an agreement. Russia would withdraw the missiles in return for a public pledge by the United States not to invade Cuba. The reporter was asked to relay the idea to the White House. Secretary of State Dean Rusk sent back word that the Kennedy administration was interested but told the newscaster, “Remember, when you report this, that eyeball to eyeball, they blinked first.”

That same evening Kennedy received two messages from Khrushchev. The first message repeated the original offer, and the second one demanded, in addition, the removal of American missiles from Turkey. The two messages likely reflected divided counsels in the Kremlin. Ironically, Kennedy had already ordered removal of the outmoded missiles in Turkey, but he refused now to act under the gun. Instead, he followed Robert Kennedy’s suggestion that he respond favorably to the first letter and ignore the second. On Sunday, October 28th, Khrushchev agreed to remove the missiles from Cuba and added a conciliatory invitation: “We should like to continue the exchange of views on the prohibition of atomic and thermonuclear weapons, general disarmament, and other problems relating to the relaxation of international tension.”

After a week of tense negotiations, both sides, therefore, had made concessions. The risk of nuclear war, greater during the Cuban missile crisis than at any other time in the Cold War, prompted a slight thaw in U.S.-Soviet relations. In the aftermath of the crisis, tension between the two nations somewhat subsided. President Kennedy, aware that Khrushchev had problems with his own hawks in the Kremlin, cautioned his associates against any gloating over the favorable settlement. Kennedy began to explore in correspondence the opening provided by the premier’s invitation. Several symbolic steps were taken to relax tensions: 1) an agreement to sell Russia surplus wheat; 2) the installation of a “hot line” telephone between Washington and Moscow to provide instant contact between the heads of government; and 3) the removal of obsolete missiles from Turkey, Italy, and Britain. As national security advisor McGeorge Bundy put it, both sides were chastened by “having come so close to the edge.”

On June 10 1963, the president announced in a speech at American University that direct discussions with the Soviets would soon begin. He called upon the American nation to reexamine its attitude toward peace, the Soviet Union, and the Cold War. Those discussions resulted in a treaty with Russia and Britain to stop nuclear testing in the atmosphere. The treaty, ratified in September 1963, did not provide for onsite inspection, nor did it ban underground testing, which continued. But the treaty promised to end the dangerous pollution of the atmosphere with radioactivity. The treaty was an important symbolic and substantive move toward detente. Kennedy emphasized that “a journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.”