

## WALTER CRONKITE – IMAGE #18

On December 31, 1958, after three years of guerrilla warfare, Fidel Castro made his final push to overthrow the regime of Fulgencio Batista, the right-wing dictator of Cuba. Following a day of fighting in the provincial capital of Santa Clara, Batista's forces were defeated by the rebels. More than that, Batista had lost the support of the United States government.

As a result, one day later, on January 1, 1959, Batista fled Cuba for the Dominican Republic, and Castro declared a successful revolution. During the following week, a new government was formed as Castro and his soldiers entered Havana. At the age of 32, Castro assumed the post of commander-in-chief and seized power throughout the country. In their struggle against Batista, Castro's forces had enjoyed the support of many Americans, who hoped for a new day of democratic government in Cuba.

Just days after Batista had fled the country and Castro had assumed control, American entertainer Ed Sullivan was given the opportunity to fly down to the Caribbean and interview the new leader of Cuba. The meeting had been arranged by Jules Dubois, the Latin American correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune*. Dubois had close ties to the Cuban revolutionary leader. Upon landing in Havana, Sullivan and his cameraman, Andrew Laszlo, drove three hours by car through what the American celebrity described as "a real war scene," to the city of Matanzas on the northern shore of the island. On January 11, 1959, Sullivan interviewed Castro, who talked about the changes that he would bring to Cuba. Following the interview, which was seen on his own Sunday night entertainment show broadcast by CBS, Sullivan seemed optimistic about the future of Castro and Cuba.

On April 15, 1959, four months after leading a successful revolution, Castro began an 11-day visit to the United States. His visit came at a time when tensions between his regime and the American government were rising steadily. Castro neither requested nor accepted an official government invitation for his trip to Washington, D.C., and New York City. Instead, he came at the invitation of what was then called the American Society of Newspaper Editors. During his stay, Castro placed a wreath on George Washington's grave, toured the Bronx Zoo, ate hot dogs and hamburgers at Yankee Stadium, and generally made a big media splash. Wherever he went, the bearded Cuban leader invariably wore his trademark rumpled green fatigues.

President Dwight Eisenhower snubbed him, although Castro did meet with Vice President Richard Nixon and acting Secretary of State Christian Herter. Nixon later said he came away from the meeting with the conclusion that Castro was "either incredibly naive about communism or under communist discipline – my guess is the former." On the other hand, after meeting with Castro, former Secretary of State Dean Acheson called him "the first democrat of Latin America."

**In a speech in New York to the Council on Foreign Relations, Castro said that he would not beg the United States for economic assistance. He finally stormed out of the session, professing his anger at some of the questions raised by the audience. Relations between the United States and Castro deteriorated rapidly after the April visit.**

**Over the next few months events took a dramatically different turn. When American television covered trials and executions conducted by the victorious Castro, promising hopes were dashed. Staged like a Roman holiday before crowds of howling spectators, the trials vented anger against Batista's corrupt officials and police but offered little in the way of legal procedure or proof. Moreover, Castro planned a social revolution and opposed the widespread foreign control of the Cuban economy.**

**When Castro began programs of land redistribution and nationalization of foreign-owned property, relations with the United States worsened. Some observers believed, however, that, by rejecting Castro's requests for loans and other help, the American government lost a chance to influence the direction of the Cuban revolution. By acting on the assumption that Communists already had the upper hand in Castro's movement, the Eisenhower administration may have ensured that fact. Most Americans, however, learned that they had been duped. Castro soon admitted that he was, indeed, a strongly committed Communist. He soon became the greatest thorn in the side of Eisenhower.**

**Castro showed little reluctance to accept the Communist embrace. In 1960 he entered a trade agreement to swap Cuban sugar for oil and machinery from the Soviet Union. Then, after Cuba had seized three British-American oil refineries that refused to process Soviet oil, Eisenhower sharply cut the quota for Cuban sugar imports to the United States. In response, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev warned that any military intervention in Cuba would encounter Russian rockets. The United States next suspended imports of Cuban sugar and embargoed most shipments of anything to Cuba. One of Eisenhower's final acts as President was to suspend diplomatic relations with Cuba on January 3, 1961. In the hope of creating "some kind of non-dictatorial 'third force'" in Cuba – neither supportive of Castro or Batista – Eisenhower authorized the CIA to begin training a force of Cuban refugees (some of them former Castro stalwart supporters) for a new revolution.**

**But the final decision on the use of this force rested with the next President, John F. Kennedy. Although he had made the existence of a "missile gap" a major part of his presidential campaign in 1960, Kennedy learned that the United States remained far ahead of the Soviets in nuclear weaponry. He also discovered that Eisenhower had a plan in the works for a CIA operation training 1,400 anti-Castro Cubans for an invasion of their homeland. Determined to keep Cuba out of the Soviet orbit, Kennedy followed through on those plans to dispatch Cuban exiles to foment an anti-Castro uprising. The Joint Chiefs of Staff assured Kennedy that the plan was feasible in theory. Diplomatic advisors predicted that the invasion would inspire Cubans on the island to rebel against Castro. Two years to the day after Castro's visit to the United States, Kennedy put into motion Operation Zapata, the CIA plan to oust Castro. In retrospect, it is clear that the scheme, poorly planned and poorly executed, had little chance of succeeding. The invaders were ill-**

prepared for their task. On landing at Cuba's Bay of Pigs on April 17, 1961, the force was brutally crushed by Castro's troops in three days and 1,200 men were captured. A *New York Times* columnist lamented that the United States "looked like fools to our friends, rascals to our enemies, and incompetents to the rest."

It was hardly an auspicious way for the new president to demonstrate his mastery of foreign policy. Kennedy had the good sense to reject CIA pleas for an American air strike. Accepting defeat, Kennedy went before the American people and took full responsibility for the fiasco. He said sadly, "Victory has a thousand fathers, but defeat is an orphan." The coup attempt proved to be a political and military disaster, precipitating a shakeup of the CIA.

The climactic Cold War confrontation came in October, 1962. Once again it involved Castro's Cuba, ninety miles off the coast of Florida. Kennedy's unwillingness to commit the forces necessary to overthrow Castro seemed to signify a failure of will to the Russians, who apparently reasoned that they could install missiles in Cuba with relative impunity. Soviet 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 American acquiescence 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 both to 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 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. They opted for a blockade, which was carefully disguised by the euphemism "quarantine," since a blockade was technically an act of war. It 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 President Kennedy announced to members of Congress and, then in a somber televised address to the American people, that United States reconnaissance planes had spotted Soviet-built bases for intermediate-range ballistic missiles in Cuba. Some of those weapons were already installed, and more were on the way. Kennedy 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.” The premier declared that Soviet ships would ignore the quarantine. As the world held its breath waiting to see if the conflict would escalate into war, five Soviet ships, presumably with missiles aboard, on Wednesday, October 24<sup>th</sup>, stopped short of the quarantine line. On October 25<sup>th</sup> the ships turned back. The next day 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 repeating the original offer and the second demanding in addition the removal of American missiles from Turkey. The two messages reflected divided opinions 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 28<sup>th</sup>, Khrushchev agreed to remove the missiles 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 made concessions. Kennedy pledged not to invade Cuba, and Khrushchev promised to dismantle the missile bases in Cuba. 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 American-Soviet relations. National security advisor McGeorge Bundy said that both sides were chastened by “having come so close to the edge.” Kennedy, aware that Khrushchev had problems with his own hawks in the Kremlin, cautioned his associates against any gloating over the favorable settlement and began to explore in correspondence the opening provided by the Soviet premier’s invitation. Several symbolic steps were taken to relax tensions: an agreement to sell Russia surplus wheat; the installation of a “hot line” telephone between Washington, D.C., and Moscow to provide instant contact between the heads of government; and the removal of obsolete missiles from Turkey, Italy, and Britain.

On June 10, 1963, President Kennedy announced in a speech at American University that direct discussions with the Soviets would soon begin. He called upon the 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 it promised to end the dangerous pollution of the atmosphere with radioactivity. The treaty was an important symbolic and substantive move toward detente. Kennedy put it this way: “A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.”

**Meanwhile, during the six years after Castro seized power in 1959, an estimated 180,000 people fled Cuba for the United States. Cuban refugees soon constituted the third largest group of Spanish-speaking immigrants in this country. The Cuban refugee community grew so rapidly that it turned Miami into a cosmopolitan, bilingual city almost overnight. Unlike other urban migrants, the Cubans of Miami quickly prospered, in large part because they had arrived with money and middle-class skills.**

**Political tensions between Washington, D.C, and Havana continue to this day – over 55 years after Castro emerged victorious in his revolution in Cuba. That island nation remains under Communist control only ninety miles away from the United States.**