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Nation: The Showdown

For days and weeks, refugees and intelligence sources within Cuba had insisted that the Soviet Union was equipping its Caribbean satellite with missiles, manned by Russians, that could carry nuclear destruction to the U.S. But the reports were fragmentary and sometimes contradictory. And U.S. reconnaissance planes, photographing Cuba from the Yucatan Channel to the Windward Passage, could detect no such buildup. President Kennedy was not yet persuaded to take decisive action.

On Oct. 10 came aerial films with truly worrisome signs. They showed roads being slashed through tall timber, Russian-made tents mushrooming in remote places. The order went out to photograph Cuba mountain by mountain, field by field and, if possible, yard by yard.

Magic Pictures.

For four long days, Hurricane Ella kept the planes on the ground. Finally, on Sunday, Oct. 14, Navy fighter pilots collected the clinching evidence. Flying as low as 200 ft., they made a series of passes over Cuba with their cameras whirring furiously. They returned with thousands of pictures—and the photographs showed that Cuba, almost overnight, had been transformed into a bristling missile base.

As if by magic, thick woods had been torn down, empty fields were clustered with concrete mixing plants, fuel tanks and mess halls. Chillingly clear to the expert eye were some 40 slim, 52-ft., medium-range missiles, many of them already angled up on their mobile launchers and pointed at the U.S. mainland. With an estimated range of 1,200 miles, these missiles, armed with one-megaton warheads, could reach Houston. St. Louis—or Washington. The bases were located at about ten spots, including Sagua la Grande and Remedios on the northern coast, and San Cristobal and Guanajay on the western end of the island (see map above, and pictures on following eight pages). Under construction were a half-dozen bases for 2,500-mile missiles, which could smash U.S. cities from coast to coast. In addition, the films showed that the Russians had moved in at least 25 twin-jet Ilyushin-28 bombers that could carry nuclear bombs.

At Once.

Throughout Monday, Oct. 15, the experts pored over the pictures. There could be no doubt. Early on Oct. 16 a telephone call went to CIA Director John McCone, who was in Seattle mourning the death there of his stepson. It was 4 a.m. on the Coast, but McCone came awake in shocked realization of the grave impact of the news. When he had heard the last detail, he ordered the pictures taken to the President at once.

While the pictures were being prepared for the President, CIA officials outlined the information by phone to McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's adviser on national security. Bundy hurried out of his office in the west wing of the White House, rode the tiny elevator up to the President's living quarters on the second floor, and walked into Kennedy's bedroom. The President, who was dressed and had just finished breakfast, put down the morning papers and listened. His expression did not change as Bundy spun out the startling story.

At 10:30 a.m.. Kennedy first saw the pictures of the missiles. At 11:45 he sat down in his rocking chair for a conference with the top members of his Administration that began the most crucial week of his term in office. It was a week of intensive analysis and planning, a week of round-robin

meetings at State and the Pentagon—and above all, a week of decisions of surpassing importance to the U.S. and the world today.

Why? Throughout that week, U.S. planes kept Cuba under their photographic magnifying glass. Air Force RB-475 and U25 prowled high over the island. Navy jets swooped low along the coastlines.

With the passing of each day, each hour, the missile buildup burgeoned. In speed and scope it went far beyond anything the U.S. had believed possible. By conservative estimate, the Soviet Union must have been planning it in detail for at least a year, poured at least \$1 billion into its determined effort.

But why? That was the question that kept pounding at President Kennedy. He knew all too well that the Soviet Union had long had the U.S. under the Damoclean sword of intercontinental ballistic missiles in the Russian homeland. There thus seemed little real need for such a massive effort in Cuba. Yet, as Kennedy pondered and as he talked long and earnestly with his top Kremlinologists—among them former U.S. Ambassadors to Moscow Llewellyn Thompson and Charles Bohlen—some of the answers began to emerge. More and more in Kennedy's mind, the Cuban crisis became linked with impending crisis in Berlin—and with an all-out Khrushchev effort to upset the entire power balance of the cold war.

"Chip" Bohlen, about to leave for Paris as U.S. ambassador there, supplied a significant clue. Talking to Kennedy, he recalled a Lenin adage that Khrushchev is fond of quoting: If a man sticks out a bayonet and strikes mush, he keeps on pushing. But when he hits cold steel, he pulls back.

The Theory.

Khrushchev's Cuban adventure seemed just such a probe. He hoped to present the U.S. with a fait accompli, carried out while the U.S. was totally preoccupied—or so, at least, Khrushchev supposed—with its upcoming elections. If he got away with it, he could presume that the Kennedy Administration was so weak and fearful that he could take over Berlin with impunity.

The theory gained credence when, on the very day that Kennedy learned about the missiles in Cuba, Khrushchev did his best to cover up the operation by assuring U.S. Ambassador Foy D. Kohler during a relaxed, three-hour talk that the arms going to Cuba were purely defensive. Two days later, Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko showed up in the White House with the same soothing message. But all was not bland during Gromyko's two-hour visit. Noting that he knew Kennedy appreciated frank talk, Gromyko declared that U.S. stubbornness had "compelled" Russia to plan to settle the Berlin crisis unilaterally after the Nov. 6 elections.

Khrushchev already had requested a November meeting with Kennedy. As Kennedy came to see it, Khrushchev planned to say something like this: We are going to go right ahead and take Berlin, and just in case you are rash enough to resist, I can now inform you that we have several scores of megatons zeroed in on you from Cuba.

If such a scene would hardly be dared by novelists, it was well within Khrushchev's flair for macabre melodrama. In this baleful light, it became completely clear to Kennedy that the U.S. had no course but to squash the Soviet missile buildup. But how? In his long, soul-trying talks with Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, State Secretary Dean Rusk, the CIA's McCone and other top civilian and military officials, the plan was arduously worked out. Direct invasion of Cuba was discarded—for the time being. So was a surprise bombing attack on the missile sites. Both methods might cause Khrushchev to strike back instinctively and plunge the world into thermonuclear war. More than

anything else, Kennedy wanted to give Khrushchev time to understand that he was at last being faced up to—and time to think about it.

The Answer.

The best answer seemed to be "quarantine"—a Navy blockade against ships carrying offensive weapons to Cuba. That would give the Premier time and food for thought. It would offer the U.S. flexibility for future, harsher action. It seemed the solution most likely to win support from the U.S.'s NATO allies and the Organization of American States. And it confronted the Soviet Union with a showdown where it is weakest and the U.S. is mighty: on the high seas. For the U.S. Navy, under Chief of Naval Operations George Anderson, 55, has no rival.

To Anderson went the job of setting up the blockade with ships and planes and making it work. While the Bay of Pigs fiasco had involved heltery-skeltery White House amateurs, now the pros were taking over. Anderson worked closely with Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Maxwell Taylor and with McNamara, who had been eating and sleeping, in the Pentagon.

Speed was vital. Already plowing through the Atlantic were at least 25 Soviet or satellite cargo ships, many of them bringing more missiles and bombers for Cuba. They were shadowed by Navy planes from bases along the East Coast.

Now, under Anderson's direction, U.S. warships prepared to intercept them.

All this took place in an eerie atmosphere of total secrecy in a notably voluble Administration. As part of the security cover, Kennedy took off on a scheduled campaign tour. But by Saturday, Oct. 20, he knew he could stay away from Washington no longer. Press Secretary Pierre Salinger announced that the President had a cold. Kennedy, a dutiful deceiver muffled in hat and coat, climbed aboard his jet and sped back to Washington.

Roundup.

On the morning of Monday, Oct. 22, Kennedy worked over the TV speech that would break the news to the nation that night. The order went out to round up congressional leaders—wherever they were—and fly them back to Washington. The Air Force brought House Speaker John McCormack from his home in Boston, House Republican Leader Charles Halleck from a pheasant-hunting trip in South Dakota, Senate Minority

Whip Thomas Kuchel from a handshaking visit to a San Diego factory.

House Democratic Whip Hale Boggs was fishing in the Gulf of Mexico when an Air Force plane flew over his boat and dropped into the water a plastic bottle attached to a red flag. The message in the bottle told Boggs to phone the White House. His boat pulled over to a nearby offshore oil rig. The Congressman donned a life jacket, swung by rope to a spindly ladder, and climbed 150 feet to the rig's platform, where a helicopter was awaiting him. At an airbase on the mainland, they crammed Boggs into a flight suit, strapped him into a two-seat jet trainer, clapped an oxygen mask on his face, took away the sandwich he had been clutching, and rocketed him back to Washington.

Dissent.

While the Senators and Congressmen were converging on Washington, Kennedy called in his Cabinet members. Some of the members still did not know what was going on. Silently they filed in. Silently they listened to the briefing, and silently they departed. Next came the congressional leaders.

They studied the enlargements of the missile pictures and, in the words of one, their blood ran cold. The President then said simply: "We have decided to take action."

When he was done outlining the quarantine plan, Kennedy asked for comments —and found himself opposed by two of his fellow Democrats. Sitting directly across from the President, Georgia's Richard Russell, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, told the President that blockade was not enough and came too late. Russell was for immediate invasion. He argued that the U.S. was still paying for the Bay of Pigs debacle, so why fiddle around any longer? Russell was supported, surprisingly, by Arkansas' William Fulbright, chairman of the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee, who had led the fight in April 1961 against the Bay of Pigs invasion.

Kennedy turned away the criticism without anger, stuck by his decisions, and even managed to send the legislators away laughing. Said the President to Minnesota's Hubert Humphrey as the meeting broke up: "If I'd known the job was this tough, I wouldn't have trounced you in West Virginia." Said the Senator to the President: "If I hadn't known it was this tough, I never would have let you beat me."

"Judge for Yourself."

Throughout that afternoon, Cadillacs swept through the magnificent October sunshine bearing foreign diplomats on urgent summons to the State Department. Russia's Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin smiled affably at newsmen as he strolled into the building. After the usual pleasantries, Rusk handed Dobrynin a copy of Kennedy's speech and a letter to Khrushchev. Dobrynin emerged 25 minutes later, his shoulders sagging and his face the color of fresh putty. When reporters asked him what had happened, he snapped: "You can judge for yourself soon enough."

The afternoon papers had carried the announcement that the President would address the nation that night on a matter of the "highest national urgency"—and all America seemed to be watching as Kennedy went on television. It was a grim speech, delivered by a grim President.

The U.S., he said, had two goals: "To prevent the use of these missiles against this or any other country, and to secure their withdrawal or elimination from the Western Hemisphere."

Kennedy explained that the quarantine would cut off offensive weapons from Cuba without stopping "the necessities of life." He warned that "any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere" would be regarded by the U.S. as an attack by the Soviet Union and would bring full-scale nuclear reprisal against Russia.

Shotguns & Beans.

There were some Nervous Nelly reactions in the U.S. The stock market, hardly a symbol of U.S. backbone, dropped sharply next day. In Tampa, sporting-goods stores reported a run on shotguns and rifles. In Dallas, a store reported brisk sales" Of an emergency ration pack of biscuits, malted-milk tablets, chocolate, pemmican and canned water. In Los Angeles, a Civil Defense warning that retail stores would be closed for five days in the event of war or a national emergency sent housewives stampeding into the supermarkets. In one, hand-to-hand combat broke out over the last can of pork and beans. Said North Hollywood Grocer Sam Goldstad: "They're nuts. One lady's working four shopping carts at once. Another lady bought twelve packages of detergents. What's she going to do, wash up after the bomb?" Yet for all such transient evidences of panic, the U.S. was solidly behind Kennedy. As he himself had discovered on his election-year forays around the nation, it was the overriding wish of almost all Americans to "do something" about Cuba.

Around the world, U.S. forces braced for combat. Under Admiral Anderson's orders, the Navy's Polaris submarines prowled the seas on courses known only to a handful of ranking officials. The Air Force went on a full-scale alert, put a fleet of B-52 bombers into the air, dispersed hundreds of B-47 bombers from their normal bases to dozens of scattered airfields. In West Berlin, the Army's contingent of 5,000 went on maneuvers.

Salty Pride.

As for the blockade itself, it was precisely directed by Anderson working in his blue-carpeted Pentagon office bedecked with pictures of historic Navy battles. Several times a day he briefed McNamara, red-eyed from lack of sleep, in front of huge wall maps. He signed countless cables—pink paper for secret, green for top secret.

As a professional—and articulate—Navyman, Anderson took particular pride in the fact that the confrontation with Russia was taking place on salt water. Said he: "The sea still does provide a measure of space, if two thermonuclear powers would stand off against each other. In general, we're seeing the great importance of sea power." Another way of putting it was that the Navy's show provided a maximum amount of power with a minimum amount of friction. At all times, Anderson delegated heavy responsibility to his subordinates—most of all to an old friend he called Denny. This was Admiral Robert Lee Dennison, 61, who is both Commander in Chief of the U.S. Atlantic Fleet and NATO's Supreme Allied Commander, Atlantic.

Ships, Planes & Subs.

As the Russian ships headed toward Cuba on their collision course with the blockading force. Dennison walked to a wall map in his Norfolk headquarters and outlined the Navy's problem. "The approaches to Cuba are pretty well funneled down. Most ships headed for Cuba come out of the North Atlantic and have to come through the Bahamas or the Lesser Antilles, and both the Bahamas and the Lesser Antilles have relatively few channels. We don't really have any headaches. We have plenty of force. There are a lot of ships out there."

So there were. They belonged to Task Force 136, commanded by Vice Admiral Alfred G. Ward, 53, a gunnery specialist who has developed into one of the Navy's most respected strategists. Under Ward were approximately 80 ships. In reserve was the nuclear-powered carrier Enterprise. Navy P2V, P5M and P3V patrol planes, flying out of bases all along the East Coast and Florida, and from carriers encircling Cuba (see map), put the Soviet ships under constant surveillance within 800 miles of Cuba.

Anderson's orders were clear. All Cuba-bound ships entering the blockade area would be commanded to heave to. If one failed to halt, a shot would be fired across its bow. If it kept on, the Navy would shoot to sink. If it stopped, a boarding party would search it for offensive war materials. If it had none, it would be allowed to go on to Cuba. But if it carried proscribed cargo, the ship would be required to turn away to a non-Cuban port of its captain's own choosing. Similarly, Cuba-bound cargo aircraft would be intercepted and forced to land at a U.S. airport for inspection, or be shot down. As for Soviet submarines, they would be sought out by radar and sonar. U.S. forces would signal an unidentified sub by dropping some "harmless" depth charges while radioing the code letters IDKCA, the international signal meaning "rise to the surface." Any submarine that ignored the order would be depth-charged for keeps.

Although there was a strong national sense of relief when Kennedy finally announced that he was "doing something" about Cuba, tension mounted almost unbearably in the hours that followed. What

would happen? Would Khrushchev press the thermonuclear button? On Tuesday night, Kennedy signed a proclamation outlining the quarantine. The first indication of Russia's reaction came when a few Soviet freighters changed course away from Cuba. But others steamed on, and the moment of showdown came closer.

A day and a half after proclamation of the blockade, the Navy intercepted the Soviet tanker Bucharest. Oil had been left off the proscribed list because the Administration did not want to draw the line on an item that might be a necessity of life for Cuba. The tanker was allowed to pass without inspection.

"No Incidents."

Sixteen hours later, about 180 miles northeast of the Bahamas, the destroyers John R. Pierce and Joseph P. Kennedy Jr.* took up stations behind a Russian-chartered Lebanese freighter named the Marucla (built in Baltimore during World War II). At daybreak on Friday, in a scene reminiscent of the 19th century, the Kennedy lowered away its whaleboat and sent a boarding party aboard the Marucla, which cooperatively provided a ladder. Wearing dress whites, Lieut. Commander Dwight G. Osborne, executive officer of the Pierce, and Lieut. Commander Kenneth C. Reynolds, the exec of the Kennedy, led the party aboard the ship. After politely serving his visitors coffee, the Greek captain allowed them the run of his ship. The cargo turned out to be sulphur, paper rolls, twelve trucks, and truck parts.

"No incidents," radioed the boarding party. "No prohibited material in evidence. All papers in order. Marucla cleared to proceed course 260. speed 9 knots to Havana via Providence Channel. Maintaining surveillance."

While the Marucla was being searched, a far more important event of the blockade was happening elsewhere in the Atlantic. After days of steaming toward Cuba and closer and closer to the Navy's line of ships, the remaining Soviet arms-carrying merchantmen were heading for home. Khrushchev had decided not to collide with the U.S. Navy on the high seas. The blockade was a success.

Still, there could be no sense of relaxation. A way had to be found to get those already installed missiles out of Cuba. The U.S. effort was two-pronged: one was diplomatic, the other military.

Talk.

On the diplomatic front, Adlai Stevenson urged Acting U.N. Secretary-General U Thant to impress upon the Russians the fact that the missiles must go. Making prompt action even more necessary was the fact that the Navy's twice-daily, low-level reconnaissance flights showed that the Russians were speeding up the erection of missile sites.

While the talks with U Thant were going on, Khrushchev suddenly proposed his cynical swap: he would pull his missiles out of Cuba if Kennedy pulled his out of Turkey. His long, rambling memorandum was remarkable for its wheedling tone—that of a cornered bully. Wrote Khrushchev: "The development of culture, art and the raising of living standards, this is the most noble and necessary field of competition . . . Our aim was and is to help Cuba, and nobody can argue about the humanity of our impulse."

Force.

Kennedy bluntly rejected the missile swap and increased the speed of the U.S. military buildup. The President considered choking Cuba's economy with a complete blockade. To knock the missiles out

in a hurry, the White House discussed sabotage, commando raids, naval bombardment or a pinpoint bombing attack. And there was the strong possibility that invasion might finally be required.

Squadrons of supersonic F-100s and F-106s zoomed into Florida's Patrick and MacDill Air Force Bases. In the Caribbean were 10,000 Marines who had been about to go on maneuvers. McNamara ordered to active duty 24 troop carrier squadrons of the Air Force Reserve—more than 14,000 men.

Demand.

Kennedy's course carried with it the obvious risk of casualties and finally, after a week of talk and maneuver, an Air Force reconnaissance plane was lost. But the flights went on as the U.S. prepared to move against Cuba if Khrushchev did not destroy his missiles.

To underline the need for urgent action, Kennedy sent Khrushchev a letter at week's end stating that no settlement could be reached on Cuba until the missiles came down under U.N. supervision.

Surrender.

Next day—just two weeks after the clinching recon photos were taken—Khrushchev said he was giving in. In his message, Khrushchev mildly told Kennedy: "I express my satisfaction and gratitude for the sense of proportion and understanding of the responsibility borne by you for the preservation of peace throughout the world, which you have shown. I understand very well your anxiety and the anxiety of the people of the U.S. in connection with the fact that the weapons which you describe as offensive are in fact grim weapons. Both you and I understand what kind of weapons they are."

To try to save some face, Khrushchev took full credit for preserving the peace of the world by dismantling the missiles. He also asked for a continued "exchange of opinions on the prohibition of atomic and thermonuclear weapons and on general disarmament and other questions connected with the lessening of international tension." And he said that Russia would continue to give aid to Cuba, which might mean that he had a lingering hope of still using the island as a base for Communist penetration of Latin America.

Within three hours, President Kennedy made his reply: "I welcome Chairman Khrushchev's statesmanlike decision to stop building bases in Cuba, dismantling offensive weapons and returning them to the Soviet Union under United Nations verification. This is an important and constructive contribution to peace ... It is my earnest hope that the governments of the world can, with a solution to the Cuban crisis, turn their earnest attention to the compelling necessities for ending the arms race and reducing world tensions."

Thus, President John Kennedy appeared to have won in his courageous confrontation with Soviet Russia. There would, of course, be other crises to come. Looking ahead, Kennedy said several times last week: "I am sure we face even bigger, more difficult decisions." Such decisions—if met as boldly and carried out as shrewdly as those so far—present him with an opportunity for a major breakthrough in the cold war.

* Asked how the destroyer named for the President's older brother, who was killed in World War II, happened to be at the right place at the right time, a Defense official said: "Pure coincidence." The *Pierce* is named for a lieutenant commander who won the Navy Cross and lost his life in 1944 while commanding the U.S.S. *Argonaut* against the Japanese. In the battle, the *Argonaut* went down with all guns firing.

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<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,874578,00.html> (accessed 1/3/2010).

Cold War: After Cuba

The cold war will never be the same again.

The struggle that began with the U.S. blockade of Cuba is far from over. But the U.S. took a firm stand and the Russians retreated with abject haste. That fact will be felt on every cold war battleground. At any number of points, Khrushchev can, of course, try to reverse his initial retreat by a counterblow, but any possible move will be harder for him than before the Cuban adventure.

A view of the field, after Cuba:

Berlin is still the West's most vulnerable position. Washington is convinced that Khrushchev was determined to sign his long-threatened peace treaty with East Germany by year's end, at which time he hoped to be able to brandish his Cuban missiles to induce Western withdrawal from the city. During the past year the U.S. has confused the Berlin situation by sometimes giving the appearance of frantically looking for a settlement, usually out of step with its Allies—but basically its position is firm. Any Red move to take over Berlin or cut off Western access, whether done abruptly or gradually, will almost certainly mean war with the U.S. The American determination to fight for Berlin carries even greater conviction after Cuba.

South Viet Nam, where the U.S. is deeply committed in a bitter guerrilla war against the Reds, looks far more hopeful than it did a year ago. As the nation celebrated its seventh annual National Day last week, President Diem declared "unwavering faith in the future," and Sister-in-Law Madame Nhu was on hand in Saigon as a chic, steely illustration of that faith by laying the cornerstone for a new \$100,000 social-welfare center. The country's welfare, social and otherwise, is still heavily at the mercy of the Communists, who demonstrated the fact by throwing a grenade into the independence-day crowds, killing six. But despite serious remaining difficulties, the rural populace is showing greater resistance to enemy guerrillas, who are now losing three weapons for every four they capture; only last year, the ratio was one to two. U.S. advisers are confident that the Viet Cong now have virtually no hope of achieving their goal of setting up a separate, Communist-ruled puppet state in South Viet Nam. After a four-day visit last week, Admiral Harry D. Felt, commander of U.S. Pacific Forces, pronounced: "I find a spirit of optimism in the country."

Laos has been virtually written off by the U.S. Continuation of its present precarious neutral status would be considered a gain, its loss no great tragedy provided South Viet Nam holds. A strong U.S. military force remains in neighboring Thailand to discourage a Red takeover.

South Korea still lives under the shadow of a Red regime to the north, but under tough little General Park and with strong U.S. military backing—there are still two U.S. divisions there—it is struggling toward stability.

Formosa, Quemoy and Matsu, long the objects of Red designs, now seem relatively secure from attack, thanks partly to determined U.S. intervention in the Formosa Straits four years ago when the Reds shelled the offshore islands, partly because of Red China's disastrous economic situation. Besides, here as elsewhere in Asia, Moscow could probably score direct gains only in cooperation with

Peking—a prospect that seems as remote as ever. Cuba has raised some fears in the West that Russia and Red China may patch up their differences in the face of mutual foes, but so far, Khrushchev's

performance can only confirm Peking's view that he is inept and weak. While Russia has been backing China in its invasion of India, this will not endear Moscow to the Afro-Asian nations it has tried so hard to woo.

Turkey has been eroded in recent years by political chaos, a growing Red underground, and economic stress. But it is fiercely anti-Russian, has a crack 450,000-man army, and remains the West's staunchest ally in the area. Iran has become increasingly conciliatory toward Moscow lately, promised (before the Cuban crisis) never to allow foreign missiles on its soil. Part of the reason lies in the Shah's annoyance with the U.S. for not giving him all the military hardware he wants. Nevertheless, the country remains a CENTO ally and, short of direct military conquest, is most unlikely to join the Communist camp.

Other Mideast countries offer a checkered picture, ranging from Nasser's manageable neutralism to relatively stable pro-Western attitudes in Jordan and Lebanon. Weakest spot is Iraq, which is approaching the status of a Russian satellite.

Africa has been a cold war disappointment to the Communists. Western aid and the end of France's war in Algeria have boosted the free world's stock, while Russia has suffered damaging setbacks in the Congo, as well as in Guinea, where brazen Soviet meddling in its domestic politics infuriated Marxist-minded Africans. There is little prospect for any Red retaliatory blows in Africa that would seriously bother the West.

Around the world, the issue is "credibility"—at long last, not America's but Russia's. Communist credibility has suffered so severe a blow that the whole balance of power between East and West is likely to change. After Cuba, few nations anywhere will rely on Russian promises of protection and alliance—or doubt U.S. determination to make a stand for freedom.

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