PS1 for 10/15/87#REMEMBERING THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

Can one week ""change the world,'' as Richard Nixon so extravagantly claimed about his 1972 visit to Red China? Certainly that week didn't do it, but the world could have been changed for the foreseeable future during the week of the Cuban Missile Crisis, whose 25th anniversary we observe this month.

The Cuban Missile Crisis was a nuclear Pearl Harbor that almost happened. It could have wiped out American independence and freedom and delivered control of the world to the ""evil empire'' headquartered in the Kremlin.

Even today, few people realize how close we came to total disaster in a surprise nuclear strike. U.S. Marine Corps General David M. Shoup began his official report on New Year's Day 1963 with these words: ""Only by the grace of God and an aerial photograph am I able to address many of you today in person instead of your spirits.''

""You and I both know, Mr. President,'' Khrushchev ominously threatened John F. Kennedy during the crisis, ""what kind of missiles these are.'' Khrushchev meant that they were ""soft'' unprotected weapons; they had to be launched with the advantage of surprise, or at least ""first'' -- or they could serve no purpose.

Khrushchev successfully created a massive and imminent threat to more than nine-tenths of U.S. strategic forces. All our Strategic Air Command bomber bases except two in the northwest, as well as all major U.S. cities, were within striking range of the Soviet-Cuban missiles.

Over the last 25 years, much has been written about that week of high drama and high stakes. But the crucial questions still remain unanswered: (1) why did Khrushchev dare to take the risk of sending his offensive missiles into Cuba, and (2) why didn't the Kennedy Administration discover them until the last desperate inch of time?

In 1962, the strategic odds were eight-to-one in favor of the

United States and against the Soviet Union. We then had the capability of actually delivering more than 40 billion tons of explosive power on the Soviet Union. That would have been eight times as much nuclear firepower as they could have delivered on us.

Khrushchev ran the risk that, if his plan were discovered, the United States would ""take out'' not only the 42 Soviet missiles in Cuba but also the 75 he had remaining in Russia, plus the major Soviet cities. Such retaliation would have been entirely rational and justifiable on the part of the United States, and would have reduced Russia to the status of a third-rate power.

What gave the Kremlin plotters such confidence that the United States would not actually use its massive, decisive, horrendous nuclear power against the Soviets if they were caught in flagrante delicto in putting missiles in Cuba designed for a first-strike against the United States? Was it because Khrushchev believed (as he told poet Robert Frost) that U.S. leaders were then ""too liberal to fight, even in defense of their own vital interests''?

The second question is, why didn't the Kennedy Administration discover the shipment of the missiles during their long trek from Siberia to the Caribbean, and then take the precautions necessary to keep them out of the Western Hemisphere?

Nikita Khrushchev's 1962 Cuban adventure was no mere gambit; nor was it an over-the-weekend maneuver (like the building of the Berlin Wall). The Soviets must have devoted at least a year to the project, manufacturing the missiles behind the Urals, shipping them by land and sea halfway around the world, unloading them only a few miles from Florida, trucking them across Cuban roads, and then installing them at predetermined locations.

The most charitable explanation is that the Kennedy Administration had developed a frame of mind that the Soviets would never do such a

thing, and so the officials disbelieved the evidence that was before their very eyes. It was an awful replay of the Pearl Harbor surprise of 1941, when Secretary of War Henry Stimson even refused to read the decoded Japanese messages that forecast the surprise attack because, as he said, ""Gentlemen don't read each other's mail.''

Millions of Americans in October 1962 knew the Soviets had shipped offensive missiles into Cuba weeks before the Kennedy Administration, which had much better hard evidence, was willing to believe it. The Senate Preparedness Investigating Subcommittee reported that the Kennedy Administration's near-fatal delay in recognizing and reacting to the threat was due to ""the predisposition of the intelligence community to the philosophical conviction that it would be incompatible with Soviet policy to introduce strategic missiles into Cuba.''

If the Soviets plotted such a surprise again, would our State Department believe the evidence? And would we discover it in time?