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Canada and the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962

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The year was 1962 and the atmosphere in North America was still tense from memories of World War II. Soviet influence was highly feared amongst the Americas, with the belief that communist ideals would destroy the fabric of North American capitalist society. Imagine, then, what the leaders of North America felt when several missile deployment sites were discovered in the fledgling Soviet nation of Cuba, just south of the American coastline. John F. Kennedy, the American president at the time, pushed for heavy defenses and a call to arms against the Soviets. John Diefenbaker, the Canadian prime minister at the time, however, was extremely hesitant to provide complete support to Kennedy’s plans.

Initially, the missiles were not set in place for an all-out attack on North America. The Soviet Premier at the time, Nikita Khrushchev, thought the United States had a strong military advantage over the Soviet forces. Eager to even this supposed “gap”, Khrushchev ordered the building of sites to hold ballistic missiles in Cuba.[[1]](#endnote-1) He had no intention of beginning a war with the United States, and instead thought of this gesture truly in the vain of reciprocity:

In addition to protecting Cuba, our missiles would have equalized what the West likes to call “the balance of power.” The Americans had surrounded our country with military bases and threatened us with nuclear weapons, and now they would learn just what it feels like to have enemy missiles pointing at you; we’d be doing nothing more than giving them a little of their own medicine.[[2]](#endnote-2)

At this time, Cuban-US relations were already very poor. Economic partnerships were non-existent as Fidel Castro percived American influence in Cuba as a threat.[[3]](#endnote-3) The tension only served to escalate attitudes on both the Soviet and American sides, with the probability of military conflict quite high.

On October 14, 1962, several photographs of missile installations were taken by an American spy plane doing its rounds over Cuba. The initial reaction by American defense intelligence was to prolong the public declaration of witness and action, even Kennedy only being told of the situation the morning after the photographs were examined in the United States. In the midst of the chaos surrounding the discovery of the missiles, Kennedy imposed a quarantine on all supposed munitions and weaponry entering Cuba. He wanted to contain the threat in the case of the Soviets actually launching an attack. This strict quarantine served, however, to confuse potential allies and irritate Castro while also giving the Soviets less reason to pull out of Cuba. At first, Kennedy wanted to keep the information very confidential and the key decisions left to a small group of advisors. After a few days, however, he realized the issue could not remain private for long and began to seek support from allied leaders and the public. He naturally assumed that other countries would provide unconditional support, both politically and militarily.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Vitally important to Kennedy was the support of his neighbours to the north. Naturally, it was assumed that Canada would be just as alarmed as the Americans were, as the Soviet’s missiles in Cuba were estimated to have a range as far north as the southern tip of Hudson Bay. The complete support of Canada’s government and military was not only expected but deemed neccessary.[[5]](#endnote-5) Unbeknownst to Kennedy, not only would Canada not provide the quick support the Americans requested, the Canadian government and more specifically John Diefenbaker would also question and criticize Kennedy’s hurried decisions against the Soviets. Kennedy’s reputation had already been tarnished from the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, and Diefenbaker was in no hurry to blindly lend support to another endeavour which he thought would be disasterous to global relations.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Making an official public statement on television on October 22, 1962, Kennedy announced his stance against the Soviet’s actions while declaring the methods in place to inhibit any further activities in Cuba. Upon hearing this, Diefenbaker addressed Canada’s own House of Commons, berating Kennedy’s actions while also noting his skepticism on the intelligence suggesting the threat in Cuba.[[7]](#endnote-7)

This is the only suggestion I have at this moment; but it would provide an objective answer to what is going on in Cuba. As late as a week ago, the U.S.S.R. contended that its activities in Cuba were entirely of a defensive nature, and that the hundreds, if not thousands, of citizens of the U.S.S.R. mechanics, technicians, and the like, were simply in Cuba for defensive purposes. As to the presence of these offensive weapons, the only sure way that the world can secure the facts would be through independant investigation.[[8]](#endnote-8)

By no means was Diefenbaker on the Soviet side, however. His distate for Castro and America’s Cuban policy put him in a state of dissonance, not wanting to act in any way to suggest threat to either side. Nuclear war was a serious issue for Diefenbaker, and he had wished Kennedy would have consulted him first before resorting to rash decisions.[[9]](#endnote-9) As stated before, however, Kennedy assumed support and never thought for careful consultation before making a public address.

Diefenbaker truly wanted to put an end to the conflict, yet he sought for a benign approach rather than the one put forth by Kennedy. He wanted UN intervention and to personally remove himself from the conflict, and he expressed an attitude that a peaceful solution would be much better than a violent resolution. Diefenbaker’s delivery of this, however, was poorly executed and left Kennedy confused on Canada’s true stance. None the wiser, Diefenbaker believed he was acting out of the best public interest, believing his citizens would prefer a peaceful solution.[[10]](#endnote-10) While the leaders of North America were divided in their stance, the public opinion was generally unanimous. Soviet Communism was a much hated ideal at the time, and the threat of weapons pointed at their homeland made many North Americans happy with the prospect of eliminating the threat and turning it on their ideological opposites.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Diefenbaker’s hesitance was not only in contrast to the public, but also to members of his own government. Canada’s Minister of Defence at the time, Douglas Harkness, was much more on Kennedy’s side than Diefenbaker’s. He cleared military mobilization to provide support to American forces, doing as much as he could without committing treason against the Canadian government. The tensions eventually reached a point where Harkness wanted to call a cabinet meeting to gain approval of higher military clearance with Diefenbaker. Despite believing that a meeting would be called and matters would go smoothly, Diefenbaker refused to meet entirely. He thought that approving something on a high-level scale would frighten the Canadian public. This decision served to anger Harkness and make him torn between what he believed should be done and what orders he had been given. At the same time, this was another strike against Diefenbaker’s presumed ability to be an effective prime minister.[[12]](#endnote-12)

At this point, many media outlets had reported on Diefenbaker’s decisions involving the crisis in contrast to Kennedy’s attitudes. Several major papers openly criticized Diefenbaker, and questioned why Canada would not support their neighbours.[[13]](#endnote-13) Holding steadfast in retaining Canada’s political independance, Diefenbaker stood unconvinced of rushing into conflict. Little did he know, government officials were, in fact, supporting America actively. Canada’s Department of External Affairs used the nation’s favourable relationship with Cuba for diffusing conflict between it and the United States[[14]](#endnote-14) , and Harkness was still avidly doing all he could to prime the Canadian military in the case of a downturn of events. Attitudes between Diefenbaker and the Unites States were reaching a tenuous point, as evident by an editorial in The Globe And Mail, on October 24, 1962.

Any attempt to sit on the fence in this period of crisis, to remain uncommitted, would be interpreted around the world as a rebuke to the United States and as aid and comfort for her enemies. Such a course is unthinkable.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Harkness convinced Diefenbaker to hold a special cabinet meeting after the article’s publication, and Diefenbaker agreed. The only thing up for discussion was the issue in Cuba. Unsurprisingly to the rest of the cabinet members, Diefenbaker still argued that the weapons were solely for defense, remaining skeptic of others’ viewpoints and once again brushing off the United States’ allegations against the Soviets. Harkness tried to convince Diefenbaker and other dissenters that more action was needed, with this situation being the most serious since the end of World War II, but he was denied.[[16]](#endnote-16)

While some in the Canadian government thought Diefenbaker would sit on the fence through the entire conflict, the prime minister finally expressed a formal agreement of support to the United States.

There is a debate going on throughout the world regarding the legality of the quarantine measures which the United States has imposed. To my mind such arguments are largely sterile and irrelevant. We have a situation to face. Lehalistic arguments, whatever they may be, cannot erase the fact that the Soviet Union has posed a new and immediate threat to the security not only of the United States but of Canada as well.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Diefenbaker’s statement came much to the relief of those in government. The military was finally able to take formal action and reach the level of preparedness they deemed adequate. Public opinion was not as favourable as Diefenbaker had hoped, however. His hesitance in declaring a definite stance on the crisis spurred questions on his government’s defense policies and caused a general consensus that Canada would have no direct part in ending the crisis, not even with supposed diplomacy Diefenbaker had hoped for.[[18]](#endnote-18)

At this point, the Canadian government was in rough shape. Diefenbaker’s minority standing in government was further strained by the Cuban Missile Crisis, with questions and concerns involving Canada’s defence policy being called into harsh criticism. Along with this, the United States called for negotiations with Canada involving policies regarding nuclear weapons. Just as he had done in the crisis, Diefenbaker tried avoiding direct confrontation and publicly declared that there were no issues dampening the political situation. As the irritation of the Americans reached a high point, they put out a press release stating their displeasure with Canada’s hesitance on the topic of nuclear weapons.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Diefenbaker was scrambling to keep his foothold in the government. The Canadian politics scene was dvided from pro-nuclear to anti-nuclear. This broken state of government caused Douglas Harkness to resign. He had enough of Diefenbaker’s interferences with Canada’s defense policy. At the same time, a non-confidence motion was passed and a re-election was soon called after.[[20]](#endnote-20)

The Cuban Missile Crisis was an extremely tense time for everyone in North America. John F. Kennedy pushed for strict quarantine and forceful removal of the Soviets and their armaments from Cuba, while John Diefenbaker sought for a less conflicting approach in order to retain Canada’s independancy in decision making as a peacekeeping nation. Ultimately, the hesistance incurred by Diefenbaker’s unwillingness to make a steadfast deicision resulted ina poor outlook of Canada from the United States and eventual removal of his leadership.

ENDNOTES

1. “Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962” (website) accessed November 5, 2013, <http://www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq90-1.htm> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Peter T. Haydon, The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis: Canadian Involvement Reconsidered (Toronto: The Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies, 1993), 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Andrew Burtch, Give Me Shelter: The Failure of Canada’s Cold War Civil Defence (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012), 205. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Robert Bothwell, The Big Chill: Canada and the Cold War (Toronto: Irwin Publishing, 1998), 64. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Asa McKercher, “A ‘Half-hearted Response’?: Canada and the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962,” *The International History Review*, Vol. 33 (2011): 335-352. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Haydon, Canadian Involvement, 122. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Bothwell, The Big Chill, 64. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Haydon, Canadian Involvement, 122. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Bothwell, The Big Chill, 65. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Haydon, Canadian Involvement, 124. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 126. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. McKercher, “’Half-hearted Response’,” 336. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Haydon, Canadian Involvement, 130. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 131-132. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 140. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid., 143. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Bothwell, The Big Chill, 65. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 66. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)