

Reading the Culture: The Cuban Missile Crisis, 50 years later

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Cuba is one of my favorite places on earth. I've been privileged to make seven trips to the island; each time I've encountered New Testament Christianity. More than a million Cubans have become Christians in the last 10 years. Cuban Christians inspire and challenge me with their passionate, sacrificial commitment to Christ as their king.

No caption submitted

My love for Cuba caused me to read with great interest Graham Allison's essay in the latest *Foreign Affairs* journal. Allison is a professor of government and international affairs at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. He recaps the Cuban Missile Crisis, perhaps the greatest military threat our nation ever faced, and explores three lessons for U.S. foreign policy today. As we celebrate our nation's birthday while thinking about the future of our relations with global adversaries, Allison's principles bear reflection. As Christians seek to influence their culture, his lessons are relevant, as well.

In October 1962, a U.S. spy plane caught the Soviet Union trying to sneak nuclear-tipped missiles into Cuba. After a week of deliberations, President John F. Kennedy announced this discovery to the world and imposed a naval blockade to prevent further shipments of armaments. His advisers had given him two options—accept nuclear missiles in Cuba or invade. He crafted a third response—a public promise not to invade Cuba if the Soviets withdrew their missiles; a private ultimatum to attack within 24 hours unless Soviet leaders accepted his offer; and a secret promise to withdraw U.S. missiles from Turkey within six months after the crisis was resolved. His solution prevented a war that might have led to the deaths of 100

million Americans and more than 100 million Russians.

Allison suggests applications of Kennedy's approach to Iran, North x Korea and China. With Iran, the United States should seek agreements that would defer Tehran's nuclear armaments development, with threats of a regime-changing attack if the agreement is violated and a promise not to attack otherwise. With North Korea, Allison believes we should enforce previous warnings to attack if they continue their nuclear program. He suggests Kennedy was prepared to risk conflict now to prevent greater confrontation to come. With China, he argues that we should develop "rules of the road," an approach similar to the negotiations that kept America and the Soviets from war.

Allison concludes leaders need time to make the best decisions. Kennedy determined he had a week before news of the Soviet missiles would become public, so he took six days to craft his response. He said later that if he had been forced to make a decision in the first 48 hours, he would have chosen an air strike rather than the naval blockade—a step that could have led to nuclear war. Leaders today need time and space to make their best decisions.

Christians will influence our culture most effectively when, like President Kennedy, we are conciliatory rather than adversarial but choose confrontation rather than weakness, while utilizing reflection rather than reaction.

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