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‘The Flower of Culture’
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Cuba lies only about 90 miles from the United States, off the southern tip of Florida. President Kennedy now made the shocking announcement that the Soviets were in the process of building missile sites there. The purpose of these sites, he said, was to provide the Soviets with the capacity to mount a nuclear attack on the Western hemisphere. Not only could missiles launched from Cuban sites strike Washington, D.C., the Panama Canal and major cities in the southeastern United States, Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean, but it was also likely, he suggested, that intermediate-range ballistic missiles capable of traveling greater distances would be deployed there.

To prevent the use of such missiles and to see that the sites were dismantled, he ordered a naval blockade on the shipment of all offensive weapons and related matériel to Cuba. This was the beginning of what came to be known as the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Kennedy further stated: “We will not prematurely or unnecessarily risk the costs of worldwide nuclear war in which even the fruits of victory would be ashes in our mouth — but neither will we shrink from that risk at any time it must be fared.”

Seventeen years had passed since the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Amid a power balance forged from the mutual fear of nuclear annihilation, the Cold War had continued and a tenuous security had been maintained. Now, the Cold War was heating up. A situation had unfolded that could lead to all-out nuclear war.

The world was gripped with tension. President Kennedy’s speech was broadcast at 8:00 a.m., Oct. 23, Japan time. Twenty minutes before the broadcast, U.S. Ambassador to Japan Edwin O. Reischauer paid a visit to the private residence of Prime Minister Hayato Ikeda in Shinanomachi, Tokyo, to deliver Kennedy’s personal message explaining the situation. It sought Japan’s support in advance for measures the United States had decided to take and asked for Japan’s backing in the United Nations.

After Kennedy’s speech, Japanese television, radio and newspapers immediately gave broad coverage to this serious development. When Shin’ichi Yamamoto heard it, he was stunned and deeply troubled. Nuclear war must never be allowed to happen! From that day, he prayed with even greater fervor, pouring his whole life into chanting Nam-myoho-rence-kyo.

President Kennedy’s speech heightened anxiety among Americans that they were on the brink of nuclear war. Indeed, the threat of war loomed not only over the United States but the entire world.

One of the causes of the crisis, of course, was the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. After World War II, the two nations had been engaged in a fierce nuclear arms race. The United States was the first to develop the atomic bomb in 1945; the Soviet Union built its first atomic bomb in 1949; and after the Americans tested their first hydrogen bomb in 1952, the Soviets followed with their hydrogen bomb in 1953.

In 1957, the Soviets developed the intercontinental ballistic missile and also launched the first artificial satellites, Sputnik 1 and Sputnik 2. This meant that the Soviet Union now had the technology to attack U.S. targets with nuclear missiles. It also meant that the Soviet Union had suddenly overtaken and surpassed the United States in the nuclear arms race.

This was an enormous shock to the United States, spawning an atmosphere of impending danger. The Soviet Union also took every opportunity to display and boast of its nuclear might. In order to confirm whether the Soviets really had the destructive capacity they

claimed, the United States began to employ U-2 spy planes to fly reconnaissance missions over the Soviet Union. These activities led to the shooting down of a U-2 plane over the Soviet Union in 1960, an incident that plunged the slightly thawing U.S.–Soviet relations then to an all-time low.

Nevertheless, the United States continued its surveillance using reconnaissance satellites and learned that the Soviet Union had greatly exaggerated its nuclear arsenals; the United States was actually still in the lead. Now it was the Soviet Union's turn to feel threatened, spurring it anew to establish military superiority over its arch rival. All this led the Soviet Union to try to place missiles in Cuba.

Later, however, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev insisted that his country's only aim was to strengthen and support Cuba, which was threatened by the United States. He claimed that the Soviet Union had no intention of starting a war; its only aim was to protect Cuba and the interests of the socialist world.

Whatever the expressed reasons, the explosive situation was the result of the endlessly escalating nuclear arms race that the two superpowers had become mired in, out of mutual fear of an illusory enemy.

Another contributing factor behind the crisis was the Cuba–U.S. relationship. Cuba had been a Spanish colony, but from the second half of the 19th century, a liberation movement arose there, including the Ten Years War for independence (1868–78). With each uprising, Spanish rule became harsher and more oppressive. But the Cuban people's drive for freedom only grew stronger and more determined.

Under the leadership of the great hero of Cuban independence, José Martí, who declared that people must fight for their right to self-determination and not rely on others, the Cuban war for independence was launched anew in February 1895. Just months later, on May 19, Martí died in battle at age 42.

But the revolutionary forces inherited his resolve, and the war turned in their favor. Independence seemed only a matter of time.

At this juncture, the United States intervened. Already, the United States exerted a powerful economic influence on Cuba. According to statistics, 83 percent of all Cuban exports in 1895 went to the United States. Sugar was the major export.

Spain, however, took the step of blocking American exports to Cuba. In 1898, in the final stages of Cuba's independence war, the United States declared war on Spain, claiming that the colonial power had violated the Monroe Doctrine, which stated that no European powers could interfere with the nations of North or South America. This war became known as the Spanish–American War.

This move was in part motivated by the U.S. desire to sustain and increase its influence in Cuba. The United States won the war and secured Spain's withdrawal from the island. U.S. troops then occupied Cuba, pending the establishment of full independence.

In 1902, the dream of Cuban independence was at last realized. However, a clause called the Platt Amendment was inserted into the new Cuban constitution granting the United States the right to intervene in Cuban affairs and establish naval bases on Cuban soil.

Cuban independence was largely brokered by the United States, and even after it was achieved, Cuba's economy rapidly became dominated by American interests; U.S. investment poured into the country. Sugar production was virtually Cuba's sole domestic industry, and the majority of the Cuban population was engaged in the backbreaking work of planting, cultivating and harvesting sugar cane. The Cuban people were also induced to buy various goods, starting with daily necessities, from the United States.

To be continued

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