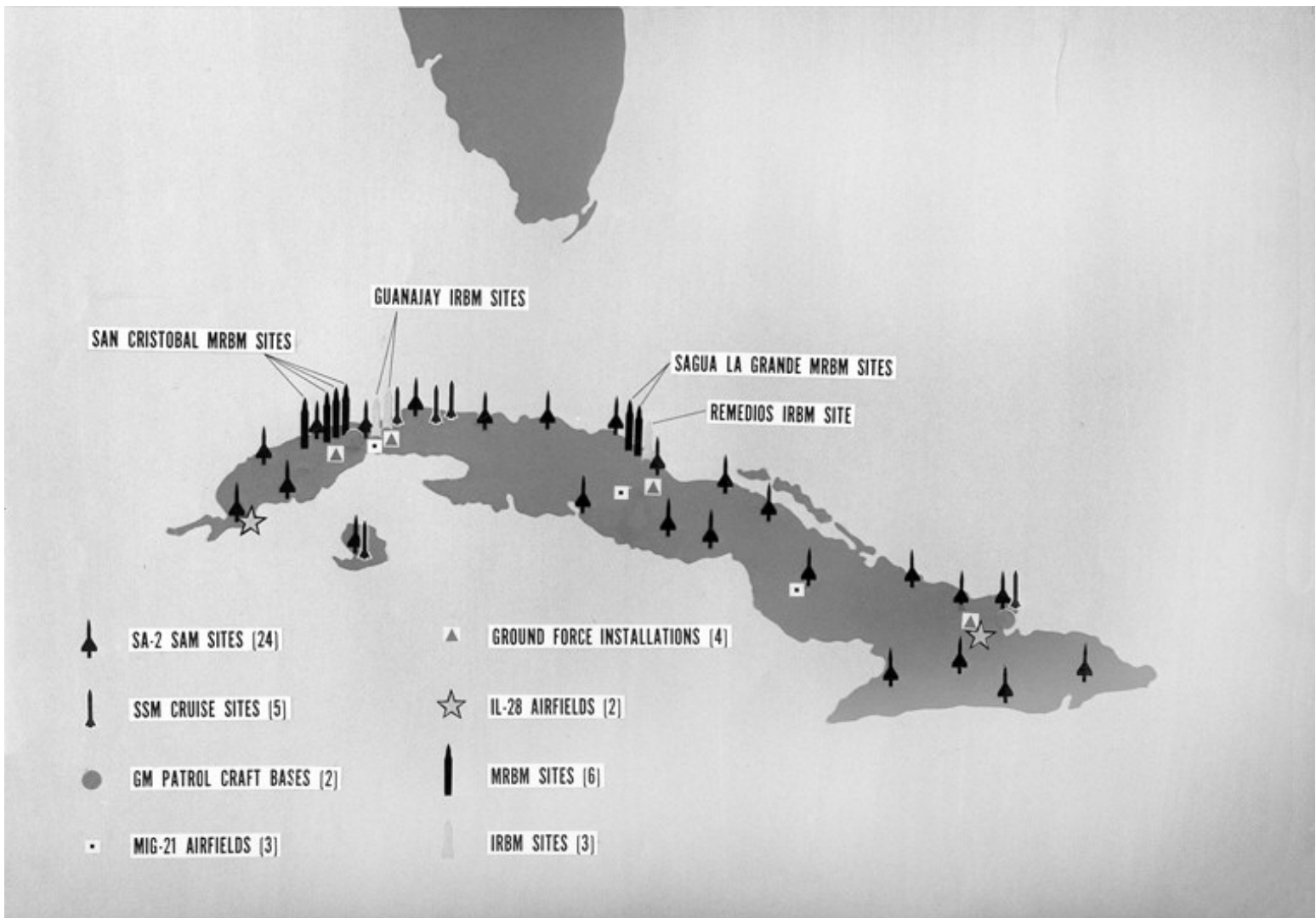


# Pax Orionis Prelude: The Cuban War

By Scott Lowther



Authors Note:

Pax Orionis is an alternate history project based on a simple idea: what if Project Orion had come to pass?

I have been working on a non-fiction book on nuclear pulse propulsion for a long, long time. A few years ago it occurred to me to write small fictional vignettes to describe various aspects of the Orion program. The first little story told the tale of a fleet of "Orion Space Battleships" going to war. It became clear to me that the idea wasn't going to work... I simply couldn't tell a meaningful tale in just a few paragraphs. But several people suggested that I should turn the short yarn into a full-fledged story. And so... here we are.

"Cuba" tells the story of how history as we know it changed into a new history that was primed to produce spacecraft powered by atom bombs...

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*Excerpt from "My Time On Fire" by Barry Wygant (weapons control officer, U.S.S. Thunderchild).  
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### **Chapter Three: Cuba**

A lot of people disagree, but I'm pretty sure that the Orion program probably would have either faded away or taken much longer to come about had it not been for the Cuban War. Sure, it was a disaster for everyone involved, and for millions of people who shouldn't have been involved, but that war gave America the solar system. Had it not been for the Orion program that rose from the ashes of Cuba, God only knows how we would have fared in the War of '84. So a bit of history of that war is in order. Sure, it's all pretty well known... but hey, it's my book, I'll tell it like I want.

World War II gave the world the atom bomb, and ended up being the first atomic war. OK, yeah, it was a one sided atomic war, but if the Japanese didn't want to get into a nuclear shooting match they probably shouldn't have attacked Pearl Harbor. 'Nuff said.

The Korean War that followed was a hellish period, but somewhat surprisingly it never turned nuclear. Many in the US wanted to use atomic weaponry to blunt North Korean advances, or even take out military targets in China, but cooler heads prevailed. The Korean War ground to a halt, but the geopolitical competition between the United States and the Soviet Union did not. In the years after the Korean War, the USSR made many efforts to extend its reach and power across the globe. One of its most stunning achievements was the Cuban Communist rebellion led by Fidel Castro that overthrew the pro-western government in 1959. This event, more than the Communist blockade of Berlin, the Korean War or the Hungarian Revolution, led directly to the world we have today, for both good and ill.

The Communist takeover of Cuba in 1959 threw the United States government into something of a panic. Oh, hell, it scared Washington shitless: here was Communism on our very doorstep. The most deadly threat the US had ever faced was just ninety miles away, occupying an island that Americans had previously associated with vacations and parties and generally getting tore up. The US was caught flat-footed.

The US finally did something about it in April of 1961 with the Bay of Pigs invasion. It was a clusterfuck; a complete failure brought on by President Kennedy's less than complete commitment to the cause. The failure of the US to provide adequate air support to what was an inadequate naval invasion made failure inevitable... and was seen by Khrushchev as an important sign of weakness.

At the time, it was clear to Soviet leadership that, despite their public boasts, their nuclear missile capabilities lagged well behind those of the United States. Soviet ICBMs at the time were woefully few and inaccurate; it is estimated that the Soviets had less than two dozen R-7 Semyorka missiles capable of striking US targets from within the USSR. On the other hand, the Soviets were doing reasonably well in the field of medium and intermediate range ballistic missiles. But MRBMs and IRBMs could not strike continental US targets from Soviet territory. So a base closer to the US was what the Commies needed.

The Communist Cuban dictatorship provided the opportunity that Khrushchev sought. By positioning Soviet missiles in Cuba, much of the US would be under direct nuclear threat. It seems that Khrushchev's goal was not to rain nuclear warheads onto the US, but to use the threat those weapons posed in order to extort concessions from the weak-willed Kennedy. Specifically... the Cuban missiles would be a bargaining chip to drive the western powers out of West Berlin, and turn the entire city over to Soviet control. Having Germany partitioned had pissed off Stalin, and the continued existence of a western-allied city in the midst of East Germany must have chapped Khrushchev's ass. Joining Germany into one nice, neat unit firmly under Soviet control was important not only for strategic purposes, but also for pure psychological reasons.

After the Bay of pigs, Castro was eager to obtain Soviet nuclear weapons as those would, he hoped, protect him from another American invasion attempt. Negotiations with the Soviets were apparently brief; in the summer of 1962, thousands of Soviet personnel began arriving in Cuba to set up missile bases.

The effort did not go un-noticed by US intelligence agencies, though they could not initially confirm just what was going on with any certainty. By August, U-2 spyplane overflights of Cuba showed clear signs of the construction of SA-2 "Guideline" surface-to-air missile sites. The CIA assumed that the SAM sites were to defend forthcoming surface-to-surface missile sites from American air attack. However, even though human intelligence reports from the ground indicated that large missiles – which could only be offensive weapons – were being trucked around at night, no U-2 overflights occurred from early September to October 14<sup>th</sup>. But once the U-2 overflights continued, the evidence of ballistic missiles piled up. An R-12 MRBM missile site was spotted at San Cristobel on the 14<sup>th</sup>; President Kennedy was briefed on the 15<sup>th</sup>.

A number of options were presented to the President, everything from "do nothing" to "invade now." The Joint Chiefs of Staff were all in favor of a sudden massive attack and invasion to not only take out the missiles but to take out the Castro regime as well and replace the Communists with someone who would be friendlier to the West. I guess the thinking was that a nuclear battle with the Soviets was inevitable, and that at right that moment the US had an advantage... but if the Russkies could set up shop in Cuba and continue to build nuclear arms and delivery systems, the math would only get worse for the US. So... better sooner rather than later, it seems.

Kennedy did not want an invasion of Cuba; not only would it be a massive mess, but it would also open the door to a Soviet invasion of West Berlin in response. He wanted a political solution.

A few days later, more U-2 photos were brought in showing that four missile sites were operational. It was now clear that something must be done. The decision Kennedy made was to enforce a blockade of Cuba to keep further Soviet nuclear forces from arriving – not just missiles, but jet fighters and bombers, brought in via cargo ship. A blockade was a legally iffy proposition, and it could not be done secretly. On October 22<sup>nd</sup>, Kennedy went on TV to address the nation on the subject. Thus began what was briefly referred to in the press as "the missile crisis."

Within a few days, the United States Navy was intercepting ships headed to Cuba. Some were allowed to pass, as they seemed to be carrying no weapons; others held back. On the 25<sup>th</sup> 14 Soviet ships turned back rather than face the blockade.

Negotiations, threats and bluster followed over the next few days. Khrushchev suggested that the US remove its Jupiter missiles from Italy and Turkey; in exchange the USSR would remove its missiles from Cuba. Castro wanted no part of that, as it would leave his island open to invasion; instead he sent a message to Khrushchev calling for a pre-emptive nuclear strike against the United States.

On the morning of Saturday, October 27, 1962, a U-2F piloted by USAF Major Rudolph Anderson was shot down over Cuba by a Soviet SA-2 Guideline SAM. This made a bad situation immediately worse. At the same time a group of eleven US Navy destroyers, led by the Essex-class aircraft carrier USS Randolph (CVS-15), were pursuing a suspected Soviet submarine northeast of Cuba. Another Soviet submarine was being stalked by the aircraft and ships of the combined USS Enterprise (CVN-65) and USS Independence (CV-62) battle groups south of Cuba.

In the afternoon of October 27<sup>th</sup>, the crew of the Fletcher-class destroyer USS Beale (DD-471), part of the USS Randolph battle group, radioed that it was dropping a handful of practice depth charges – with an explosive power approximating that of a hand grenade – in order to rattle the Soviet subs crew and force them to the surface. These devices were small and incapable of doing any real damage to a Soviet submarine due to the limited explosive potential and the unlikelihood of actually striking a submarine. They were simple, and were simply tossed over the side by the crew. And it turns out these small devices were the trigger that set off the war. But it wasn't until recently that this explanation has come to light.

In the mid 90's, military archeologists wearing those lead-lined spacesuits dug through the ruins of the buried Kremlin archives. Records were found that explained just what the hell happened beneath the waves that day. The Soviet Foxtrot-class submarine B-59 was on its own; it had been out of contact with Moscow for several days and the crew were completely in the dark as to the current situation. War could very easily have broken out in the time they'd been out of communications. The air in the sub must have been going bad, the temperature steadily rising and the noise of the depth charges deafening. According to the discovered Soviet debrief reports, debate raged among the senior officers as to how to respond... their orders allowed them to use torpedoes – specifically a nuclear torpedo – if the sub was damaged in an American attack. So long as the depth charges missed damaging the submarine, however, flotilla commander Vasili Arkhipov voted against use of the nuclear torpedo.

And then... around 5 PM local time (Eastern time) one of the depth charges, through sheer happenstance, apparently detonated nearly on top of the hull. Damage to the submarine was minimal, but the sound of the explosion created a panic among the already rattled crew. Remember, they'd been under barrage for quite a while already, and were hard pressed to determine just what was going on. They could not know that they were being merely harassed; the lucky shot had seemed like a successful attack. In the chaos that followed, word shot through the boat that the hull had been breached. In fact it was just a burst pipe... but the command staff had had enough.

The order was given to return fire with the nuclear torpedo. The sub came to periscope depth and scanned the surroundings; the destroyer Beale was steaming away, but a more tempting target, the carrier USS Randolph, was visible in the distance. It presented an easy broadside target. The torpedo was launched at 5:24 PM, ran true but detonated short. It went off about a hundred yards from the Randolph at a depth of about three meters. With a yield of fifteen kilotons, the resulting shockwave caved in the side of the Randolph, sending it to the bottom in under a minute. Two other destroyers, the Beale and USS Cony (DD-508), were also sent to the bottom. More than 3,000 sailors went down on the Randolph; only 203 survived. Six hundred crew went down with the destroyers. Destroyers USS Bache (DD-470) and USS Barry (DD-933) also received heavy damage, but managed to limp back to port.

The B-59 survived, but due to the dire conditions on board, was soon forced to surface. However, in the chaos that followed it managed to survive and limped its way back to its base on the Kamchatka peninsula. The crew were debriefed... and then disappeared from history. No record of anyone who was on the B-59 has ever appeared from the post-war period. Knowing how the Commies dealt with things, they were probably all taken out back, one by one, and shot. Not because they had disobeyed orders, but because they had started the war, and their testimony was best kept quiet. Had the debriefings not been stored deep in heavy safes in strong vaults, they would not have survived to finally tell the story.

The USS Randolph managed to send a few emergency signals prior to sinking, as did the surviving destroyers. The messages were picked up not only by the Pentagon, but by the brand-new nuclear powered supercarrier, the USS Enterprise... as well as the nearby Soviet and Cuban forces. Upon realizing that nuclear weapons had been employed, the Enterprise and Independence began actively trying to sink their sub. Nobody really knows what happened below the waves, whether the Soviet sub crew somehow received word of the nuclear strike or if, as with the B-59, depth charges were getting too close. But in the end, the same decision was made: launch a nuclear torpedo.

At 6:15 PM, this torpedo found its mark about two-thirds of the way back on the port side of the USS Enterprise, four meters under the waterline. The blast split the hull in two; the forward portion tipped 45 degrees to starboard and sank in a minute and a half; the aft portion rolled completely inverted before sinking in less than 30 seconds. The Enterprise lost all 5,800 hands. The destroyers USS Fiske (DD-842) and USS Hawkins (DD-873) were also sent to the bottom. The Soviet submarine went to the bottom as well. Postwar examination of the wreckage showed that the shockwave from the nuclear torpedo crushed the hull, but there is evidence that the hull had already been damaged, presumably from depth charges or torpedoes.

The waves from the blast swamped the deck of the Independence, washing numerous aircraft and fifty-five crew overboard. A number of aircraft from the Enterprise, Independence and Randolph were already in the air, including several aircraft armed with nuclear weapons. The aircraft from the Randolph, north of Cuba, had a clear line of return to bases in Florida. Those from the Enterprise and Independence did not. They would have to divert around Cuba in order to reach Florida... or fly directly home, crossing enemy territory. The fighters and attack aircraft, lacking orders and effective communications, largely chose to overfly Cuba. Those with armament capable of attacking ground targets did so.

F-4 Phantoms attacked the Sagua La Grande and Remedios missile sites with conventional bombs, while other F-4s provided air cover against defending MiG-21s. Effectiveness of these attacks were minimal... chaos, inadequate planning, the setting of the sun and inadequate forces led to the F-4s being incapable of mounting a useful attack on the missile bases. Worse, the attacks caused the local Soviet missile commanders to unilaterally prepare their missiles. As a result of the F-4 attacks, at 7:22 PM five R-12 Dvina theater ballistic missiles were launched. One of the R-12s went wildly off course (whether due to malfunction or damage from the attacks has never been determined), its 2.3 megaton warhead detonating seventy kilometers above the middle of the Gulf of Mexico. Unfortunately, the other four missiles found their marks. All four were aimed at aviation bases in Florida.

The first R-12 to detonate targeted Naval Air Station Key West, its warhead detonating somewhat short of the target at 1500 feet, killing 5,000.

The second R-12 targeted Naval Air Station Miramar but apparently went off course, ground-detonating several miles north near Kendall, Florida. Some 50,000 or so people were killed outright, but worse came when the radioactive fallout fell directly on Miami, drifting as far north as West Palm Beach. A hundred thousand died within the week, nearly half a million within a month.

The third bullseyed the US Naval Air Station Sanford, Florida, its thermonuclear warhead detonating at about 3000 feet. Three quarters of a million people were killed in Orlando and the surrounding regions.

The last R-12 targeted MacDill AFB, airbursting at 2000 feet, killing a few thousand.

As more missiles were being prepared for launch at the Sagua La Grande and Remedios missile sites, two A-4 Skyhawks arrived. Slower than the F-4, they took longer to arrive; flying low, while the F-4's raised hell with the MiGs, the A-4s arrived unseen and unmolested at 7:48 PM. Each A-4 carried a single Mk 7 nuclear bomb with a yield of 61 kilotons. Each missile site saw the detonation of a single nuclear device near ground level, destroying the sites. Neither A-4 made it home... most likely taken out by the blast or possibly by anti-aircraft fire.

In the immediate aftermath of the nuclear detonation near the USS Randolph, the White House tried to gain control of the situation. However, since nobody really knew what the fuck was happening their efforts met with no success. Similar efforts by the Soviets in Moscow to gain control over their forces in Cuba failed. The high altitude R-12 burst created an electromagnetic pulse that scrambled radio communications and damaged powerlines, transformers and phone lines all around the Gulf, from Mexico through Cuba to Florida and the gulf states to Texas. Naval vessels unaffected by the nuclear torpedo detonations lost radio communications. However, they could see the flashes of nuclear bursts in Cuba and Florida. Similarly, Cuban and Soviet military forces in Cuba lost communications both with Moscow and with other forces.

US and Soviet leadership each managed to maintain firm control over their forces outside of the Caribbean, and stayed in sporadic contact with each other. The White House and the Kremlin each attempted to maintain contact with the other to try to shut the situation down. While this failed, they at least were able to keep hold of the reins of the rest of their strategic forces.

As panic rampaged across the southern US and Cuba, individual military commanders and units prepared for action. There was a natural pause after the R-12 attacks; this pause could have been used to shut down the conflict. Obviously, that's not what happened. An hour after the twin nuclear strikes on the Cuban missile sites, nuclear-armed aircraft attacked the US military facility at Guantanamo Bay. Air defenses were prepared, and shot down nine of the eleven attacking planes, but two got through and detonated just above ground level at 8:42 PM, with about five kilotons yield each. To this day debate rages whether the attackers were nuclear-armed SSC-2b "Samlet" cruise missiles or whether they were MiG-15s carrying nuclear bombs (or perhaps a combination of both types). Nobody who saw them or who launched them lived out the hour, so the question will probably never be answered. However, the low level yield indicates that small tactical weapons were employed; gravity bombs should have had higher yield.

In any event this attack was ordered by local commanders and was apparently authorized by no known Soviet or Cuban leadership. When word filtered through of further nuclear strikes to the east, Cuban and Soviet commanders could not know that those were their own weapons being employed and they incorrectly assumed that those were American nuclear strikes. And so, at 8:45 PM the missile sites at San Cristobal and Guanajay, as well as several mobile sites, began launching their missiles. A total of twenty seven missiles were launched.

These missiles gave the United States the worst day in its history up to that point, and utterly changed the nation.

- 1: Jacksonville, Florida, was hit with a 2+ megaton airburst over the center of town, killing 125,000.
- 2: Tallahassee was hit with a 2 + megaton airburst over the center of town, killing 100,000.
- 3: Pensacola was hit with a 2+ megaton airburst over the center of town, killing 70,000.
- 4: Charleston, South Carolina was hit with a 2+ megaton airburst over the center of town, killing 100,000.
- 5: Birmingham, AL was hit with a 1 megaton airburst over the center of town, killing 100,000.
- 6: Columbus Air Force Base, Mississippi was hit with a multi-megaton air burst, destroying the home of the 492d Bomb Squadron. However, while the base was destroyed, only two B-52s were taken out. The rest had been dispersed to surrounding civilian airports or were in flight. Total dead: 5,000.
- 7: Wichita, Kansas, was hit with a 2+ megaton airburst over the center of town, killing 100,000.
- 8: Oak Ridge, Tennessee was targeted with a 2+ megaton warhead, which overshot the town and impacted some fifteen miles north in the hills near Rocky Top. Immediate fatalities were only a thousand or so, but fallout swept north into Ohio as far as Cincinnati.



9: St. Louis, Missouri, was hit with a 2+ megaton airburst over the center of town, killing 200,000.

10: MacDill Air Force Base was struck for a second time with a 2+ megaton air burst. Fatalities were few, as the region was already largely destroyed.

11: Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana, was targeted with a one megaton air burst, destroying the B-52 base as well as largely destroying the city of Shreveport. As the B-52s were dispersed, only a handful being maintained were destroyed. However, 40,000 people were killed at the base and inn nearby Shreveport.

12: Eglin Air Force Base in Florida was destroyed by a 2+ megaton air burst. Total dead: 25,000

13: Keesler Air Force Base near Biloxi was hit with a 2+ megaton air burst, killing 40,000. As a training base, it was an unlikely target, but was hit nonetheless, destroying Biloxi in the process.

14: Patrick Air Force Base, near Cape Canaveral. The air station between Satellite Beach and Cocoa beach was hit with a 2 megaton air burst, killing 20,000. While this destroyed the headquarters of the Air Force Missile Test Center, it largely left intact the Cape Canaveral Air Force Station and association launch sites, though blast did damage many lighter buildings.

15: Little Rock, Arkansas. A one megaton warhead impacted on the western edge of Adams Field airport, but failed to properly detonate. The explosive charge went off, but did so asymmetrically; the total yield from this "fizzle" was about one kiloton. But the radioactive fallout was tremendous, blowing to the north-east into southern Illinois and Indiana. Only 2,000 people were killed in the initial blast, but hundreds of thousands later died due to radioactive poisoning.

16: Arlington, Virginia was hit with a 2+ megaton air burst just west of National Airport. The Pentagon was the presumed target; while the building itself was not greatly damaged by the blast, most of the south-facing windows were blown in and many south-facing offices were set ablaze. However, the Pentagon was a small blip in the whole story, as injuries extended as far south as Fort Washington and as far north as Bethesda, with substantial blast damage in Washington, D.C. itself. The total death toll exceeded half a million.

17: Topeka, Kansas: A one megaton ground burst targeted an Atlas E site south west of the city near the town of Dover, destroying the ICBM site. Only a few hundred people were killed in the blast, but nearly a hundred thousand were killed by the radioactive fallout that drifted onto Kansas City, Topeka, Leavenworth and other smaller towns.

18: Lincoln Air Force Base, Nebraska: a 2+ megaton ground burst nearly on top of an Atlas F missile site east of the city near the town of Eagle, killed only a few hundred initially, but around fifty thousand later died of radiation poisoning due to the fallout drifting over Omaha and Council Bluffs, on up to Minneapolis.

19: Omaha: a one megaton air burst over Offutt Air Force Base destroyed the base and a good fraction of southern Omaha, killing 30,000.

20: Amarillo, Texas: An air burst about 20 miles east of Amarillo did little damage and killed only a few hundred. This was almost certainly aimed at the Pantex nuclear weapons plant located to the northeast of Amarillo. Only superficial damage was done to the facility.

20: McCoy Air Force Base: a 2 megaton air burst directly over the base, destroying the base and most of Orlando, Florida. The bulk of the B-52s and KC-135s stationed at the base were in the air at the time and were not destroyed. Death toll: 45,000.

21: Gip, West Virginia. This tiny community in the central part of West Virginia was struck with a one-megaton ground-burst. As Gip certainly seems unlikely to have been intentionally targeted, the going theory is that the missile was intended for Pittsburgh. Due to the low population density and hilly terrain, only a few hundred people were killed outright. However, due to the ground-level detonation, fallout was bad and blanketed Morgantown, killing thousands over the next several years.

22: Houston, Texas was destroyed by a 1 megaton airburst over the center of the city, killing 250,000. My parents and I lived there at the time; we only survived because my Dad's folks had had the good sense to build a good bomb shelter in the back yard. My parents and grandparents ducked us into the shelter the moment the news came over the radio that nukes had started popping off. We stayed there for nearly two weeks; when we came out, the firestorm had long since reduced the entire neighborhood to ash. A bunch of the neighbors had also had bomb shelters, so even though the houses were all gone, a lot of their friends were still alive. Of course... a lot more of them weren't. Caught outside, or in a house that couldn't survive the flash and blast, or hiding in a bomb shelter that wasn't up to code, or buried in shelters that became their tombs. Some people who survived the bombs refused to talk about the experience. My mom was like that... but my dad? Couldn't get him to shut up about it. When my little brother came along a year later, they were sure he'd be some mutant with bug-eyes and tentacles, like a rubber monster from a cheap B-movie. A lot of Houstonians were turned into homeless refugees, but we lucked out... my parents had worked at the NASA Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston, and when NASA rebuilt the MSC near Denver, they took my parents along.

I was too young to really remember the Houston area before the bomb. But I was old enough to remember going back a few years later. Such sights you don't forget.

23: The northern-most target was Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton, Ohio. A two-megaton airburst midway between the city and the base leveled both and killed 125,000.

24: Colorado Springs was the western-most target. The one megaton warhead detonated on impact with the southern face of Pike's Peak, raining debris down upon Manitou Springs and blowing down structures in Colorado Springs. A few thousand were killed by the blast, but the fallout drifting to the north east caused the closing of the Air Force Academy and the eventual

deaths of some 10,000 or so. It also trashed the mountain, bringing down 1,500 feet off the peak.

25: A warhead targeted at either Norfolk or Newport News Virginia overshot by five miles and detonated on impact with Chesapeake Bay. While only a few dozen people were killed outright on boats and a few people on shore swept by the resulting wave, the entire Eastern Shore portion of the Delmarva Peninsula was rendered uninhabitable for several years due to fallout, and much of the rest of the peninsula was blanketed with lower-level fallout that required evacuation and cleanup. Several thousand died over the next few years from the fallout.

26: Fort Worth, Texas was hit with a warhead that did not detonate. Considerable radioactive debris was scattered around, causing local evacuations, but bomb disposal crews were able to render the areas safe. The stories of the bravery and, in the end, sacrifice of the UXB men who went into the warhead impact zone and cleared it are well known and worthy of remembrance.

27: The one bright spot to come out of the Communist missile attack was the warhead aimed at Chicago. It was destroyed in flight by a pair of Nike Hercules missiles (each with a 20 kiloton W31 nuclear warhead) launched out of Porter, Indiana; the near-simultaneous detonations at about 105,000 feet over central Indiana caused no damage on the ground but they did temporarily blind several hundred people, leading to numerous automobile crashes and one plane crash. The incoming Soviet warhead was not vaporized, but instead fell in numerous highly radioactive pieces into eastern Lake Michigan where they proved to be an environmental problem for several years.

All told, we lost about two million of our friends and family in one night, with another three million dead of radiation poisoning and other wounds in the next two months. Coupled with illnesses, malnutrition, exposure and other related issues in the months following the war, the total American death toll was about six million over the first year, and about twenty million over the next two decades. Leukemia and other cancers ran riot among the downwinders for the next generation. Deaths tolls like that had not been seen since World War II, and then certainly not all in one night... and definitely not in the US. We were wholly unprepared for that.

Given that most of the CONUS, and virtually all of the eastern seaboard, was within range of the missiles, it's a mystery why so many of the strikes seem to have been aimed at the relatively close southern states. The local Cuban commanders no doubt had some input on the targeting; by aiming at southern bases, they may have thought that Americas ability to respond with overwhelming force upon Cuba would be greatly impaired. A competing theory is that since the missiles were liquid fueled, they may not have been fully fueled at the time they were launched, thus they were aimed at nearer, more attainable targets. This theory isn't widely held. We will probably never know because nobody, Cuban or Soviet, who had anything to do with launching those missiles survived the day.

As a result of the incoming nuclear strikes and the lack of adequate command and control, lower-level nuclear commanders in the region of the Gulf unleashed their weapons rather haphazardly upon Cuba. Air Force B-52s, B-47s and B-58s rained nuclear and conventional gravity bombs not only on known

Cuban missile sites but also all known Cuban military targets. All told, some thirty-two nuclear explosions occurred over Cuban territory. Cuban and Soviet MiGs and SAMs took a great toll on the American bombers, but were overwhelmed by swarms of USAF, USN and USMC fighter aircraft. Within 24 hours of the attack on the Randolph, there were no surviving Cuban or Soviet military forces of any consequence. Several Cuban cities were also destroyed by nuclear strikes, largely due to proximity to known military forces or bad targeting.

By 7 AM on the 28<sup>th</sup>, command and control over the Caribbean region had been re-established. The conflict had managed to stay regional, and neither the US nor the USSR took the opportunity to use their other nuclear forces to attack the other country directly. This was not a popular decision among the upper military leadership of either nation. In fact, both nations were near military coups. While such a thing was basically unthinkable in the US, the horrors being reported out of Florida and the gulf coast were beginning to change many military minds. The stories vary about who was trying to do what, but I tend to believe that it was pure luck that nobody at the DoD tried to knock over the civilian leadership that night or the day after. And even if someone had, I'm not sure that it would have been an unpopular move.

Earlier, on October 22<sup>nd</sup>, President Kennedy addressed the nation and stated:

*"It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union."*

And yet... there was no retaliation against the Soviet Union. The reasons for this are obvious and reasonable; the US had just suffered shocking losses, and an attack on the USSR would only assure even worse losses with the inevitable Soviet response. At the time... sure, it made all kinds of sense, I suppose. But given what happened later? The world would have been better off if Kennedy had unleashed the Navy and the USAF to drop nuclear whoopass on the Soviets. We would have pasted them and saved the planet a hell of a lot of trouble. But drawing a line in the sand and then not striking back after the enemy not only stepped over the line, but chucked nuclear missiles over the line... well, that's why Kennedy is at the top of every "worst President of all time" poll. Had the populace known just what was going on in the White House, I'm sure there would have been open revolt.

When Johnson published his memoirs in '68, he spilled the beans about the events in the Oval Office over those few days. It was clear that he and Kennedy had truly had a falling out shortly afterwards... the old Texan sure didn't cut JFK any slack. According to Johnson, on the morning of the 28<sup>th</sup>, Kennedy spoke directly with Khrushchev over the phone. Kennedy was prepared to make serious concessions to the Soviets, including withdrawing nuclear missiles from Turkey and Italy, something Johnson and the Joint Chiefs saw as tantamount to surrender. However, Khrushchev beat him to the punch. Apart from the military in Cuba, the Soviets had suffered no losses. Preliminary reports from Cuba and the Gulf Coast states described vast destruction, with some reports indicating that Cuba had been nearly entirely wiped out, the entire island reduced to a strip of radioactive green glass. It seems the Soviets, who had been somewhat uncertain about Kennedys stability, were now convinced that the United States would

be perfectly happy to destroy the Soviet Union as well. They believed that Kennedy and the Americans had been driven insane, into a genocidal blood-lust. They weren't far wrong, of course. And so, Khrushchev led off with some pretty desperate peace offerings, including pulling Soviet forces out of Cuba (not that there were any left, of course) and backing off from western Europe.

Kennedy was startled into silence. He had planned to make his own peace offerings but they were suddenly made unnecessary. Instead, he simply assured Khrushchev that if there were no more aggressive moves from the Soviets and if they pulled their military forces back, the US would withhold further retaliations. Johnson noted that, to his credit, Kennedy did tell Khrushchev that there would be an accounting for what the Soviet missiles had done to the US.

Many in the DoD were downright pissed and wanted to carry the war to the USSR. Others were secretly relieved; the American death toll was already known to be stupendous, and any furthering of the conflict would only increase that. Perhaps worse, the conflict had shown to be almost completely chaotic. Once nuclear weapons started going off, both the Soviets and the US had lost control of their military forces in the region of Cuba. A larger war at that time would have been a complete disaster. But nobody, and I mean nobody, saw the nuking of dozens of American cities as anything but an act of war.

The American public was understandably both panicked and enraged. All across the country cities emptied as citizens sought shelter in the country or in their home bomb shelters. The economy essentially stopped for several days. When news finally started getting out that the war was, at least for the time being, over, people slowly began to return to their lives. But the full horror of the death and destruction started to become clear; as it did so, Kennedys apparent unwillingness to carry the war straight to Moscow became a national scandal. Even as the administration extracted further concessions out of a subdued Soviet Union, the people of the United States vented their outrage publicly, loudly and widely. TV and radio broadcasts, newspapers and magazines, all carried stories of acts of retaliation carried out in the US against those considered to be at all allied with Communist or Russian interests. Those of Russian, or even just Eastern European, extraction were in great danger, with many burned out of their homes, beaten and even murdered. Many pundits called for the destruction of the Soviet Union by nuclear hellfire, a sentiment shared by an overwhelming majority of the public.

In contrast, the Soviet public, not having been attacked themselves, did not have the same sense of outrage against the US. Instead, what filled the USSR was a sense of fear that the US would in fact bomb them into oblivion. This fear ran all the way through the military and the political structure. As in the US, there were those who thought the best approach was to launch a full strike against the US, before the US got around to doing it to them. But those better informed knew that the Soviet Union was nowhere near well enough equipped to deal the US a nuclear deathblow fast enough or complete enough to prevent the US from utterly destroying them. And so the other view took hold: appease the US.

"Panic" was the watchword of the day. Cities emptied not just in the United States, but across Europe as well. West Berlin went into complete lockdown; the border regions between East and West Germany turned into complete chaos as civilians, and more than a few military personnel, scattered. Many East Germans, fearing that war was upon them, dashed across the borders of West Berlin and West

Germany, often doing so via the simple expedient of crashing cars and trucks into border stations to do so. Often they found that the East German guards that they expected to shoot them had themselves abandoned their posts. Even so, hundreds died and thousands were injured.

The US was wounded, but its military was nearly at full strength. Its populace was becoming united in anger and purpose. And it was in no mood to be lectured or pestered. Kennedy was convinced by both his advisors and the Joint Chiefs to adopt that attitude himself, and make it policy. In early November, Adlai Stevenson announced at the UN that the United States was now in a state of permanent military readiness, and that any attack on the US would result in a nuclear response (the fact that Kennedy had made the same promise before the war, and had failed to follow through on it, was muttered low, angrily and often). Further, it was announced that the US had had enough of Soviet expansionism. It would no longer tolerate any form of military aggression from the Soviets, including even the act of selling weapons to countries the US disapproved of. No action was taken in the Security Council, and none could... the USSR would simply veto anything they didn't like.

One point the US made perfectly clear: the Soviet Union was not welcome in the western hemisphere. Soviet military forces that decided to approach North or South America would be subject to immediate force. Soviet "trade missions" and "fishing trawlers" and the like would be scooped up and sent home, no matter where they were. Sure, it was strictly speaking piracy, illegal as hell. Anyone who pointed that out would be countered with the notion that vaporizing Birmingham was illegal too. The Soviets protested, of course; a few of their ships decided to probe to see if the US meant what it said this time. And they discovered that the US actually did mean it. Bear bombers that crossed into Alaskan or Canadian airspace went home with bullet holes, shrapnel damage and failing engines; suspected Soviet submarines were subjected to immediate barrages with depth charges and torpedoes; surface vessels were boarded, their crews removed and the ships were then scuttled, or chased off by destroyers and subs with rules of engagement that simply read "shoot first." The Soviets complained to anyone who would listen, but they soon decided that they were better off not pushing their luck. The point was now clear that the US would control its hemisphere as it chose.

Much of the South was bombed to rubble, the population reduced to the status of refugees. The economy was in a state of freefall; productivity around the nation had dropped off as workers stayed home in droves. This had several immediate effects. The first was that vital industries were temporarily nationalized. The Kennedy administration sent the Army and National Guard to secure rail lines, airports, airlines, powerplants, hospitals and general utilities. In some cases they were there to maintain order and prevent damage from panic and looters. In other cases, as with the rail lines, they were there to actually operate them... and, where necessary, go to absent workers homes and convince the workers, sometimes at gunpoint, that they really needed to go back to work. This was not a universally popular decision, as the Rock Island riot and subsequent massacre showed; but in the years since it has been accepted as a necessary evil. Had force not been employed to maintain not just order but operations, the situation across much of the country could have been far, far worse.

As TV broadcasts and wire photos began to show the devastation, Americans began to question just how it was going to rebuild. The bombed-out cities of course reminded many people of the bombed out

cities of Europe and Japan, twenty years earlier. At the end of World War II, Americas allies and former enemies could rely on support from the United States. Granted, a lot of that support came with strings attached... occupation forces, American oversight of the rebuilding of the local system of governance, political concessions. But now, after the Cuban War was ended and America needed aid... little came.

In some cases, aid was instant and important. Canadian resources and personnel swarmed south. Tens of thousands of medical professionals, firefighters and even lumberjacks flooded into the danger zone; the first flight of medical supplies and doctors left Ottawa while the warheads were still dropping. From Britain, Australia and New Zealand came further assistance, as much as could be spared. But from the rest of Europe, from NATO as a whole... aid was cautious, to say the least. Kennedy had promised a nuclear retaliation against the USSR, but had not done so. Many saw this as weakness. And for Europe, a weak America – brought low by dozens of nuclear strikes – was a dangerous ally when faced with an intact Soviet Union just to the east. So some in Europe were stingy with aid so as to not antagonize the Soviets, others were stingy because they felt that a larger war was immanent and that they'd need the supplies and manpower themselves soon enough.

The first impressions formed in the first few days after the war became set in stone. What people thought they saw became what the world was. And this set the course for the next twenty years.

The American public saw itself as under assault, in a state of permanent war against an implacable foe on the other side of the world. The American public saw their leadership as feckless chickenshits because they did not exact bloody retribution. The American public saw aid flood in from the English speaking world... and from nowhere else. This wasn't exactly true, of course... aid came in from everywhere, even Red China. But the vast need far outweighed the resources that came in. Aid from the Anglosphere was loudly touted, in no small part thanks to the visible efforts of the likes of elder statesman Winston Churchill to rally British aid.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, before the fires had even started to burn out, groups were doing their political calculus. Communists, pinkos, fellow travelers, socialists... they were all headed for the hills, or flat-out leaving the country. Their voices vanished. But on the other side, anti-communist groups like the John Birch Society and the Objectivists gained in prominence. No matter how nutty you might be, if the enemy you rant and rave about actually drops atom bombs on your countrymen, your stock is going up. And so the discussion tilted.

Within continental Europe, the fear of an undamaged Soviet Union muted public support for the United States; additionally, public denunciations of what many in the European left saw as the result of American imperialism and anti-Cuban genocide really did not help to seal Americas love of Europe. This led to resentment against pretty much the rest of the industrialized world. But it also led to a sense of national identity... and a strong isolationist tendency in both the public and in policy.

In the end, the American public saw the world as now divided between the Anglosphere, the Enemy, Latin America... and the Cowards, as Americas European and Asian allies became rather unfairly known. The chattering classes in the papers and magazines, and on the radio and TV, pushed this agenda. It

wasn't that there was a conspiracy to do this... it's just that their political opposition was busy getting lynched in the streets.

In the Soviet Union, the populace saw the United States as a wounded but dangerous – and dangerously unstable – animal. The official story in the USSR was that the war was of course a result of American imperialism, but that Soviet strength had convinced the Americans not to dare attack the USSR directly. But with the tales of an utterly ruined Cuba, and with the memory of Nazi genocide a generation earlier still fresh in their memories, the Soviet people wanted nothing more than to not poke the beast. Best to let the US heal on its own and not taunt it.

For several years following, the United States enjoyed at least some moral support from most nations of the world. The scenes of devastation in ruined American cities were shown widely... along with scenes of American resolve and American rebuilding. Conversely, scenes of devastation in Cuba were not widely shown.

Immediately after the bombs stopped going off, the US Marines and US Army invaded Cuba in vast numbers, easily defeating the few remnants of Soviet and Cuban military forces. Castro, it seemed, had been vaporized along with half of Havana; but Che Guevara was captured, healthy and unharmed, and taken to the US for trial. Oddly, no Soviet personnel were ever sent home from Cuba. None, it seemed, had survived either combat or internment. American forces in Cuba took an extremely dim view of the Communists.

At the same time, the surviving Cuban people were largely seen by the American public as victims of Communism. While American military rule of Cuba was strict, and those known to have been in the Communist political, military or police system fared extremely poorly, the Cuban people were allowed to rebuild in relative peace. After several years, when the destruction in American cities was cleared out and rebuilding well underway, Americans started flooding into Cuba in order to rebuild... and to buy. Of course, Cuban real estate was going for rock-bottom prices, and many Americans moved to Cuba. Many of those displaced from their bombed-out American cities were given incentives to move to Cuba. By 1969, the American civilian population of Cuba was estimated to be nearly half a million.

The rest of the world expected to see the American giant stomping around the world. And for the first few years after the Cuban War, the American military in the form of carrier groups and B-52 and B-58 bombers made great shows of American military might... but almost always restricted to the western hemisphere or trips to British Commonwealth nations.

Across the world, the Soviets – and Red Chinese - backed off from their expansionist policies. All efforts to spread Communism in the western hemisphere ended... a decision made easier after a simultaneous series of assassinations of virtually all known Soviet agents in Latin America in July, 1963. While never confirmed, the CIA was unanimously assumed to have been the force behind that operation. The war between North and South Viet Nam came to an abrupt end in November of 1963, with an armistice signed in Saigon and an agreement that left each nation to its own devices.



An unprecedented arms buildup followed the war, with three new Enterprise class nuclear carriers quickly authorized by Congress. Even though the first had proven to be vastly over budget and was of course taken out by a single torpedo, the Enterprise had become, like the Arizona and the Maine before it, the symbol of the cause. Changes were made to the design, including a new reactor bay structure that would allow easier replacement of the reactors, increased armor plating around the waterline and numerous automatic gun turrets meant to be used to destroy incoming torpedoes.

While US Navy aircraft carriers had fared poorly in the conflict, somehow this only served to endear them to the US public. It was aircraft from the Enterprise and Independence that had struck the first counterstrike. Even though the nuking of Cuban missile sites led other sites to launch their own missiles, in the view of most of the public the A-4s had prevented more missiles from being launched in the first place. On the other hand, long range ballistic missiles, both ICBMs and SLBMs, had sat out the war. There were those who somehow associated this with uselessness, or even cowardice. Ballistic missiles began to fall out of favor in the US.

Everybody who has examined the issue rationally and coolly has concluded that ICBMs and sub-launched ballistic missiles were perfectly valid nuclear delivery systems. But the extreme passions of the time produced some odd results. The heady optimistic days of the 1950's were suddenly over, replaced with a definite grimness. Comedy disappeared from the TV screens and radios, and was not to reappear for more than a year. And rockets, which had increasingly symbolized the future throughout the prior decade and a half, now seemed impotent. Exactly how this came to be is unclear. A vague grumble somehow turned into an accepted cultural understanding, without anyone having actually tried to make that happen. Ballistic missiles began to fall out of favor.

Many in the USAF and USN quietly took satisfaction in the sudden decline in ballistic missile popularity: it meant that bombardment aircraft would fulfill the nuclear bombardment role. And while public opinion on matters of weapon system procurement is generally not of great import to the military, public opinion matters to Senators and Congressmen, and the opinions of Senators and Congressmen matter for military funding. And so ballistic missile funding began to be curtailed in favor of other systems. The B-70 program, cancelled several years before, was revived and modernized, the first B-70B flying in 1967. God were those beautiful machines! The Dyna Soar program, which had been technically progressing but finding political problems, found new support. The first USAF Dyna Soar flew in 1966.

NASA also received a hammer blow. The Apollo program was well underway when the Cuban War broke out, but the loss of Houston and the general overall state of things after the war threw NASA's plans into utter chaos. The budgetary situation clearly meant that the US had more important things to do than send capsules to the moon. Many felt sure that Americas days as a spacefaring nation had ended just as they'd begun. Funding wasn't entirely cut, of course; the Mercury and Gemini programs continued, and development of the Apollo Command and Service Modules continued. But the Saturn development program faltered.

With cities in ruin and millions dead, there were millions of jobs needing doing in the reconstruction. Beginning in early 1963, several Depression-era concepts were revived, including the National

Reconstruction Act and the Works Projects Agency. These had the result of draining unemployed and underemployed people, men and women, from Northern cities and funneling them south to work jobs related to the reconstruction effort. In the last year of the Kennedy administration, Vice President Johnson began pushing a series of entitlement programs called the "Great Society." Despite many public speeches and attempts at bullying members of Congress, Johnson was not able to get his economic policies enacted, although the Voting Rights Act was passed to great fanfare. Johnson just wasn't the force he had been.

Despite the depression, death and destruction, the mid 1960's became a period of great advancement economically and socially. Coupled with a major income tax rate cut pushed forward by Kennedy, the millions of jobs created in the reconstruction effort resulted in historically low unemployment rates. With the WPA providing free transportation and housing for men (and their families) willing to work, and social welfare programs being largely defunded, slums and poverty-stricken rural areas emptied out with people flooding the south for the assured work. The need for workers was so vast that previous racial issues simply evaporated, with the federal WPA project mandating strict rates of pay for specific jobs – no variation based on seniority, experience or race. Prior to the Cuban War, several political pundits had foreseen that the 1960's would be an era of racial and social strife... but instead the 1960's ended with overall prosperity and general social cohesion. Of course, basic human nature helped out here. The best way to stop two people fighting is to give them a common enemy they hate more than each other. The Soviets did that for us in spades.

Unsurprisingly, Kennedy lost the '64 election. There was talk that he didn't want to run, but there were few in the Democrat Party who saw any viable alternatives. Vice President Johnson was a shadow of his former self; after extremely animated anger in the first days after the war, trips to his home state of Texas to see the devastation first hand seemed to drain the life out of him. His failure to get his "Great Society" programs pushed through Congress was the end of his political ambition. The Kennedy/Johnson campaign was the most lackluster in American history, and for the first time the sitting President lost every single state.

President Goldwater took office in January, 1965. Goldwater continued the de facto policy of militarized isolationism that had begun in late 1962. He had run on a platform promising an updated Monroe doctrine, and once in office, he rammed through that policy in the first few days. Where the earlier Monroe Doctrine established that European powers were not to meddle in the affairs of New World nations, and the US would not meddle in the internal affairs of Europe, the Goldwater Doctrine made official the existing policy that Soviet influence in the western hemisphere was at an end, that Communism in any form would not be allowed to spring up in any New World nation... and that the United States would withdraw from entangling alliances outside of the western hemisphere, with the exception of mutual aid pacts with Britain and the other English-speaking nations that had aided the US in its time of trial. Much to the shock of many members of the NATO alliance, the US announced its intention to partially withdraw. With the US in disarray and an economy in chaos, the US was not as able – or as willing – to play planetary policeman. Additionally, the isolationist movement coupled with a more general annoyance with NATO allies who did little in the wake of the Cuban War made the American public unwilling to spend money defending others. So as the French had done, the US pulled out of

NATOs integrated military command in early 1964, with a planned complete withdrawal of all American military forces – apart from the occasional naval vessel visit - by mid-1968.

The US Army and Marine Corps made a habit of showing up unannounced everywhere from Mexico to Tierra Del Fuego. Marxist rebel groups found not only that their support from Mother Russia had dried up, but that if they tried to rise up and overthrow a government, the full weight of the US military would descend upon them. Often enough this occurred without the consent of the local national government... but nobody was willing to stand up to the US military. Local tin-pot dictators quickly discovered that if they played along, benefits of American friendship would soon follow. If they opposed US policy... well, it's known that a lot of Latin American politicians woke up with their throats slit or their presidential palaces smoking ruins after a visit from a B-52. This was all legally dubious. But as President Goldwater famously said to a reporter in March, 1966, when asked about Latin American discontent over American actions... "Yeah? What're they gonna do about it?"

At the same time, Communism in all its forms was declared illegal within the US. It became a Federal crime to publish Communist propaganda, to try to convert people to Communism, or to be involved in Communist organizations. A lot of people pointed out that this sort of thing was unconstitutional as hell, but even the ACLU couldn't be bothered to take up the case. Heck, a lot of their best lawyers and lobbyists and activists were arrested.

In the course and aftermath of the war, well over two million Cubans died. Once American occupational forces rooted out the last of the Communists and Communist sympathizers, reconstruction began. Reconstruction was of course controlled by Washington, with both political reconstruction as well as physical reconstruction being done as America dictated. Cuba quickly prospered; the worst of both the Communist as well as the Batista-era policies were done away with, replaced with a Constitution, a strictly enforced law code and generally benign neglect so long as the Cubans played along. One area that caused great annoyance among the people of Cuba was the American appropriation of the region around Guantanamo Bay to the eastern tip of Cuba. Initially the US government claimed that due to the Cuban bombing of the Marine Corps base there, the entire region was contaminated... but nobody bought that since there were a whole lot of other places in Cuba that had been blasted much harder that had been quickly made livable. The US government soon stopped claiming much of anything about the region, other than it was now a Federal reserve.

For years, conspiracy theorists believed that the Guantanamo area was being used as a concentration camp for Communists. Of course, we now know that's not the case, but it's interesting to point out that even when many Americans did believe that... nobody much cared. Certainly nobody of any importance made any effort to protest a concentration camp full of murderous Commies. "Fuck those guys" was the universal sentiment.

A lot of books have been written about how the US basically re-ordered all of Latin America and the Caribbean after the Cuban war, so I don't really need to go into all the brushfires and bullshit. A lot of professional talking heads didn't like it, thought it was none of our business, blah, blah, blah... but the results spoke for themselves. After a decade of trouble, diplomacy, negotiations, US military force,

targeted executions and outright bribery did a bang-up job of sweeping out Communism and corruption. By the late 1970's, nobody could argue that central and South America weren't some of the safest, most advanced and prosperous places on Earth, with a standard of living nearly equal to that of the US itself. Historic basketcases like Haiti were knocked over, the corrupt political leaders dumped out of office and caretaker governments installed.

The Cuban War killed millions, destroyed whole cities, spread misery on a scale not seen since World War II. But it was turned into an opportunity: an opportunity to remake the western hemisphere into Americas image, and an opportunity to try new things. This included Project Orion.