

Back on the brink

Exactly 60 years after first being transfixed by the threat of nuclear war, NIGEL ROBERTS is fearful once more.

Sixty years ago – on Monday evening, October 22, 1962 – I watched the most riveting speech I've ever heard and seen.

I was an 18-year-old American Field Service (AFS) international exchange student in the United States. Given that I eventually became a political science professor, it's not too surprising I was keenly interested in learning as much as I could about US politics. Four days earlier, for example,

my AFS host father had taken me to Cleveland, Ohio, to see President John F Kennedy campaigning on behalf of his Democratic Party candidates in the US mid-term elections.

On October 22, I'd been invited to have dinner with the chairperson of the AFS committee in the town in which I was living. Knowing my interest in politics, Mrs Spelman told me when I arrived that it had been announced that the President would be addressing the nation in a short while. She asked me if I'd like to watch the broadcast. Yes, please, was my response.

In the early 1960s, the US had only three nationwide television networks: ABC (American Broadcasting Company), CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System) and NBC (National Broadcasting Company). Competitors such as CNN (Cable News Network) and Fox News didn't exist then; they were products of the 1980s and 1990s respectively.

The White House had asked for and was given simultaneous broadcast time on all three networks. As a result, almost everyone in the US who tuned into their local television station at 7pm (east coast time) that evening saw and heard what I did. The US and the world learnt what had been happening during the previous week, because October 22, 1962, was the exact mid-point of the 13-day Cuban missile crisis.

The President told the nation that "within the past week, unmistakable evidence has established the fact that a series of offensive missile sites is now in preparation on that imprisoned island. The purpose of these bases can be none other

than to provide a nuclear strike capability against the Western Hemisphere."

To counter this, Kennedy implemented "a strict quarantine on all offensive military equipment under shipment to Cuba", and chillingly warned that the US would "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".

Thankfully, Nikita Khrushchev, the chair of the Council of

Ministers in the Soviet Union, backed down: on October 28, the 13th day of the crisis, he agreed to "take appropriate measures to discontinue construction of the [Cuban] facilities, to dismantle them, and to return them to the Soviet Union".

The world breathed a collective sigh of relief, and a mere nine months later, the US and the USSR also agreed to ban nuclear testing in the atmosphere, in space and underwater.



In 1962, I didn't think the missile crisis would result in a nuclear war. Of today's crisis, I'm not so sure.

speech, Putin warned that "if the territorial integrity of our country is threatened, we will without a doubt use all available means to protect Russia and our people." He added, "This is not a bluff".

Perhaps it was the optimism of youth, but in October 1962, I never did think the Cuban missile crisis would result in a nuclear war.

Of today's crisis, I am not so sure. By invading Ukraine, Putin has already defied both logic and world opinion. As he grows more desperate and more dictatorial, I really fear he could cross a line that the world has studiously avoided since August 1945. ■

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