

2022 Carnegie International Nuclear Policy Conference

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Presidential Opening Address

Speaker

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Tino Cuéllar: Thank you, James. Thank you, Toby. Thank you all of you who are here. Thank you all of you who are watching us online. By the way, the session at 4:00 PM tomorrow is not what I'm going to talk about right now.

[laughter]

I do have to note, despite the seriousness of the moment we're gathering in, that there's no better place to have a nuclear conference than an underground bunker like where we are right now, so welcome.

I want to take you back to exactly this minute 60 years ago. You can't imagine that this conference would begin without some reference to what was happening at this exact moment in the early 1960s when the world was in crisis, when John F. Kennedy had just given a speech about the presence of nuclear capable missiles in Cuba, and Nikita Khrushchev was gradually coming to the realization that the United States would not accept the presence of those missiles.

President Kennedy had ordered what he and his team called a naval quarantine, and the world was on the edge of a crisis that it had never seen before. People around the country, as they took in Kennedy's words and certainly around the world to some degree, were realizing that they were not in the world that they had been living in before. In the US, people were buying food, supplies of gas. Around the world, in military bases, universities, schools, teachers, churches, people were wondering if they would ever see the same kind of day or if they would ever see many days going forward in their lives.

As all this crisis was playing out, at 9:09 AM, an American plane took off from Florida on its way to Cuba. The reconnaissance plane entered Cuba just before 10:00 AM, literally 60 years ago, was shot down. At that point, as the world was on the brink of a crisis of epic proportions, Kennedy's team scrambled. They didn't know what was next. They didn't know whether the letter that they were planning to send to Khrushchev would succeed. They didn't know how best to use the time that they had left. Of course, as you know, crucially, to the dynamic RFK, President's brother, was sent to meet with Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet ambassador.

Now, as a lawyer who spent time in the US government, I had many meetings in the Department of Justice. I can tell you what my impression was when I first walked into

the Attorney General's office, in Main Justice, a building not far from here, just down the street. Many of my colleagues were reflecting about how that was the place where some of the key decisions in our government's history around civil rights had taken place. I have to tell you, as a highlight of how I have common cause with you, that my first impression when I walked into that room was, wow, this is where the Dobrynin and RFK meeting occurred.

The meeting takes place, as you know, and within a short period of time, Khrushchev announces that the crisis is coming to a close. The missiles are withdrawn from Cuba, and ultimately, JFK gives a speech, and he expresses a great deal of relief. As most of you know, all of you know, really, that's not the end of the story, of course. Later, Jupiter missiles were removed from Turkey, and, certainly, that's not the end of the story either, because here we are, 60 years later, and the world has seen extraordinary changes. I'll highlight some of them because they're relevant to our discussion today, and then I'm going to highlight some things that have not changed.

Seventy percent of the world is now connected roughly to the internet. Information and disinformation spreads like wildfire. We have, in the course of even just 10 years, from about 2008 to 2018, reduced global poverty, extreme poverty, from about 15% to 8%. The world came close to having nearly 70,000 nuclear warheads at one point. Now, we have under 13,000. Before we declare victory and recognize the incredible capacity of human ingenuity, take a moment to recognize how all these facts highlight the ambiguity of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

What does it mean? What are humans capable of? Yes, they are capable of coming back from the brink of destruction. We got there, and we were fortunate. We were incredibly lucky, and the world we're living in today is still one where two basic facts are part of the reality that we face. Number one, the world still has nuclear weapons, and if any of you have a clear plan for how those weapons are going to end up not being a part of human history anymore, we want to hear it. We have some work to do on that score.

Number two, we gather amidst dark shadow and that's the terrible brutal reminder that aggressive war is not a thing of the past. If you combine those two facts, the reality that aggressive war continues and the presence of nuclear weapons, you get to the core of the hard work that we have ahead of us. Now I know that many of you are in a position to break new ground here, to forge ties, over coffee from our nuclear-themed baristas, to build these deeper relationships you have. As you do that and think about all the questions that are going to be part of the program, I just want to highlight three that I think are particularly important that I hope you'll spend some time reflecting on.

The first one is the elephant in the room. Eighty years almost into our history with nuclear weapons, what is the absolute best wisdom in this room, in this conference and around the world on the dynamics of escalation? How we understand its dynamics, how it works, how you de-escalate wisely, thoughtfully, smartly, and in non-naïve way.

Number two, on the eve of this conference, we also have to recognize the world faces, another crisis of staggering proportions and that's a climate crisis. For that

reason, interest in civilian nuclear power is higher than it has been in a generation. How do we square that interest in civilian nuclear power with the continuing dangers that many of us will naturally see around proliferation?

Number three, many of us became aware of the nuclear threat, became interested in the subject, because we had some exposure to this problem in popular culture. I still remember the movie *The Day After* from when I was a little kid, for example. What is the connection between the general public, social movements, the mass understanding of these complicated issues, and the work we're doing here? How do we square that with the reality that, of course, the dynamic we're in obliterates nuance, erases sometimes the texture of the difficulty of the problems that we face?

That's plenty of work for the next couple days, no doubt. I want to highlight that as we think about doing that work and reflect on the 1960s, I hope that we'll see in the 1960s not only a cause for alarm, concern, the stakes, but also perhaps a reason for hope. Here, I will just note that whenever I get a little concerned about these issues, whenever I think about some requests from James and Toby about the Endowment, and why we need to continue spending money on this, which I'm happy to do, I reread JFK's speech at American University, where he spoke at the commencement, and many of you are familiar with the speech.

It's a speech of quite profound eloquence and particularly intellectual honesty. I would particularly direct you the very last few words where he highlights how so much depends not on stark revolution in human nature but a gradual revolution in human institutions that is honest, that is not naïve, that takes seriously the real divisions and concerns around the world. I hope that just as he kept that in mind in the 1960s, we will keep that in mind here in our underground bunker.

Thank you very much and good luck to all of us.

[applause]

[00:08:32] [END OF AUDIO]