

# Bill Nemitz: It's been 60 years since the Cuban missile crisis. This is worse.

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By Bill Nemitz

March 13, 2022



There I stood at the gas station last week, watching the pump race past \$40 as I filled up my car's 10-gallon tank. But strangely, the money flowing out of my wallet wasn't uppermost on my mind.

I was lost in thought about the Cuban missile crisis. And the nagging sense that as the war in Ukraine ratchets up with each passing day, we are once again hurtling toward the unthinkable.

Two years ago at this time, we had only begun to face the existential threat of a global pandemic. Now, as COVID-19 recedes with the winter snow, a newfound fear takes root: In his maniacal crusade to subjugate Ukraine, how far will Russian President Vladimir Putin go? Could this still unfolding war, bad as it already is, get infinitely worse?

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"Right now, Vladimir Putin is the most dangerous person in the history of the world," Sen. Angus King, choosing his words carefully, told me over the phone from Washington, D.C., Thursday evening. Then, those words still hanging in the air, he let out an audible sigh.

"The irony is that during most of his career, he's been viewed as coldly calculating and not erratic," King continued. "And now, there's a lot of emotion. These decisions are being made on emotion. And the problem is he made a terribly mistaken assumption about the Ukrainian

people and their mystical connection to Russia.”

I was only 8 when President John F. Kennedy and Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev squared off over the placement of Soviet nuclear warheads in Cuba, a mere 90 miles from the U.S. mainland. I was just old enough to know something bad was happening, but too young to grasp that, unless someone blinked, we were one bad decision away from what the military strategists so antiseptically called “mutually assured destruction.”

King was a freshman at Dartmouth College during those fateful two weeks in October of 1962. His most lasting memory?

“I was in Hanover, New Hampshire, and I remember my parents – who, remember, lived down here in Alexandria, Virginia, right outside of Washington – called me and said, ‘Whatever you do, don’t come home. Stay up there. Because it’s safer.’ If there was an atomic attack, Washington would have been the first target. And I remember that very vividly.”

Khrushchev, of course, eventually did blink and World War III was averted. Now, with an increasingly isolated Putin blasting his way into infamy, we find ourselves wondering once again: Could this thing go nuclear? And if so, what would that mean not just for Ukraine, not just for Maine, but for the entire human race?

King, who has spent more hours than he can count in recent months being briefed as a member of the Senate’s armed services and intelligence committees, agreed that when it comes to someone pushing the nuclear button, this is “the most dangerous moment we’ve had since the Cuban missile crisis.” At the same time, he noted, the fact that that finger belongs to Putin makes the current situation even more perilous.

“There’s no more politburo in Russia,” King said. Meaning that Khrushchev, whose official title was chairman of the Soviet Union’s council of ministers, had to balance – and answer to – competing interests inside his government as he tried to stare down Kennedy and the United States.

Not so with Putin, who by all indications now answers to no one but himself. As ever-widening global economic sanctions pile up against his people, he remains fixated on the delusional belief that he’s restoring the Russian motherland to its past power and glory. The suffering of the Russian populace is secondary to Putin – if it matters at all.

“That’s why sanctions are of limited utility with dictators,” King said. “I remember interviewing (then-Sen.) George Mitchell when I was with Channel 10 (now Maine Public) back in the early ’90s about Iraq. And George said, ‘Well, we’re going to impose sanctions on Saddam (Hussein) and their GDP is going to shrink 2 percent – and if that happened here, we’d have riots in the streets.’ And I thought, ‘Yeah, but I don’t think Saddam cares. He’s still going to have his Mercedes and his caviar.’”

Add to Putin's myopia and isolation the heroic leadership of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky these past few weeks, along with the steely-eyed defiance of the Ukrainian people, and it's hard not to wonder: How many Ukrainians must Putin slaughter before the United States and the rest of NATO decide that direct intervention is no longer a distant scenario but a moral imperative?

And if that happens – say, deployment of an air defense shield to protect Ukraine from the non-stop barrage of incoming Russian rockets and artillery – then what?

King's fear: Putin, insisting that he's simply defending the Russian homeland (Ukraine included) might use tactical nuclear weapons to turn the tide of a conventional war that's at a stalemate. Even such a limited nuclear strike, King said, "would still be horrendous."

And if we suddenly see a mushroom cloud over Kyiv, *then* what?

If only we knew.

"So much of this is in Putin's head," King said. "It's hard to have intelligence. We don't know what he's thinking."

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At the same time, he added, "It's hard to see how he ultimately survives this. But in the meantime, he's in charge. He is the one who is going to make the decisions. And it's very dangerous when you're dealing with people who (A) are trapped, (B) think they're on a mission from God, and (C) have nuclear weapons."

Given all that, it's mind-boggling these days to see this crisis being reduced to complaints about the price of gas or, worse yet, exploited for political gain. I winced last week when the Maine Republican Party tweeted: "Avg. Maine gas price when (Gov. Janet) Mills took office: \$2.23/gallon. Avg. Maine gas price today: \$4.09/gallon."

As even those Republicans know, that whopping \$43.87 I paid last week for a fill-up is the work of Vladimir Putin, not Janet Mills. By taking such a cheap shot, they succeed only in spotlighting their willful blindness to the seriousness of this moment.

This is no time for politics, folks. Or for that matter, fixating on the price of gas.

This is a time for humanity.

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