



## Will Romney Rule Out Talks With Iran?

Either by coincidence or design, tonight's foreign policy debate between presidential candidates Barack Obama and Mitt Romney falls on the 50th anniversary of a Monday night when President John F. Kennedy warned the nation and the world of a nuclear threat from Soviet missiles stationed on the island nation of Cuba. It was on October 22, 1962 that Kennedy delivered the [nationally televised address](#) that officially put the United States and the Soviet Union on the brink of nuclear war.



The secretly installed missiles, the president said that night, threatened the safety and security of not only the United States, but other nations in the Americas and throughout Latin America as well.

Each of these missiles, in short, is capable of striking Washington, D. C., the Panama Canal, Cape Canaveral, Mexico City, or any other city in the southeastern part of the United States, in Central America, or in the Caribbean area.

Additional sites not yet completed appear to be designed for intermediate range ballistic missiles — capable of traveling more than twice as far — and thus capable of striking most of the major cities in the Western Hemisphere, ranging as far north as Hudson Bay, Canada, and as far south as Lima, Peru.

Kennedy announced that night that a U.S. naval blockade of Cuba was already under way. Any Soviet ship bound for Cuba with offensive weapons would be turned back, he declared. He did not describe it as a blockade, however, choosing deftly to label the action a “quarantine.” It was, in fact, a distinction without a difference, but it sounded less belligerent. A blockade is universally recognized as an act of war. A quarantine sounds like a public health measure. Kennedy said he would not “at this time” deny “the necessities of life as the Soviets attempted to do in their Berlin blockade of 1948.” At the same time, he claimed the right to do so if events warranted it. “This quarantine will be extended, if needed, to other types of cargo and carriers.”

Along with the threat of confrontation at sea with a rival nuclear superpower, Kennedy's speech carried a stern warning to the Soviet Union.

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.

In other words, all-out nuclear war.

Forty years later, in preparing America for its second war in 12 years with Iraq, President George W. Bush quoted [another line from President Kennedy's speech](#) to buttress his case for preventive war.

As President Kennedy said in October of 1962, “Neither the United States of America nor the world community of nations can tolerate deliberate deception and offensive threats on the part of any nation, large or small. We no longer live in a world,” he said, “where only the actual firing of



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on October 22, 2012

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weapons represents a sufficient challenge to a nation's security to constitute maximum peril."

The analogy didn't fit for two reasons. First, Kennedy was dealing with the fact of Soviet nuclear missiles a short distance off our shores. Bush was responding to intelligence reports that Saddam Hussein had a nuclear capability yet undeveloped. And Kennedy did not launch a preventive or pre-emptive strike, though he was urged to do so by both military and political leaders. White House tapes declassified in 1997 show how urgently that solution was pressed upon him.

"I just don't see any other solution except direct intervention — right now," said U.S. Air Force Chief of Staff Curtis Le May. Army Chief of Staff Earle Wheeler recommended "a surprise air strike, the blockade and invasion."

"Don't frig around, go and take the missiles out," said David Shoup, commandant of the Marine Corps. Even Sen. J. William Fulbright, the Foreign Relations Committee chairman who would later become famous for his opposition to continuing the war in Vietnam, recommended a pre-emptive strike on Cuba.

"Some people would say, 'Let's go in there with an air strike,' Kennedy replied to Fulbright. "You'd have these bombs go off and blow up 15 cities in the United States, and they would have been wrong."

Instead, Kennedy quietly agreed to a deal with the Soviet Union. They would remove their missiles from Cuba and we would, some months later, remove the Jupiter missiles we had stationed in Turkey. On the face of it, it seems a reasonable solution. Though the missiles in Turkey had been openly placed there years before, the Soviets were no more sanguine about U.S. missiles aimed at them and stationed near their border than we were at having Soviet missiles aimed at us from a mere 90 miles off the coast of Florida. Each side was capable of reaching the other with missiles based within its own borders and, unknown to the Soviets, the United States was already planning to replace the outdated Jupiters with missile-bearing submarines. Yet a condition of the agreement, insisted on by Kennedy, was that it be kept secret. Then, as now, any concession to a foreign foe was likely to be branded as "appeasement" and invite comparisons to Neville Chamberlain at Munich.

Perhaps that's why the White House over the past weekend was quick to squelch [reports of an agreement](#) between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran to begin bilateral talks over Iran's nuclear enrichment program.

"It's not true that the United States and Iran have agreed to one-on-one talks or any meeting after the American elections," said National Security Council spokesman Tommy Vietor, though he added the Obama administration "said from the outset that we would be prepared to meet bilaterally." The administration, in other words, is not ready to talk about talking with Iran.

Or is it? Could it be the story of an agreement on talks was leaked from the White House in order to lure Mitt Romney into taking a hard line against such talks? Both Obama and Romney have said they would not allow Iran to develop a nuclear weapon, but Romney has gone a step further saying repeatedly that he would prevent Iran from developing even the "capability" of producing such a weapon. How would he do that?

Romney declined to answer when asked over the weekend if he as president would be open to bilateral talks with Iran. During the 2008 campaign, Obama was ridiculed as "naïve" by primary opponent Hillary Clinton, now his Secretary of State, and Republican John McCain for saying he would be willing to enter into bilateral talks with Iran without preconditions. On Sunday, Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) was quick to pounce [on reports of an agreement for negotiations](#), saying "the time for talking is over" and calling for a U.S. policy aligned with Israel's against Iran's nuclear program.



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“We need to have red lines coordinated with Israel and end this before it gets out of hand,” Graham said in an interview on Fox News. Will Romney, who insists on “no daylight” between the United States and Israel concerning Iran, take the same line? His surrogates on the talk shows circuit Sunday were insisting the governor views war as a last resort. But if he should rule out negotiations, the road to that resort might be shortened considerably. In that case, Obama, whose position on Iran is scarcely different from Romney’s, could make his opponent appear eager to take the country into another Middle East war. By being “open” to negotiations, Obama could adopt as his own the argument made by R. Nicolas Burns, who negotiated with Iran as under secretary of state during the George W. Bush administration. Negotiating with Iran makes sense, [Burns told the \*New York Times\*](#).

“What are we going to do instead?” he asked. “Drive straight into a brick wall called war in 2013, and not try to talk to them?”

What neither campaign seems to acknowledge is the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate of all 16 U.S. intelligence agencies, which stated that Iran had abandoned its nuclear weapons program four years earlier. An NIE last year found no evidence that Tehran had decided to direct its nuclear development, which officials there say is for energy production and medical use, into a weapons program. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta has said there is no evidence that Iran has made that decision, a point he repeated as recently as last month.

George W. Bush led this nation and a grand “coalition” of others into war in Iraq over “weapons of mass destruction” that were not there. As a result, he left the White House a very unpopular president. Romney may not get to the White House at all if he gives voters the impression he is determined to skip a few stops on the road to the “last resort” called war. We have been down that road before.

*Photo: In this Oct. 16, 2012, file photo, Republican presidential candidate, former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney speaks while President Barack Obama listens during the second presidential debate: AP Images*



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