

H.W.  
B. is a fine fellow  
cl that you might  
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# we almost went to war

Barton J. Bernstein

Thirteen years ago, during the week of October 22-28, 1962, the two great powers stood near the abyss of nuclear war. It was a fearful week, one that opened with President John F. Kennedy's declaration on Monday evening, the 22nd, that there were Soviet "offensive" missiles in Cuba, that they must be withdrawn, and that he would establish a quarantine, and that closed with the Soviet promise on Sunday morning to accede to the American demand. It was a time, as Premier Nikita Khrushchev later said, "when the smell of burning hung in the air."<sup>1</sup> During the week, President Kennedy placed the likelihood of disaster at "somewhere between one out of three and even."<sup>2</sup>

It was a week when the Administration skillfully "managed" an often trusting, usually uncritical press<sup>3</sup> and found the nation eager to rally

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Newly declassified materials suggest that the Cuban missile crisis may not have been necessary and that in achieving a momentary victory the United States may have learned the wrong lesson

around the President and the flag. The nation was in peril, citizens believed, and the quarantine was essential—possibly as the first act in a series of escalating tactics to remove the nuclear threat 90 miles away. Few Americans then challenged the need for Kennedy's action, or lamented his decision to eschew private negotiations with Khrushchev before moving toward public confrontation, or questioned whether the missiles constituted (as Administration spokesmen indicated) an imminent military threat to the United States. Only in tiny pockets in the nation did some citizens raise troubling questions about the creation, necessity, and handling of the crisis, and their voices were seldom heard and their reasoning al-

*Is there a plan to brief and brain-wash the key press within 12 hours or so?—N.Y. Times—Lippmann—Childs—Alsop—key bureau chiefs?*

White House Memo of  
October 22, 1962

*There has undoubtedly been great pressure on Khrushchev for a considerable time to do something about our ring of bases, aggravated by our placing Jupiter missiles in Turkey.*

W. Averell Harriman,  
Memo of October 22, 1962

*The Soviets... were humiliated by the missile crisis... [Khrushchev] never recovered from the setback.*

Charles E. Bohlen,  
Witness to History,  
1969

most never reported in the press.<sup>4</sup>

John F. Kennedy had known about the missiles in Cuba for nearly a week, when, on Monday evening, October 22, he announced their presence to a frightened nation already troubled by the Soviet military build-up 90 miles from the United States. The missiles, he insisted, were "offensive," and constituted "an explicit threat to the peace and security of all the Americas." The President declared that "the purpose of these bases can be none other than to provide a nuclear strike capability against the Western Hemisphere." Prompt action was essential, he asserted, for the 1930s "taught us a clear lesson: aggressive conduct, if allowed to go unchecked and unchallenged, ultimately leads

to war." America, though not eager for war, would risk it, Kennedy stressed, "at any time that it must be faced." He implied that the quarantine, if it did not halt the build-up in Cuba and lead to Soviet withdrawal of the missiles, might be followed by war, even nuclear war.<sup>5</sup>

His speech was an uneasy mixture of restraint and belligerence, of caution and provocation. Kennedy was not prepared to accede to the missiles, but he was also stopping short—in the early stages of confrontation—of an attack on Cuba. There would be no immediate air strike or invasion, only a quarantine directed primarily against the Soviet Union. In his analysis the Soviets were the aggressor, Cuba a victim.

The nation publicly cheered Kennedy's resolution and determination. There were some grumblings—mostly from critics who regretted that the President had acted belatedly or too cautiously. If the nation was in peril, as Kennedy said, why not invade Cuba and destroy the missiles? Not only Republicans but some prominent Democrats offered the bold counsel of bellicosity—immediate invasion.<sup>6</sup> Even Sen. J. William Fulbright, Democratic chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, wanted a prompt invasion to eliminate the missiles.<sup>7</sup> Apparently he believed that none, or almost none, of the sites was operational and that the Administration could safely launch an invasion before the missiles would be ready.

"Kennedy warns nation of peril,"<sup>8</sup> reported the New York Times on Tuesday. "We are in as grave a crisis as mankind has been in," Dean Rusk, the Secretary of State, declared.<sup>9</sup> The United States navy, American officials stressed, would sink any ship that did not respect the quarantine. The two great powers seemed perilously close to war. Was a collision course inevitable? Would the Soviet Union back down or at least avoid a confrontation at sea? The world waited for evidence of Soviet restraint, as Kennedy and his associates made it clear that they would not allow ships with Soviet weapons to reach Cuba. "The greatest danger of war as we saw it then," a high ranking U.S. official later ac-

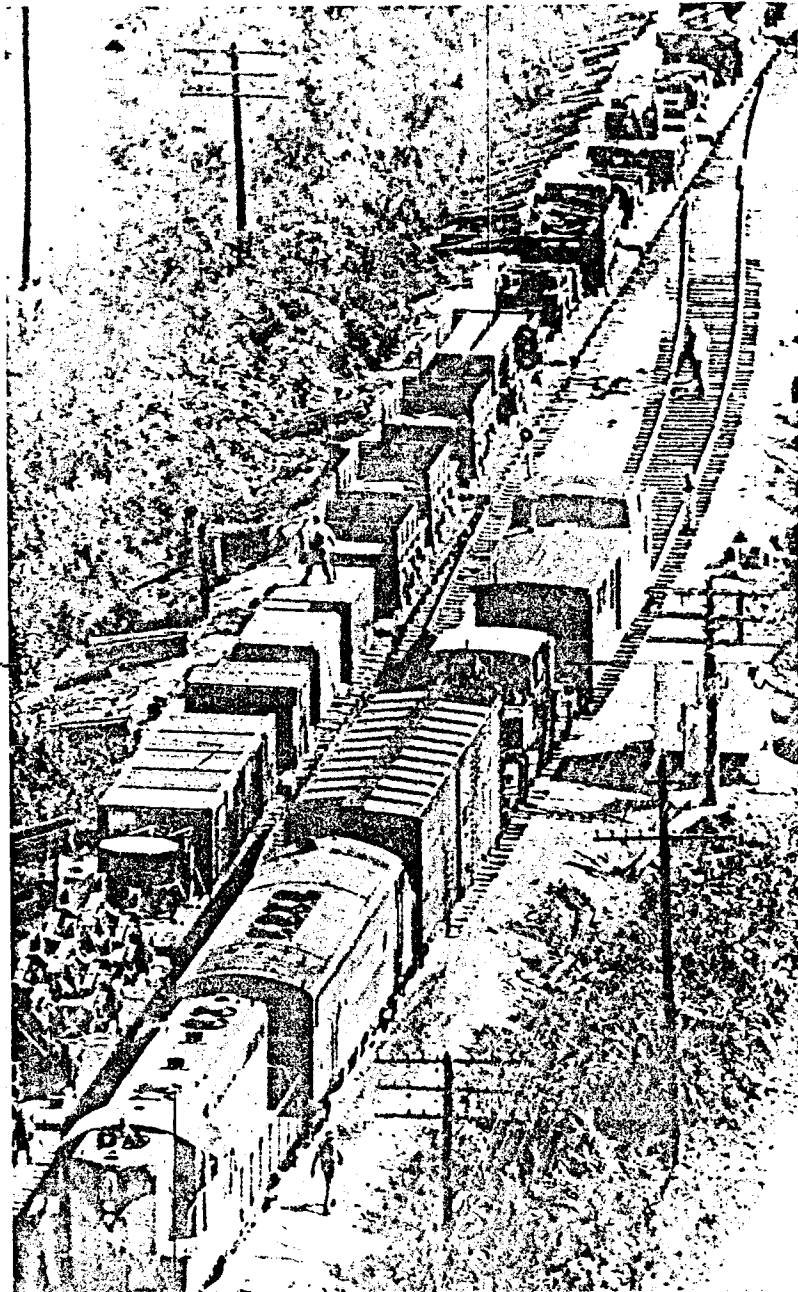
knowledged, "was that we would sink a Russian ship trying to run the blockade. If that happened, it seemed highly doubtful that Khrushchev would withhold further action."<sup>10</sup> How quickly, many Americans worried, would a shoot-out at sea escalate into nuclear war?

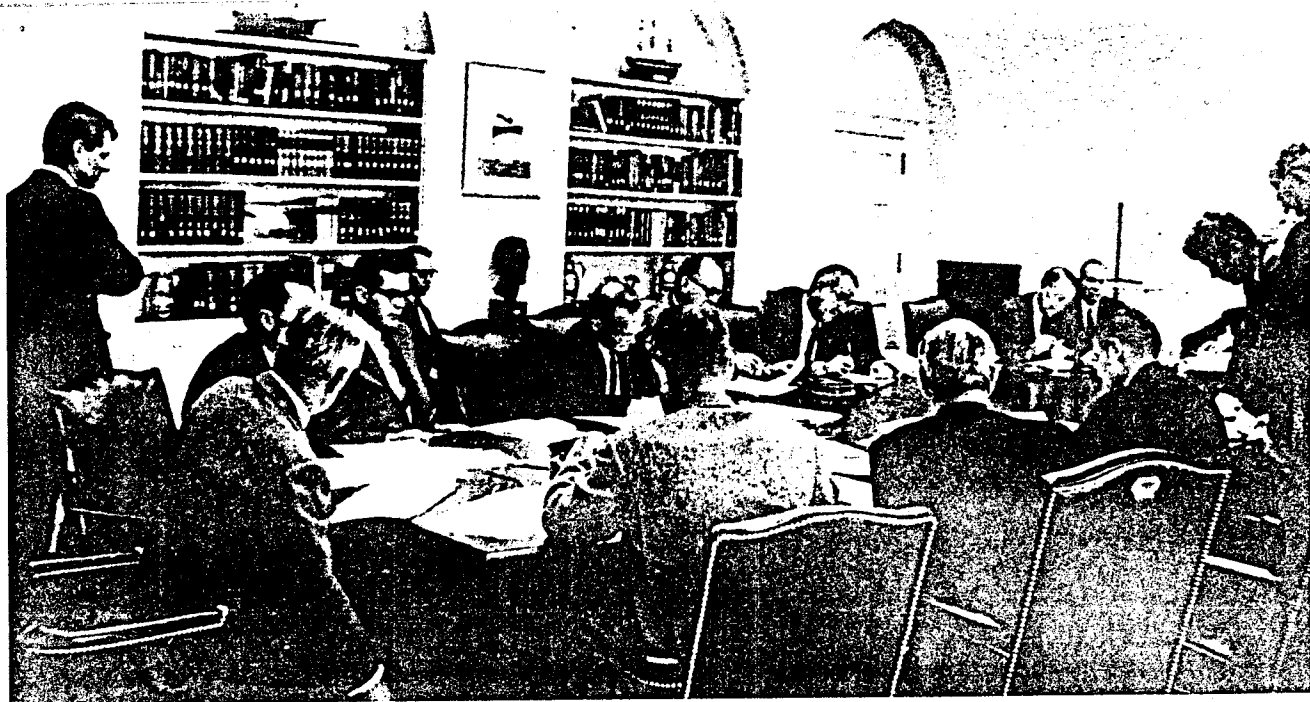
Throughout the world, U.S. military forces were on special alert, ready to respond to Soviet moves. Pentagon spokesmen reported large U.S. troop movements to the Gulf

area, the dispersal of military aircraft and a special SAC alert. Part of the B-52 force, with a full load of nuclear bombs, was in the air at all times.<sup>11</sup>

On Wednesday morning, the 24th, the U.S. navy established the quarantine of Cuba. Would the So-

**Show of strength. A train carrying troops, artillery, ammunition and trucks into southern Florida as part of a build-up of forces to back the threat of a United States invasion of Cuba unless terms were met.**





An historic meeting of President John F. Kennedy (standing, second from right) with his cabinet and advisors at the White House during the Cuban missile crisis. The President's brother, Robert, then attorney general, is standing at left.

viets challenge it? At first, the skimpy evidence was sufficient to justify gloom in America. "This could well be our last conversation," a Soviet press officer told his American counterpart. "New York will be blown up tomorrow by Soviet nuclear weapons." A Soviet general told American officials that Soviet ships would challenge the blockade.<sup>12</sup>

A few hours after the quarantine went into effect, Khrushchev declared publicly that his government "will not take any reckless decisions." He suggested a summit conference, branded American actions "piratical," and warned that "we shall have to resort to means of defense against an aggressor [the United States] to defend our rights. . . ." He left unclear whether he would test the quarantine.<sup>13</sup>

Late on Wednesday afternoon, Americans soon learned, the Soviet ships closest to Cuba appeared to have altered their course.<sup>14</sup> "We're eyeball to eyeball," Secretary of State Dean Rusk allegedly said, "and I think the other fellow just blinked."<sup>15</sup> Just before noon on Thursday, a Pentagon official reported that "at least a dozen Soviet vessels have turned back because—according to our information—they might have been carrying offensive materials."<sup>16</sup>

This welcome news suggested a brief respite, perhaps even a settlement. In a background briefing, Rusk was quick to warn the press against optimism. "The key issue is the presence of these weapons in Cuba," he emphasized.<sup>17</sup> President Kennedy, in rejecting the relaxation of the quarantine or a summit conference, also stressed that the danger still remained: the missiles were still in Cuba.<sup>18</sup>

To add to the pressure on the Soviets, a State Department official underscored a sentence from Kennedy's Monday night address: "Should these offensive military preparations continue, thus increasing the threat to this hemisphere, further action will be justified."<sup>19</sup> U.S. officials kept warning that the missile sites would soon be operational and that military action—directed against Cuba—would soon be necessary. Presumably there were only a few more days before the United States would act—to destroy the sites to protect America.<sup>20</sup>

Frequent news reports of U.S. troop movements and the U.S. build-up in the Caribbean added credibility to this threat. The government's handling of the news in this crisis was, as Arthur Sylvester, Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, later admitted, part of the "arsenal of weaponry" used by the

Administration.<sup>21</sup>

On Saturday, the 27th, the Soviet Union made an explicit public offer to settle the crisis: withdrawal of the missiles in Cuba and dismantling of the sites in return for a U.S. non-invasion pledge, elimination of the quarantine, and removal of U.S. missiles from Turkey. Kennedy and his advisers were unwilling to yield on the last condition—removal of missiles from Turkey—and therefore publicly rebuffed the offer. They demanded that the Soviets reduce their conditions to the non-invasion pledge and elimination of the quarantine, and they prepared for an imminent attack on Cuba. That day, it appeared, negotiations might founder on the issue of the U.S. missiles in Turkey.<sup>22</sup> Were they worth having the two great powers go to war? Would neither the United States nor the Soviet Union back down on this issue? Fortunately, the Soviets retreated under the threat of an attack on Cuba, reduced their conditions, and the two great nations reached a settlement.

Since that October, with the flurry of memoirs, many analysts have ex-

amined the events of that week, but many important issues remain in dispute: Were the missiles in Cuba an imminent military threat that overturned the military balance of power? If not, why did the Soviet Union, according to Kennedy and his advisers, put the 42 medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) in Cuba and presumably plan to add about 24 intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs)? If they were not

attack." Most members of the ExComm (Executive Committee of the National Security Council) agreed that the addition of missiles in Cuba, though outflanking the U.S. radar warning system,

- did not add to the likelihood of a Soviet first strike,
- did not reduce the impact of a U.S. first strike, and
- did not add significantly to Soviet retaliatory capacity after a U.S.

adversaries can trust "our courage and commitment . . . if we tolerate the known presence of offensive nuclear weapons [in Cuba]." He quickly disposed of contrary arguments. "Retorts from either our European allies or the Soviets that we can become as accustomed as they to accepting the presence of MRBMs have," he wrote, "some logic but little weight. . . ."27

For most advisers, this "courage and commitment" thesis explained Soviet behavior and determined the need for the Administration to remove the missiles. But why a public confrontation first? There was a safer route.<sup>28</sup>

The career diplomat and Soviet expert Charles Bohlen argued for private negotiations first. On the 17th and 18th, when the ExComm was still deliberating tactics to secure removal of the missiles, Bohlen proposed that Kennedy communicate first with Khrushchev privately and then decide, after the Premier's response, on whether a blockade, invasion, or air strike was necessary. "No one can guarantee," Bohlen informed Kennedy, "that withdrawal can be achieved by diplomatic action—but it . . . seems essential that this channel be tested out before military action is employed."<sup>29</sup> Llewellyn Thompson, another Soviet expert and career diplomat, as well as a number of advocates of blockade, also favored this course.<sup>30</sup>

Recently declassified materials indicate that the career diplomats were the chief proponents in the ExComm of using diplomacy to resolve the crisis. At minimum, as Bohlen argued, a private approach would more clearly define Khrushchev's mood and commitment and thereby allow the Administration more accurately to gauge the Premier's future actions, in response to American tactics, if he refused to accede privately. Curiously, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, also a foreign affairs expert but not a career diplomat or a specialist in Soviet affairs, favored a sharply different course: military action to remove the missiles *without* any prior political action or warning.

Summarizing the ExComm's deliberations for Kennedy, who had

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**"A missile is a missile; it makes no great difference whether you are killed by a missile fired from the Soviet Union or from Cuba."  
—McNamara**

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an imminent threat and did not overturn or even significantly alter the military balance, why did Kennedy move toward a public confrontation without first trying private negotiations with the Soviet Union? What was the role of domestic and of international political considerations in shaping his tactics? Why didn't Kennedy accept the proposal of some advisers, as well as Khrushchev, for a summit conference during the crisis? And why, on Saturday, the 27th, when the only issue blocking settlement was withdrawal of U.S. missiles from Turkey, did the Administration reject this condition and risk prolonging the crisis and moving toward nuclear war? Some recently opened (often recently declassified) materials at the Kennedy Library allow us to address these questions with more authority.

#### **The ExComm's Analysis**

On October 17, five days before Kennedy's speech, Theodore Sorensen, his trusted assistant, informed the President that most advisers agreed, "these missiles, even when fully operational, do not significantly alter the balance of [military] power." (The missiles, Sorensen explained, "do not significantly increase the potential megatonnage capable of being unleashed [against] American soil, even after a surprise

first strike."<sup>23</sup>

Robert McNamara, Secretary of Defense, who understood nuclear strategy, argued in the ExComm, "a missile is a missile. It makes no great difference whether you are killed by a missile fired from the Soviet Union or from Cuba."<sup>24</sup> After the crisis, Roswell Gilpatric, Deputy Secretary of Defense, explained, "the military equation was not altered" by the introduction of missiles into Cuba. "It was simply an element of flexibility introduced into the power equation that the Soviets had not heretofore possessed."<sup>25</sup>

Despite these judgments, Administration spokesmen told trusting reporters during the crisis that the missiles imperiled the United States, and that is what the press told Americans, who would have been reluctant to believe the contrary.<sup>26</sup>

Why, according to the Administration, did the Soviets put the missiles in Cuba? Most ExComm members concluded that the Soviet Union was testing America's courage and commitment, her will and credibility—perhaps in preparation for a demand on Berlin or pressure elsewhere.) The missiles, they maintained, were not a military but an international political threat. Summarizing the ExComm discussions for Kennedy, Sorensen explained that neither America's allies nor her

purposefully absented himself from the meeting. Sorenson wrote, "If you accept the Bohlen plan, we can then consider the nature of the letter to [Khrushchev]."<sup>31</sup> As Walter Lippmann was soon to lament in his column,<sup>32</sup> there was no letter, no effort at diplomacy before quarantine. Why not? Why did Kennedy reject this tactic by the 19th or 20th? It was not primarily because Bohlen left Washington, for his own memoir suggests that he knew by the 18th that he was clearly in the minority in the ExComm, and his own conversation with Kennedy probably confirmed his sense that his counsel of diplomacy first would not succeed.<sup>33</sup> Why did contrary counsel win out?

Over the years, some participants and analysts have stressed two complementary explanations: Kennedy feared losing time and letting the missiles become operational during negotiations, for that would weaken his position; and he feared losing the initiative by letting Khrushchev learn that the U.S. government was aware of the missiles, for the President believed that he had to take firm action when disclosing knowledge of the missiles.<sup>34</sup> Both explanations, whether taken separately or together, seem unsatisfactory.

The "operational missile" theory is very questionable, for it assumes that the Administration believed that the missiles were not operational on about the 20th and would not be operational for more than a week (about the 29th). A recently declassified CIA report, dated October 23, undercuts most of this assumption. The agency concluded that four of the six MRBM sites were "fully operational" on the 22nd, and the other two had an "emergency capability."<sup>35</sup> Presumably the earlier CIA reports (still classified) had forecast, with reasonable accuracy, this rate of progress on the sites. So we must conclude that Kennedy knew by the 19th or the 20th, if not earlier, that most of the MRBMs were, or would soon be, operational.

The "initiative" theory is also suspect. First, contrary to assumptions, U.S. intelligence reports estimated by the 16th that Khrushchev probably believed that Kennedy already

knew about the missiles in Cuba.<sup>36</sup> Second, Administration members presumably recognized that any loss of U.S. initiative would be quite temporary, and that the United States, with military superiority in its own hemisphere and with overall nuclear superiority, could regain the initiative quickly. Private negotiations, in turn, had the advantage of giving Khrushchev the time to respond without his being frozen into a public position and left facing a stark choice—military confrontation or retreat and humiliation for himself and the Soviet Union.

### Politics and Personality

Because the "operational missile" and "initiative" theories are unsatisfactory, we must consider other likely reasons why Kennedy eschewed private negotiations and moved directly to public confrontation. (The memoirs and archival sources on Kennedy's prior 21 months in office, especially after his unpleasant meeting with Khrushchev in Vienna and the debacle at the Bay of Pigs, emphasize that he felt beleaguered in foreign affairs: he had lost prestige, failed to win victories, met defeats, and feared that his courage and commitment were doubted at home and abroad.) Even America's great nuclear superiority had not brought him a triumph. He could not even stop the Berlin Wall, which he, like most Americans, viewed as an aggressive Soviet act.<sup>37</sup> A public confrontation and a public triumph would allow him dramatically to recoup these losses and would persuade various "constituencies"—citizens at home, allies abroad, and the Soviets—of his decisiveness and commitment.

Still suffering from Khrushchev's bullying and bluster at Vienna, Kennedy worried that the Premier would try to humiliate and coerce him. (After Vienna, Kennedy said, "If Khrushchev wants to rub my nose in the dirt . . . it's all over.")<sup>38</sup> How sweet, how necessary, given Kennedy's personality and his perception of the crisis, to stand up to Khrushchev dramatically, to block the Premier, to "rub [his] nose in the dirt," and to affirm American prestige and power. Who then could doubt

America's and Kennedy's credibility and will?

In addition, there is another likely reason why Kennedy moved so speedily to public confrontation without first trying private negotiations. He feared that the convincing news of the missiles would leak out at home, that citizens might panic, that bureaucrats and politicians, already pillorying him for what the GOP called the "tragic policy of irresolution" in dealing with Cuba,<sup>39</sup> would block his program in Congress and possibly force a harder line in foreign policy. With the congressional elections scheduled for early November, with Cuba a major issue in many contests, and with major newspapers already piecing together the story of missiles in Cuba, Kennedy could not risk the delay of private negotiations. To head off the stories on the missiles and to gain two days, Kennedy and McNamara telephoned publishers of three newspapers and got them, in the name of national security, to kill this news. The President had to act quickly, publicly, forcefully.<sup>39</sup>

The political danger was recognized by at least some members of the ExComm. As C. Douglas Dillon, Secretary of the Treasury and a Republican, noted during a meeting of the ExComm: "Have you considered the very real possibility that if we do not remove the missiles promptly the next House of Representatives is likely to have a Republican majority? This would completely paralyze our ability to react sensibly and coherently to further Soviet advances."<sup>40</sup>

Kennedy and his advisers were not acting primarily to protect narrow partisan interests, though they could not be totally indifferent to such concerns, but out of a larger sense that an electoral setback in November would impair their capacity to advance the national interest. For them, this was the reasoning of patriots, not narrow partisans.

Throughout the week of crisis, President Kennedy steadfastly demanded that the Soviets dismantle the sites and withdraw their missiles. That was not a negotiable demand. In mid-week, when U.N. Secretary-General U Thant suggested a brief

relaxation of tension, with the United States suspending its quarantine and the Soviet Union its arms shipments to Cuba, Khrushchev endorsed the proposal but Kennedy rejected it. "The existing threat was created by the secret introduction of offensive missiles into Cuba," Kennedy informed U Thant, "and the answer lies in the removal of such weapons."<sup>41</sup> The President wanted to maintain the pressure.

Other Administration representatives explained that the proposed delay for negotiations was unacceptable because it would allow the missiles to become operational and therefore make removal more difficult. The trusting press, kept ignorant of the CIA reports that the MRBMs were operational, uncritically passed on this explanation to the American people.<sup>42</sup>

On Wednesday, the 24th, Khrushchev suggested a summit conference to discuss the missiles and possibly other issues dividing the two nations. All of Kennedy's advisers agreed that removal of the missiles should remain unnegotiable, but some thought that a summit meeting then could be very useful. It might ease tensions, reduce the possibility of escalation and nuclear war, and maybe produce "a turn-around of some significance [in] Soviet policy." According to a secret memorandum (recently declassified), Khrushchev "might be at a crossroads in policy," the missiles in Cuba represented his effort "to explore the 'hard' fork," and the summit might tempt him "to explore the alternative [fork]." The results, according to some advisers, including probably Llewellyn Thompson, might be agreements on nuclear free zones in Latin America and Africa, the reduction of tensions over Germany, and the easing of bitterness between NATO and the Warsaw Pact.<sup>43</sup>

Kennedy rejected a summit then, presumably because he feared that it might suggest that his commitment was flagging, that he lacked the courage for nuclear diplomacy, that he might accede to the missiles in Cuba. How, he undoubtedly believed, could he risk a summit if there was no Soviet promise in ad-

vance to withdraw the missiles? In making this decision, he encountered little criticism at home but did miss an opportunity to reduce the likelihood of nuclear war during the crisis week—either through mistakes at the operational levels or through escalation of the confrontation by the leaders of both nations.

#### Missiles in Turkey

On Friday, the 26th, the Soviets privately suggested a settlement—withdrawal of their missiles in return for an American pledge not to invade Cuba.<sup>44</sup> That offer seemed acceptable, but the ExComm decided to delay a formal acceptance while studying this plan. By the next morning, optimism in Washington collapsed under the impact of troubling events. The Soviets had shot down a U.S. "spy" plane over Cuba; the F.B.I. reported that the Soviet U.N. delegation was burning codes and papers in likely preparation for war; and another message, with more demanding terms, had arrived from the Kremlin. "It was the blackest hour of the crisis," reported Roger Hilsman, then head of State Department intelligence.<sup>45</sup>

The Soviets increased their terms to include an additional condition—America's withdrawal of her missiles from Turkey.<sup>46</sup> Why didn't the Administration accept this additional condition? The missiles in Turkey were obsolete, vulnerable, and provocative; they were useful, at best, for a first strike, not for deterrence or a second strike. Six days earlier, on Sunday, the 21st, Kennedy had discussed them with C. Douglas Dillon, who according to the President's scrawled note (recently declassified), "stated that the Jupiters were sent [to Turkey] because they were flops, and this would have been proved if they [had been used]."<sup>47</sup> They were, in short, placebos for the Turks, whose government found them useful for domestic politics.

To the Soviets, the Jupiter missiles were a threat to security and prestige. On October 22nd, five days before the Soviets suggested the trade, W. Averell Harriman, former ambassador to the Soviet Union and a "trouble shooter" for the Presi-



Khrushchev and Kennedy at Vienna in 1961. One confrontation set the stage for another.

dent, advised Kennedy, according to a recently declassified document, "There has undoubtedly been great pressure on Khrushchev . . . from his military and from the more aggressive group [in the Kremlin] to do something about our ring of bases, aggravated by our placing Jupiter missiles in Turkey." Premier Khrushchev, (Harriman explained, has been compelled to act in order "to offset the humiliation" of U.S. nuclear bases on Soviet borders.<sup>48</sup>)

Harriman's unstated implication was that removal of the missiles from Turkey might lead to Khrushchev's withdrawal of the missiles from Cuba. (Perhaps Harriman's proposal was the basis for Lippmann's suggesting these terms in his widely read column on Thursday.) It is important, Harriman counseled, that "we recognize the conflict that is undoubtedly going on within the Soviet Union, that Khrushchev has been induced to take this action . . . by the tougher group. Consequently, we should handle the situation . . . in such a way as to make it possible for Khrushchev to save his own face, to blame this tough group."<sup>49</sup>

At the ExComm meeting on Saturday, the 27th, after the arrival of the Soviet note demanding removal of the missiles from Turkey as part of

the *quid pro quo*, some advisers, led by the military chiefs, proposed a zany plot: (The United States would disarm her missiles in Turkey and secretly inform the Soviet Union "prior to moving against the Soviet missiles in Cuba"—first by an air strike, and a few days later by an invasion.<sup>50</sup>)

With many documents still classified, we can only speculate why this scheme seemed attractive. It would remove both the missiles and Castro ("the bone in our throat"), establish America's will to use force (at least in her sphere), and yet accede to some Soviet demands. The scheme had obvious disadvantages: It ranged far beyond the immediate problem of the missiles in Cuba, expected Soviet leaders to accede to attacks on Cuba and the killing of thousands of Soviet soldiers and citizens, disregarded the importance of Cuba ("support for national liberation movements") in the ideological and political struggle dividing the Soviet Union and China, and also seemed to reduce America's commitment to Turkey.

At one point on that troubled day, the zany plot apparently became attractive to many members of the ExComm. "On the final crucial Saturday night," Sorensen later disclosed, "the hawks began to dominate the discussion and [the President] adjourned our 'Ex Comm' meeting to halt the momentum, to block this dangerous action."<sup>51</sup>

While blocking this bizarre scheme, the President also refused formally to endorse the Soviets' proffered trade requiring withdrawal of U.S. missiles from Turkey. Why? Unlike Lippmann, who had first suggested the exchange publicly, the President and most advisers viewed it as a threat to their commitment and courage. They did not want to risk appearing to abandon an ally—even a weak ally like Turkey. "Appearances contribute to reality," Kennedy later emphasized in explaining his policy.<sup>52</sup>

Once more, the problem of commitments to weak allies, as Lippmann had often warned since the assertion of the containment doctrine, jeopardized American security

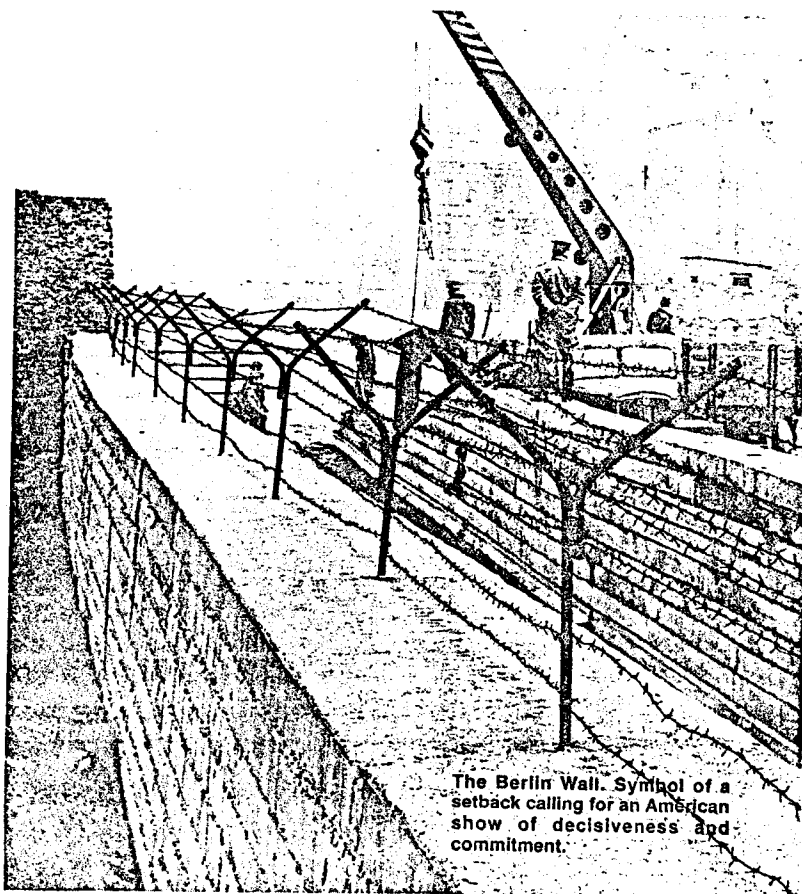
and narrowed the range for diplomacy. The President, as Robert Kennedy later explained, "obviously did not wish to order the withdrawal of missiles from Turkey *under threat* from the Soviet Union."<sup>53</sup> Once more, the requirement of establishing courage shaped government policy, even though the President had decided well before the crisis to phase out the missiles from Turkey. "We all agreed," wrote Robert Kennedy later, "that if the Russians were ready to go to nuclear war over Cuba, they were ready to go to nuclear war, and that was that. So we might as well have had the showdown then as six months later."<sup>54</sup>

To put more pressure on the Soviet Union, Robert Kennedy privately told the Soviet ambassador on Saturday evening that the United States would launch an attack on Cuba by Tuesday, the 30th, if the Soviets did not agree by Sunday to remove the missiles. Offering a small carrot with his big stick, the Attorney-General also indicated that, if NATO approved, the Administration would later withdraw the missiles from Turkey.<sup>55</sup>

Would this guarded, hedged, private offer suffice? There could be serious problems. How confident could the Soviets be that the Administration could deliver on this hedged offer, especially since Turkey had already thwarted Kennedy's efforts to remove the missiles? The offer did not meet Soviet demands for an explicit public agreement. And, by refusing to make the terms more palatable and to soften the impact of a public defeat for Soviet policy, the President was refusing to protect Khrushchev from public humiliation. Would the Soviet Union choose defeat? The Kennedy brothers were not optimistic. The President had not abandoned hope, Robert Kennedy later wrote, but it "was a hope, not an expectation."<sup>56</sup>

#### Perils of Invasion and War

By Saturday, an American invasion of Cuba seemed perilously near. At the United Nations, Adlai Stevenson, the American ambassador who had earlier suggested to President Kennedy a swap of the



The Berlin Wall. Symbol of a setback calling for an American show of decisiveness and commitment.

missiles in Turkey,<sup>57</sup> said that the United States could not delay an attack much longer if the Soviets refused America's terms.<sup>58</sup> To put more pressure on the Soviets and to prepare for the invasion, the President announced the call to active duty of 24 troop-carrier squadrons from the Air Force reserve. "The expectation [that Saturday night]," later wrote Robert Kennedy, "was a military confrontation by Tuesday and possibly [Sunday]."<sup>59</sup> War seemed dangerously near.

Would John F. Kennedy have sought to delay longer? Would he have tried other approaches, offered other terms? Two Administration memoirists, including Robert Kennedy, indicate that the die was cast, that time had run out. "The United States would have no real choice," concluded Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "but to take action against Cuba [that] week." Then what would the Soviets have done? President Kennedy later told Schlesinger, "If we had invaded Cuba . . . I am sure that the Soviets would have acted. They would have to, just as we would have to. I think that there are certain compulsions on any power."<sup>60</sup> Kennedy's later analysis may well have been correct, for could Khrushchev have afforded to stand by while the United States attacked Cuba, killed Soviet soldiers, destroyed the missiles, and removed Castro?

Alone among the Administration memoirists, Theodore Sorensen was less fearful later about the inevitability that week of an attack on Cuba. He suggested that Kennedy might have delayed and maneuvered.

**The potentially fatal paradox behind American strategic policy: that the country might have to go to war to affirm the very credibility that is supposed to make war unnecessary.**

"The President would not, in my judgment," Sorensen wrote in 1965, "have moved immediately to either air strike or invasion." But even Sorensen followed his sanguine analysis with a painful admission: "the pressures for such a move on the following Tuesday were rapidly and irresistibly increasing."<sup>61</sup> How long, after all, would the President have risked holding out—if at all? Within his inner council, the "hawks," who had gained the support of some "doves," were now dominant. By Saturday night, when he adjourned the ExComm meeting, he forecast that events "could go either way."<sup>62</sup> War or peace hung in the balance.

#### Costs of Victory

Fortunately, on Sunday morning, the Soviet Union announced that it had decided to back down. American nuclear strength had triumphed and Khrushchev accepted the public humiliation while asserting that he had acted for peace.<sup>63</sup> For most observers, then and now, the crisis had produced a great victory for the United States and John F. Kennedy. Was it a desirable and worthwhile victory? Can America afford such victories?

There were neglected costs at home. The crisis helped confirm the dangerous pattern, inherited from earlier administrations, of employing deceit and excessive secrecy on matters of foreign affairs to keep the Congress and the American people behind official policy. Why could not the nation be informed at the beginning of the public crisis that the MRBMs were already operational? Why not tell the people that the missiles, in the judgment of most ExComm members, did not constitute an imminent military threat? Consider what it means when a White House adviser, Brig. Gen. Chester Clifton, Kennedy's military aide, could ask whether there is "a plan to . . . brainwash the key press"<sup>64</sup>

The crisis produced a mixed legacy in dealings with the Soviet Union and with our allies. To Charles de Gaulle of France, for example, America's unilateral actions in the crisis confirmed what he had been

arguing for some time: Membership in the American-dominated NATO was too dangerous; America could drag European nations into war ("annihilation without representation"), and America would sacrifice her allies to her own interests. Kennedy's refusal to sanction an explicit trade of the missiles in Turkey did not undercut de Gaulle's analysis. But Kennedy's demonstration of courage, as well as his seemingly moderate decision to begin with a quarantine, increased respect for his judgment and his will among other European leaders. The President's actions may have speeded de Gaulle's inevitable departure from NATO and, at the same time, strengthened ties with those other nations which were committed to the alliance.

The resolution of the crisis led both to an accelerated arms race with the Soviet Union and to detente. Both great powers, having looked into the abyss, were chastened and sought to reduce their differences. The non-invasion pledge, despite continued CIA attacks on Cuba, reduced the importance of Cuba as an issue dividing the two great powers. The President's triumph gave him the political capital at home to push through the test-ban treaty, despite opposition from the military and right-wing groups at home. In the Soviet Union, the public defeat and humiliation of Khrushchev contributed to his deposal and probably helped to produce the triumph of those forces that wanted a larger nuclear arsenal to match the United States. His policy of moderation, of allowing a missile gap, had proved bankrupt. The non-invasion pledge could not compensate for the great public defeat. The Soviets concluded that they could no longer afford to be at a nuclear disadvantage. After the crisis, a top Soviet official said privately, "You Americans will never be able to do this to us again."<sup>65</sup> By about 1968-69, the Soviets had greatly expanded their missile arsenal, closed the large gap created by Kennedy's missile-building program, and the two nations were at approximate parity.

Kennedy's triumph in the missile



crisis, while allowing him more flexibility in pursuing policies and giving him considerable political capital, may well have taught the American people the wrong lesson: that America could achieve dramatic victories in the Cold War and impose her will through a show of strength. In subtle ways, that lesson, as well as the acclaim bestowed upon Kennedy, left his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, also looking for a great victory. Johnson's unyielding commitment to intervention in Vietnam, even after many former supporters had turned against the war, may be explained in important ways by his quest for a similar triumph, by his felt need to avoid defeat, by his fear of humiliation.<sup>166</sup>

These mixed results, after the crisis, do raise serious questions about the value of Kennedy's victory for the future welfare of his nation. Most troubling is the often unexamined paradox lurking beneath the Administration's argument for establishing "courage and commitment": Such qualities are at the heart of American security and the alliances on which that security is said to depend, so the United States might have to go to war to affirm the very credibility that is supposed to make war unnecessary. It may be, some would say, a potentially fatal paradox.

Would not it have been better had Kennedy struggled—as Bohlen and Lippmann had urged—to avoid a public confrontation and sought first to gain removal of the missiles through private diplomacy? Cannot our system work that way? Just as Kennedy believed that retreat and concessions under pressure may be token weakness and invite more demands, what would have happened if the Soviets had clung tenaciously to the same analysis? What would have happened if Khrushchev and his associates, after misreading America's temperament and foolishly placing the missiles in Cuba, had proved intransigent, had refused to back down, and had chosen war instead of humiliation 13 years ago?

#### Notes

1. Nikita Khrushchev, Dec. 12, 1962; reprinted in *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, 14 (Jan. 16, 1963), 4-5.
2. John F. Kennedy quoted in Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper, 1965), p. 705.
3. U.S. House of Representatives, Subcommittee of the Committee on Government Operations, *Government Information Plans and Policies*, 88th Cong., 1st Sess., part I.

4. A protest meeting on Oct. 24, 1962, at Harvard University packed a hall with about 1,000 people, and another 1,500, mostly critics of Administration policy, were turned away. The speeches went virtually unreported. See H. Stuart Hughes, "The Crisis of the Cuban Blockade," *Council for Correspondence Newsletter*, 21 (Oct. 1962), 1-4, for his speech at this meeting. See *New York Times*, Oct. 23, 1962, p. 20; Oct. 24, pp. 24, 25; Oct. 25, pp. 21, 25, 26 for brief reportage of some protests.

5. Kennedy speech of Oct. 22, 1962; reprinted in *Public Papers of the Presidents: John F. Kennedy, 1962* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1963), pp. 806-80.
6. *New York Times*, Oct. 23, 1962, pp. 18, 19, 21, 22.
7. Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968), pp. 53-54; *New York Times*, Oct. 28, 1962, p. 1.
8. *New York Times*, Oct. 23, 1962, p. 18.
9. Dean Rusk quoted in Elie Abel, *Missile Crisis* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1968), p. 108.
10. Paul Nitze quoted in Abel, *Missile Crisis*, p. 134; *New York Times*, Oct. 23, 1962, p. 18; Oct. 24, p. 1.
11. *New York Times*, Oct. 23, 1962, pp. 19, 20.
12. Both quotations are from Abel, *Missile Crisis*, p. 116.
13. Khrushchev to Bertrand Russell, Oct. 24, 1962; reprinted in *New York Times*, Oct. 25, 1962, p. 22; Moscow to U.S. Secretary of State (with U.S. embassy translations of Khrushchev messages), Oct. 23 and 25, 1962, Department of State Records, file 611.3722/10-2362 and 1/10-2462.
14. *New York Times*, Oct. 25, 1962, p. 1.
15. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, p. 135; Roger Hillsman, *To Move A Nation* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967), p. 219, uses a similar quotation in a slightly different context.
16. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, pp. 142-3; *New York Times*, Oct. 26, 1962, p. 1.
17. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, p. 143; *New York Times*, Oct. 26, 1962, p. 1.
18. White House press release, Oct. 25, 1962, John F. Kennedy Library, Waltham, Mass. (hereafter Kennedy Library); *New York Times*, Oct. 26, 1962, p. 1.
19. Abel, *Missile Crisis*, p. 154; *New York Times*, Oct. 26, 1962, pp. 16 and 30.
20. "Defense Department Backgrounder," Oct. 22, 1962, National Security Files (NSF), box 36, Kennedy Library; *New York Times*, Oct. 26, 1962, p. 18; Oct. 27, pp. 1, 6; Oct. 28, p. 1; Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, pp. 82-83; Abel, *Missile Crisis*, p. 153. The *New York Times* of Oct. 27, 1962, p. 7, suggested that the medium-range ballistic missiles might be operational but emphasized the danger when the intermediate-range ballistic missiles become ready.
21. Sylvester quoted in House Subcommittee of Committee on Government Operations, *Government Information*, p. 15. See also *New York Times*, Oct. 25, 1962, p. 21; Oct. 26, p. 30. Cf. Brig. Gen. Chester Clifton, memo for the President, "Discussion of Freedom of the Press . . ." Nov. 20, 1962, Backgrounder File, President's Office Files (hereafter POF), box 58, Kennedy Library.
22. Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, pp. 93-107.
23. Sorensen memo of Oct. 17, 1962, Cuba Files, POF, box 115, Kennedy Library. Cf. Stewart Alsop, "Our New Strategy: The Alternatives to Total War," *Saturday Evening Post*, 235 (Dec. 1, 1962), pp. 13-18.
24. McNamara quoted in Hillsman, *To Move A Nation*, p. 195. For confirming counsel, see McGeorge Bundy, memo to the President, Oct. 22, 1962, NSF, Kennedy Library.
25. Gilpatrick quoted in *New York Times*, Nov. 12, 1962, p. 18. At the time, the United States had 177 operational ICBMs (Nancy Bearg to George Bullock, May 25, 1971). See Roger Hagan and Bart Bernstein, "Military Value of Missiles in Cuba," *Bulletin*, 19 (Feb. 1963), 8-13.
26. See Alsop, "Our New Strategy"; "Defense Department Backgrounder," Oct. 22, 1962, NSF, box 36, Kennedy Library; White House press release, Oct. 26, 1962, Kennedy Library; *New York Times*, Oct. 27, 1962, pp. 1, 5, 6, 7 (especially John Finney); Abel, *Missile Crisis*, p. 153.
27. Sorensen memo, Oct. 17, 1962. This memo also suggested as possible Soviet purposes "diversion, harassment, provocation or bargaining."
28. Sorensen memo, Oct. 18, 1962, NSF, Countries: Cuba, Kennedy Library; Charles E. Bohlen, *Witness to History 1929-1969* (New York: Norton, 1969), pp. 491-2.
29. Bohlen, *Witness to History*, 491-2.
30. Sorensen memo, Oct. 18, 1962.
31. Sorensen memo, Oct. 18. This memo provides a lineup of positions for ExComm members that differs from all published versions—Sorensen, *Kennedy*, pp. 686-9; Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1965), pp. 802-12; Hillsman, *To Move A Nation*, pp. 196-206; Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, pp. 35-9; Abel, *Missile Crisis*, pp. 54-68.
32. Lippmann, "Today & Tomorrow," *Washington Post*, Oct. 25, 1962, p. 18.
33. Bohlen, *Witness to History*, pp. 488-93.
34. Hillsman, *To Move A Nation*, pp. 198-206; Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, pp. 801-13; Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, pp. 32-72; Sorensen, *Kennedy*, pp. 682-99.

35. CIA, "Readiness Status of Soviet Missiles in Cuba," Oct. 21, 1962, NSF, Countries: Cuba, Kennedy Library. In that memo, the CIA reported 23 MRBM launchers and 33 MRBMs, but was unsure whether there were any nuclear warheads. There were three IRBM sites under construction, with the earliest "probably fully operational by December 1"; but no IRBMs had been sighted. The two MRBM sites, which had "emergency capability" on the 22nd, became fully operational on the 27th and 28th (CIA memos Oct. 27 and 28, 1962, Kennedy Library). That suggests that it took at least three to four days for the MRBMs to go from "emergency capability" to "fully operational" status.

36. Hillsman, *To Move A Nation*, p. 167. Cf., Sorensen, *Kennedy*, pp. 688, 691.
37. Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, pp. 831-3, 392-405; Sorensen, *Kennedy*, pp. 675-86.
38. Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, p. 391.
39. Barton J. Bernstein, "Their Finest Hour?" *Correspondent*, 32 (Aug. 1964), 119-21; and Bernstein, "The Cuban Missile Crisis," in Lynn Miller and Ronald Pruessen, eds., *Reflections on the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974), pp. 130-33. Cf., R. Hillsman, Letter to the Editor, *New York Review of Books* (May 8, 1969), p. 37. On Kennedy's relations with the press see, for example, Orvil Dwyer, File, Special Correspondence Files, box 29, Kennedy Library.
40. Dillon quoted in Sorensen, *Kennedy*, p. 688.
41. White House press release, Oct. 25, 1962, Kennedy Library.
42. *New York Times*, Oct. 26, 1962, p. 1; cf., *New York Times*, Oct. 27, pp. 1 and 7.
43. "Memorandum—Subject: Summit," Oct. 25, 1962, NSF, Kennedy Library.
44. Khrushchev message of Oct. 26, 1962, Department of State Records; Hillsman, *To Move A Nation*, pp. 216-20.
45. Hillsman, *To Move A Nation*, p. 220.
46. Khrushchev to Kennedy, Oct. 27, 1962, Department of State Records.
47. Kennedy, Oct. 21, 1962, "Doodles" File, POF, box 115, Kennedy Library.
48. W. Averell Harriman, "Memorandum on Kremlin Reactions," Oct. 22, 1962, Kennedy Library.
49. Harriman, "Memorandum on Kremlin Reactions," Oct. 22.
50. See (unsent draft) "Message to the North American Council and Governments of All NATO Countries," Oct. 27, 1962, NSF, Countries: Cuba, Kennedy Library.
51. Sorensen, *The Kennedy Legacy* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), p. 145; Robert McElroy interview with Donald Wilson, Dec. 18, 1974. I am also grateful to Robert McElroy for sharing other research materials on the crisis.
52. Kennedy interview, Dec. 31, 1962; reprinted in *Public Papers . . . Kennedy, 1962*, p. 898.
53. Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, p. 95 (emphasis added).
54. Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, pp. 829-30.
55. Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, p. 108. See also, Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), p. 512.
56. Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, p. 109.
57. In a memorandum of the 17th, Stevenson had noted that critics would equate the Soviet missiles in Cuba with the American missiles in Turkey. He wrote: "I feel that you should have made it clear that the existence of nuclear missile bases anywhere is negotiable before we start anything." In this agonizing memo, he suggested that the United States promise "to discuss these bases in the context of a disarmament treaty" (Stevenson to "Mr. President," Oct. 17, 1962 and Stevenson to Schlesinger, ca. Dec. 10-20, 1962, NSF, Stevenson Analysis Folder, Ex Comm Files, Kennedy Library).
58. *New York Times*, Oct. 28, 1962, p. 1.
59. Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, p. 109.
60. Schlesinger, *Thousand Days*, p. 830.
61. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, pp. 715-6; Alexander George, "The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962," in George et al., *The Limits of Coercive Diplomacy* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), pp. 126-31. George doubts that the President would have attacked Cuba without first trying other tactics.
62. Hillsman, *To Move A Nation*, p. 224.
63. Khrushchev message, Oct. 28, 1962; reprinted in *New York Times*, Oct. 29, 1962, p. 16.
64. Vasily Kuznetsov to John J. McCloy, quoted in Bohlen, *Witness to History*, p. 496.
65. Thomas M. Wolfe, *Soviet Power and Europe, 1945-1970* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), pp. 182-4, 431-7; W. W. Rostow, *The Diffusion of Power* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 259-60; Jerome H. Kahan and Anne K. Long, "The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Study of Its Strategic Significance," *Political Science Quarterly*, 87 (Dec. 1972), pp. 586-90.
66. See also James A. Nathan, "The Missile Crisis: His Finest Hour Now," *World Politics*, 29 (Jan. 1975), pp. 280-1.