

History Held Hostage

30 Years Later, We're Still Learning the Secrets of the Cuban Missile Crisis

By Peter Kornbluh
and Sheryl Walter

THIRTY YEARS ago this week, the Cuban missile crisis began and the world stared down what Theodore Sorensen described as "the gun barrel of nuclear war." In the past five years, the history of the events of October 1962 has been profoundly revised despite continuing resistance by the government to declassify top-secret documents long after the need for confidentiality has passed.

A series of conferences in the United States, Moscow and Havana has brought together historians and former government officials from all three countries to pool their knowledge and recollections. At the same time, a six-year lawsuit, brought by an ad hoc coalition of lawyers, academics and the National Security Archive, a public interest group, has forced the U.S. government to declassify thousands of relevant documents, including top-secret correspondence between President Kennedy and Premier Nikita Khrushchev. The combination of testimony and documents has altered the conventional wisdom about the crisis.

The Cuban missile crisis has long been cast by policymakers, historians and political scientists as the preeminent model of "crisis management." Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s oft-quoted description of Kennedy's "responsible management of power" as a "combination of toughness . . . nerve and wisdom, so brilliantly controlled, so matchlessly calibrated" bolstered a mythology that the successful outcome of the conflict derived from the president's control of both the making and implementation of U.S. policy.

As the historical record has grown more complete, interpretations of the crisis have become less reassuring. Former defense secretary Robert McNamara, who in the aftermath of the conflict proclaimed, "There is no such thing as strategy, only crisis management," now believes that decision-making in Washington, Moscow and Havana was characterized by "misinformation, miscalculation and misjudgment."

One view of just how close the United States and the Soviet Union came to nuclear war was revealed at a conference held in Havana last January. Soviet Marshall Anatoly Gribkov claimed that, in addition to the recently installed

ballistic missiles, nine nuclear warheads had been shipped to Cuba for Soviet short-range tactical missiles. Gribkov, whose account has been challenged by some scholars, claims that in the event of a U.S. invasion, local Soviet com-

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manders had authority to fire those missiles without further direction from the Kremlin. McNamara, also attending the Havana conference, responded, "No one should believe that [invading] U.S. troops could have been attacked by tactical nuclear warheads without the U.S. responding with nuclear warheads.

"And where would it have ended?" McNamara asked the hushed audience. "In utter disaster."

On perhaps the most important puzzle of the crisis, namely, what motivated the Soviets to put missiles in Cuba in the first place, the new documentation is also suggestive.

Recently declassified military histories of the Jupiter missile program in Turkey reveal that U.S. rockets deployed along the Soviet frontier became operational in April 1962. That fact may have prompted Khrushchev to propose that same month the deployment of similar weapons in Cuba.

The new information about the missile crisis may also lend credence to Khrushchev's claim that a primary motivation was to deter a U.S. invasion of Cuba—a claim that U.S. analysts have always dismissed out of hand. Yet a "basic action plan," drafted in February 1962 by the legendary Gen. Edward Lansdale, called for a series of covert operations inside Cuba that would culminate in an internal uprising in October 1962, supported by a U.S. invasion. The guidelines for Operation Mongoose, as this plan was known, stated: "In undertaking to cause the overthrow of the target government, the U.S. will make maximum use of indigenous resources, internal and external, but recognizes that success will require decisive U.S. military intervention."

Whether President Kennedy intended to launch an invasion to overthrow Castro—McNamara and Schlesinger argue forcefully that he had no such intention—is beside the point. The United States had contingency prep-

arations for an invasion and knew that such preparations would be perceived by both Cuba and the Soviet Union as threatening. When shown the Mongoose documents, McNamara admitted that "if I was a Cuban and read the evidence of covert American action against their government, I would be quite ready to believe that the U.S. intended to mount an invasion." Later McNamara added that if he had "been a Soviet leader at the time, I might have come to the same conclusion."

With the declassification of the Kennedy-Khrushchev letters, it became clear that the missile crisis lasted more than the "13 days" memorialized in Robert Kennedy's book. Accounts of the missile crisis have traditionally begun with the discovery of the Soviet missile sites on Oct. 16 and ended on Oct. 28 with Khrushchev's decision to remove the rockets. The new letters, which date from Oct. 30

through Dec. 14, 1962, make clear that tensions did not immediately abate. The U.S. issued an additional demand that the Soviets withdraw a number of bomber planes from Cuba. When the Cubans resisted, the Americans continued to prepare for a possible invasion. On Oct. 29, the day after the crisis ostensibly ended, the head of the Atlantic Command requested permission to arm the invasion force with tactical nuclear weapons, a request denied by Secretary of Defense McNamara. On Nov. 20, Khrushchev finally agreed to remove the bombers.

Such important pieces of the Cuban missile crisis puzzle might have remained unknown were it not for the National Security Archive's systematic use of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). The documents that have made a fuller understanding of October 1962 possible would still be gathering dust in a storage room on the seventh floor of the State Department. That's where they had been since 1965, when officials in the Johnson Administration decided to centralize a small portion of the thousands upon thousands of records generated during the crisis.

When an archive researcher began interviewing people knowledgeable about the crisis in early 1987, he obtained a list of the documents housed in the State Department that included the box numbers, file titles and exact location of the records. The archive, in collaboration with American University professor Philip Brenner, then filed a series of FOIA requests. Able to pinpoint the exact location of these secret files, the archive avoided a roadblock faced by many FOIA users—the government's claim that the requested documents cannot be located or do not exist. By law, governmental agencies must respond to requests for documents within 10 working days; in practice this rarely happens. The State Department regularly takes up to several years to declassify documents; the CIA

has been known to delay for 12 years.

Seven months later, not a page of documents had been produced. After the archive filed suit in federal court, the State Department took nine more months to release about 2,000 documents, but it refused to declassify hundreds more, including many of the historically important ones such as 11 Kennedy-Khrushchev letters. After 26 years, U.S. officials maintained that their release would damage the national security of the United States.

(In fact, some of the "sensitive" documents that U.S. government censors deemed necessary to withhold in their entirety had already been released years before to the Kennedy Library in Boston. As the document accompanying this article indicates, a comparison of the excised documents with the fully declassified versions often makes it hard to imagine the basis for the original censorship.)

In January 1989, a dozen documents on Op-

eration Mongoose were declassified; the government refused to reconsider the classification of more than 750 other records. With pro bono assistance from the law firm of Crowell and Moring, the archive continued to press its case in court. Still nothing happened. In April 1991, the Russian government, after learning about the court battle over the documents, sent a diplomatic note to the State Department stating that it had no objection to the release of the Kennedy-Khrushchev letters.

It still took the State Department bureaucracy nine more months to release the letters, and then only because of the pressure of court proceedings. In January 1992, the State Department finally complied, releasing the correspondence on the eve of the Havana conference. Margaret Tutwiler, then spokesman for the State Department, declared that the United States was "pleased to be able to work with the Russian Federation to make the complete historical record of this correspondence available publicly"—as if the State Department had not resisted disclosure every step of the way.