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Maxwell D. Taylor

Reflections on a Grim October

This is the season for drawing "lessons" for our own age from the Cuban missile crisis of 20 years ago. Already such notable participants as Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara and McGeorge Bundy, among others, have been heard from, and already there is considerable disagreement as to whether there really are any such "lessons" to be drawn and, if so, what they are. Here Gen. Taylor, who was a key player, offers his view.

Twenty years ago, on the morning of Oct. 16, President Kennedy and his immediate advisers saw for the first time the aerial photography revealing Soviet ballistic missiles being installed in Cuba. Their presence had been suspected for a long time, but Soviet leaders had emphatically denied it. One of them, Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, repeated the denial in the Oval Office on Oct. 18, two days after the president had learned the truth.

Summoning the senior officials of State, Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and CIA to his office, the president received the first reactions of the advisers who would serve him in the ensuing "secret crisis." These men, acting as his advisory staff under the improvised title of EXCOMM (Executive Committee of the National Security Council), were to assist him in making the many difficult decisions that lay ahead. An observer might have found it ominous that some of the EXCOMM had served the president in a similar capacity at the time of the Bay of Pigs fiasco in the spring of 1961.

In discussing the situation in this first meeting on Oct. 16, Kennedy gave no evidence of shock or trepidation resulting from the threat to the nation implicit in the discovery of the missiles but rather of deep but controlled anger at the duplicity of the Soviet officials who had tried to deceive him. Clearly he had in mind but a single purpose—to get the missiles out of Cuba before they were capable of delivering a warhead on an American target. The task of the members of EXCOMM was to find the best way to accomplish this purpose and to do so, the president reminded us, in absolute secrecy.

There followed six days of seemingly endless secret meetings in the course of which the EXCOMM members studied all available intelligence, determined the limited number of alternatives worthy of consideration and eventually reduced that number to two, each with its partisan supporters. The alternative favored by the "hawks," a group to which I belonged, was to launch an air attack without warning on all the located missiles and IL28 bombers that constituted the "offensive weapons" the president had determined to remove. The insistence on surprise reflected our concern that Khrushchev, if warned, might quickly move the missiles into hiding, thereby making it necessary to invade Cuba to get them out. For many of us, the invasion of Cuba was to be avoided at almost any cost.

The "doves," on the other hand, recommended a partial naval blockade, euphemistically called a quarantine, to keep out further weapons. Most of them, however, were prepared to consider more drastic action if a quarantine proved insufficient.

During the ensuing meetings, these options were hotly debated, with the president usually in attendance except when, to preserve secrecy, he was obliged to make public appearances to which he was already committed. Thus, as the deliberations drew to a close, he was well informed as to the differing points of view of his advisers.

He did not appear to have made up his own mind until Oct. 21 following a discussion with Lt. Gen. Walter Sweeney Jr., who commanded the Tactical Air Command, which would have carried out any air raid on the missiles. Sweeney's frank admission that any such operation could not guarantee the destruction of all the weapons attacked reinforced an already perceptible inclination of the president to adopt the quarantine option. At the same time, however, he wanted the Armed Forces to be prepared for any likely contingency, to include an invasion of the island.

Such was the final decision embodied in his television address on the evening of Oct. 22.

I might interject here that during the EXCOMM discussions, I never heard an expression of fear of nuclear escalation on the part of any of my colleagues. If at any time we were sitting on the edge of Armageddon, as nonparticipants have sometimes alleged, we were too unobservant to notice it.

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Before addressing the nation on Oct. 22, there was much for the president to do in preparation for it. In the afternoon, he called the leaders of Congress to the White House and there informed them of the situation and his intentions. He had the essential facts transmitted to our principal NATO allies, the Organization of American States and our embassies about the world. Then at 7 p.m., he stepped to the microphone and informed a startled country and a perturbed world what had happened and what was in store. Thus ended the "secret crisis," and the open power confrontation between Kennedy and Khrushchev began.

Action and event followed in quick succession thereafter. In execution of the president's order, the Armed Forces promptly set in motion a partial mobilization that eventually resulted in concentration of a quarter-million men in Florida and neighboring states. Simultaneously the Air Defense Command and the Strategic Air Command prepared themselves to defend the United States and its neighbors against air attack and the remote possibility of some form of nuclear threat.

Khrushchev, caught by surprise with his missiles only partly installed, protested loudly and at length against Kennedy's actions and threats. Nonetheless, within three days he had ordered home his missile-bearing ships at sea rather than run the risk of breaching the quarantine. On Oct. 29, he capitulated completely, announcing that he would dismantle his offensive weapons and would return them to their source if Kennedy would promise not to invade Cuba.

But the crisis did not end here. Castro flatly refused to return the IL28s, which he claimed to be his own and not Khrushchev's, or to permit international on-site verification of the removal of the weapons covered by Khrushchev's agreement. After weeks of wrangling, Castro agreed to surrender the bombers, but Kennedy had to be satisfied with photographic verification of the departing weapons exposed on the decks of Soviet ships headed for home. Since Castro never permitted international verification, a primary condition of President Kennedy's promise not to invade Cuba, Khrushchev's failure to deliver on this point raised questions still with us today, as to the subsequent solidity of Kennedy's promise.

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Such was the Cuba missile crisis in bare outline. If it is to be more than a historical episode soon forgotten and to serve as guidance for future leaders, it is important that we determine the lessons it contains. Aware of many differing views on the subject, I venture to propose the following list as worthy of study by future administrations arriving in Washington to assume the powers of governance.

a) The first lesson derives from the contrast in performance of the president's advisers in the Bay of Pigs affair, where the outcome had been disaster, with that of essentially the same advisers in the Cuba crisis, where the outcome was success. In my opinion, this difference resulted largely from the experience that these officials had acquired between crises. They had

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Sir:

Old soldiers don't fade away any more. Like Maxwell Taylor (op ed page 10/5), they live to rewrite the history of their own disasters waiting to happen and to encourage new ones.

Some of the unfaded general's statements simply are not true. It is not true, as he says in his first two sentences, that in the Cuba missile crisis, USSR Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko denied the "presence" of "Soviet ballistics missiles being installed in Cuba." what Gromyko actually denied is that the USSR was supplying any offensive weapons.

To further this significant misrepresentation, the unfaded one, who was one of the majority of JFK's advisors who would have launched a war in that crisis, is untruthful in saying that to sove the crisis Khrushchev announced "that he would dismantle his offensive weapons..."

Khrushchev never admitted that any of the weapons the USSR gave to Cuba were offensive. Based on the precedent established by the unfaded generals, they were "defensive," their justification of our own similar missiles on the USSR's border in Turkey and at several points in Europe. Were ours defensive and theirs offensive?

The general has a purpose. We've had a peace of sorts since JFK agreed to Khrushchev's deal, but that appears not to satisfy the generals who thrice ignored JFK's order to remove our missiles from Turkey. (JFK did not learn this until he was deep in that extraordinarily dangerous crisis.) Because 20-year-old military airplanes are now "offensive" and not "defensive," the general tells us that the deal in which we guaranteed not to invade Cuba, his understatement of the reality, is of questionable "solidity."

Give them the chance that they'll get another war going!

The general endorsement of the performance of JFK's advisors also is unfactual. Actually, most of them urged military action, which meant war. He had to override them to avoid that war and establish the fear that has endured for two decades.

With most of a page of space the general said nothing about the USSR's possible motives in placing missiles in Cuba. This is consistent with his untruth that they were for "offensive" purposes. Yet to downplay the magnitude of the possible disaster, he says that for the USSR "the stakes were too small."

Aside from his apprehensions over our missiles on its borders, the USSR had a treaty obligation to defend Cuba from any attack. It is now well known that we were responsible for many attacks on Cuba and that more and larger ones were planned.

Sincerely,

Harold Weisberg

learned how to operate the complicated machinery of government, how to start, stop, oil and repair it. Perhaps more important, they had had time to become acquainted with one another, their respective turfs of responsibility and their individual capabilities. In so doing, they had also learned to function as a team able to integrate the assets of several executive departments in carrying out the president's will.

The lesson in this case is simple. Every new administration should beware of its special vulnerability during at least the first year of its tenure, retain at the start a few apolitical experts from the preceding administration to tide over its inexperience and try to avoid all crises as long as possible.

b) A second lesson is the importance of recognizing that the president must inevitably be the manager of any crisis at the level of the National Security Council. Early in the Reagan administration, there was much debate over who should be designated in advance to manage crises as they arise. Any such designation of a crisis manager would probably be a waste of time since only the president can make the many decisions required in the course of a crisis worthy of the name. Who but President Kennedy could have picked the quarantine alternative as a means of evicting the missiles and issued the operational orders for implementing the decision to subordinates such as the secretaries of state and defense, the CIA director and the senior military leaders of the Armed Forces? There are many time-consuming chores traditionally performed by a president from which he could and should be relieved. National crisis management is not one of them.

c) Another important factor contributing to success in the Cuba crisis was the secrecy maintained during the planning phase and the surprise effect on Khrushchev of the president's Oct. 22 speech. Aside from alerting Khrushchev, any premature leakage of information regarding the discovery of the missiles or the secret meetings of the EXCOMM would have released a flood of rumors and speculative press articles sure to stimulate congressional queries to the White House and similar requests for information from anxious allies abroad.

One can only speculate as to what Khrushchev would have done had he been warned. At a minimum he would have been spared the shock effect of the president's revelation and would have been able to prepare countermeasures in the form of threats, propaganda and appeals to the United Nations in order to gain time while completing the installation of his weapons or concealing them. Surprised by the loss of surprise, Kennedy might have been forced into ill-prepared or unwise actions adversely affecting the outcome.

d) Our great superiority in nuclear weapons contributed little to the outcome of the Cuba crisis. In this situation the stakes involved were far too small for either party to risk a resort to nuclear weapons. Hence our strategic strength had little applicability to the situation, whereas our conventional forces were indispensable. Since, in this category of strength, we were regionally superior and since the distance from home prevented timely reinforcements from the Soviet Union, from the start Khrushchev was condemned to military failure in the Caribbean.

The lesson here is that nuclear superiority is of little use in coping with an adversary similarly armed, whereas conventional superiority at the right place and time is likely to carry the day.

e) The foregoing, I believe, are the most important lessons to be drawn from our own experience. But we can also derive benefit from Khrushchev's mistakes—particularly from two of them. Having underestimated the young president in the course of their Vienna meeting in June 1961, Khrushchev felt such confidence in his risky plan as to make no provision for any escape hatch in case that things went badly. Things did go badly, and he paid the price for ignoring Murphy's Law.

f) Even more disastrous was Khrushchev's error in picking a fight far from home in his adversary's front yard. In doing so, he ignored a wise saying dating from Roman times: "A cock has great influence on his own dunghill." Present-day American strategists contemplating military operations in the vicinity of Soviet dunghills should bear this truism in mind, and the price Khrushchev paid for not following it.

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This summary of important lessons in the Cuba crisis raises a final question—are the lessons of 1962 likely to be relevant in future crises, and, if so, will our leaders be able to apply them? There are several reasons to be doubtful on both points.

Today it would be next to impossible to count on the secrecy which contributed so much to success in the Cuba crisis. At least two new obstacles would exist—the War Powers Act and the intragovernmental practice of leaking information. Had the War Powers Act existed in Kennedy's time and had he followed it explicitly, he would have been obliged to consult with Congress before announcing his deci-

sion to impose the quarantine, which might have involved the Navy in hostile action, or to order the concentration of troops in Florida, where they were exposed to air attack from Cuba. Equally dangerous to secrecy would be the vicious practice of leakage by government officials as a means of sabotaging a course of action of which they disapprove. A president today cannot count on either the privacy or the loyalty that Kennedy enjoyed.

Another missing asset would likely be the support that Kennedy received from the OAS and the NATO allies. The rise of anti-Americanism in Latin America and our deteriorating relations with NATO nations would render most unlikely comparable allied backing today for crisis actions as bold as those of Kennedy.

Obviously, leaders today would confront a far more powerful Soviet Union than did President Kennedy. While the Russians would be just as far from home in the Western Hemisphere as in 1962, they now enjoy a prestige based largely on imposing strategic power that would inject a new factor into crisis management—the possibility of nuclear intimidation. The exaggerated importance attached in the Western world to Soviet superiority in number and size of strategic weapons along with the worldwide fear of nuclear World War III create an atmosphere inviting Moscow to try the stratagem of conquest by intimidation, something that was not conceivable in 1962. Can we and our allies resist this new aspect of an old threat?

My overall conclusion from this entire discussion is that we shall need to recognize and reflect upon the lessons of the Cuba missile crisis for the indefinite future, exploiting those applicable and feasible under current conditions while adapting others to a changing environment. At the same time, we must change our ways when they are clearly contrary to our international effectiveness. In consistence with the latter precept, we should hasten to reduce the number and importance of indefensible interests located in proximity to the Soviet Union and adjust our foreign and military policies accordingly. (This would obviously be difficult in the case of our interest in the Persian Gulf region, but in most places there are steps that could be taken.) The resulting military establishment should be strong in conventional forces capable of assuring and enhancing the essential defensible interests that remain. Such a combination of foreign goals and military strength should make future crises at least as manageable as the Cuba crisis, provided in the meantime its lessons have not been forgotten.

The writer was formerly Army chief of staff and chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

U.N. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson decribes aerial photos of Cuban missile sites for Security Council on Oct. 25, 1962.