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OUTLOOK

Column

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Was the Cuban

Missile Crisis

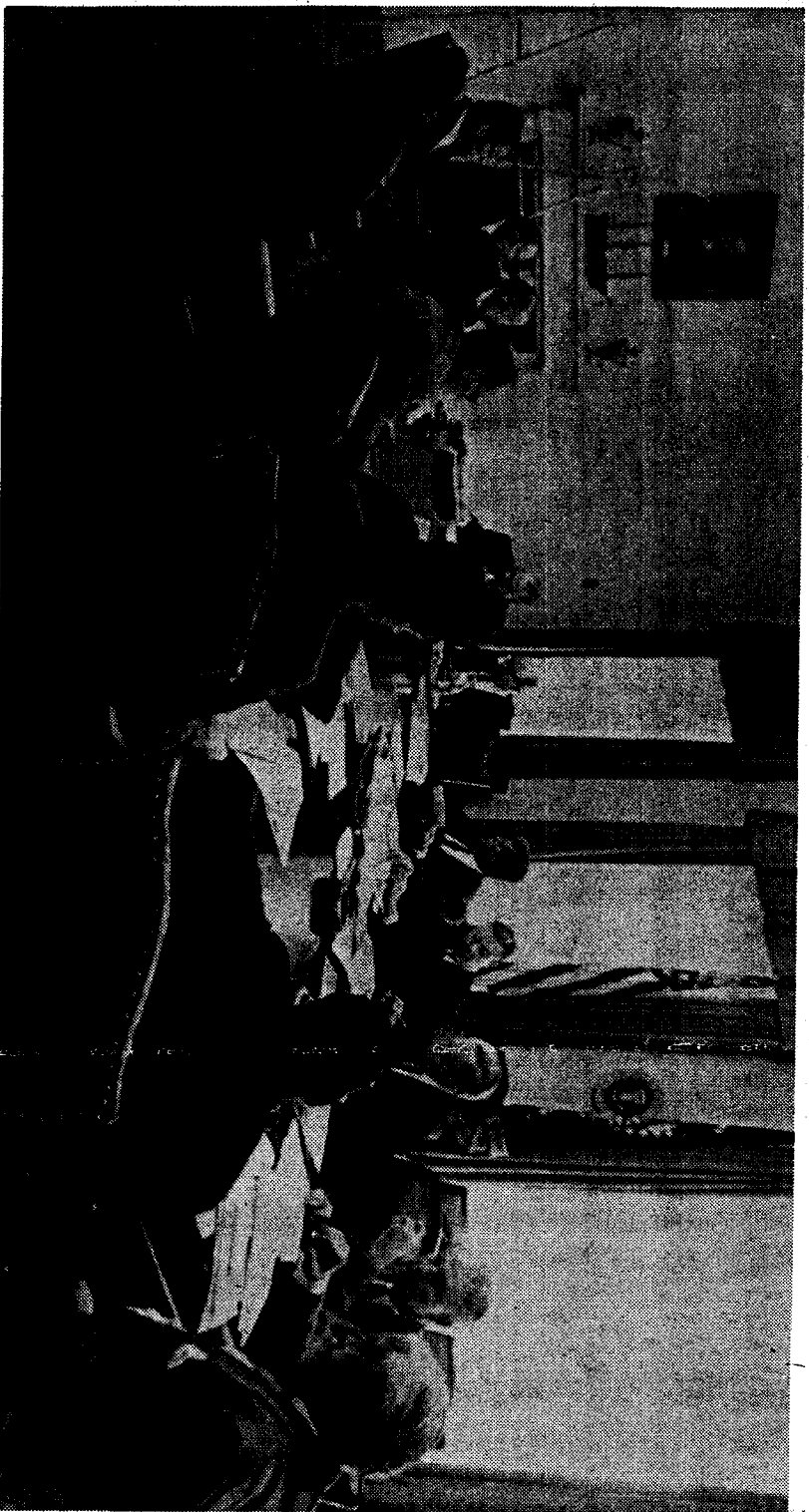
Necessary?

By Barton J. Bernstein

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President Kennedy meets with the Executive Committee of the National Security Council during the crisis.

John F. Kennedy Library Photo

public confrontation. None who reads the memoirs and archival sources on Kennedy's prior 21 months in office, especially after his unpleasant meeting with Khrushchev in Vienna and the Bay of Pigs debacle, can easily deny that the President felt beleaguered: He had lost prestige and feared that his courage and commitment were doubted at home and abroad. A public confrontation and triumph would allow him dramatically to recoup those losses and would persuade various constituencies — citizens at home, allies abroad and the Soviets — of his decisiveness.

There was another reason why Kennedy moved so speedily to public confrontation without first trying private negotiations. He feared that news of the missiles would leak out at home, that the citizens might panic, and that bureaucrats and politicians, already pillorying him for what the GOP called "the tragic policy of irresolution" in dealing with Cuba, would block his program in Congress and possibly force a harder line in foreign policy.

With the congressional elections scheduled for early November, and with major newspapers already piecing together the story of missiles in Cuba, he could not risk the delay of private negotiations. As Treasury Secretary C. Douglas Dillon, a Republican, remarked 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."

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

THROUGHOUT THE WEEK of crisis, President Kennedy steadfastly demanded that the Soviets withdraw the missiles. This was not a negotiable demand. Nor would he risk delay by agreeing to a summit conference then.

Newly declassified materials reveal that some advisers were proposing a summit in order to ease tension, reduce the possibility of nuclear war and perhaps produce a turnaround of some significance of Soviet policy." Khrushchev was then at the "crossroads in policy, the Cuba MRBM deployment represents his attempt to explore the hard fork," and, according to an unidentified adviser, a summit might "tempt [the Premier] to explore the alternative for [fork]." The results might include agreements on nuclear-free zones in Latin America and Africa, the cooling of tensions on Germany and the relaxation of NATO-Warsaw Pact problems.

On Saturday, October 27, when the Soviet Union offered formally to withdraw her missiles in Cuba in return for an American no-invasion pledge and removal of Jupiter missiles from Turkey, why didn't the administration yield explicitly on the missiles in Turkey? Well before the October crisis, Kennedy had urged their removal, because they were obsolete, vulnerable and provocative. And on Sunday, Oct. 21, Kennedy had scrawled in a note (recently declassified) that Douglas Dillon "stated that the . . . Jupiters were sent [to Turkey] because they were flops, and this would have been proved if they had [been used]." They were, in short, placebos for the Turks.

But to the Soviets the Jupiters were a threat to security and to prestige. On Oct. 22, five days before the Soviets suggested the trade, W. Averell Harriman, former ambassador to Moscow, advised the President, according to a recently declassified document, that "there had 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." Harriman's unstated implication was that removal of the missiles might lead to Khrushchev's withdrawal of the missiles from Cuba.

At the ExComm meeting on Saturday, Oct. 27, after the Soviets demanded removal of the Turkey missiles as a part of a *quid pro quo*, some advisers proposed, and even drafted a message about a zany plot, now revealed in recently declassified papers: The United States would disarm its missiles in Turkey and secretly inform the

Soviet Union "prior to moving against the Soviet missiles in Cuba" — first by air strike and then invasion. Fortunately, this scheme failed to gain much support.

Rejecting this scheme, the administration agreed to the Soviet request for a public no-invasion pledge but refused to accede formally to the additional Soviet condition — withdrawal of U.S. missiles from Turkey. "We all agreed . . . 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," Robert Kennedy later explained. "So we might as well have the showdown then as six months later."

But privately, Attorney General Kennedy suggested to Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin that if NATO approved, the United States would later remove the missiles in Turkey. Would this guarded, hedged, private offer suffice? It did not meet the Soviet terms. The Kennedy brothers were not optimistic.

"It can go either way," President Kennedy said privately.

War and peace hung in the balance. The President had not abandoned hope, Robert Kennedy later wrote, but it "was a hope, not an expectation." John F. Kennedy, his brother explained, "obviously did not wish to order the withdrawal of missiles from Turkey under threat from the Soviet Union."

Fortunately, the Soviet Union decided to back down before superior American nuclear forces and Khrushchev accepted the public humiliation. For many observers, then and now, it was a great victory for the United States and Kennedy. Yet the events of that week still raise painful questions: Was the crisis necessary? Was the risk of nuclear war a reasonable price for seeking to remove the missiles through a public confrontation? Should not other tactics — private negotiations — have been tried first? Was Kennedy's rejection of a summit unwise? Was his refusal to formally trade the Turkish missiles too risky? What would have happened if the Soviet Union, 13 years ago, had proved intransigent and refused to back down, and had chosen war rather than humiliation?

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