

1962 Missile Crisis Described In JFK-Khrushchev Letters

12/11/73

By Elizabeth Wharton
United Press International

The once top-secret letters began with "Dear Mr. President" and "Dear Mr. Chairman," and closed with words like "sincerely," or even "respectfully."

But in between the salutations were threats and warnings which 11 years later revive the drama and fears of the six tense days when President John F. Kennedy and Premier Nikita Khrushchev clashed over construction of Soviet missile bases in Cuba.

Ten letters were exchanged during the missile crisis of October, 1962. The last four—two from each man—were made public at the time, but the seal of secrecy only recently was lifted from the first six.

The crisis actually began about mid-month, when Kennedy was called home from a campaign trip because photographs taken from U.S. spy planes showed work under way on what military experts said could only be a nuclear missile installation in Cuba.

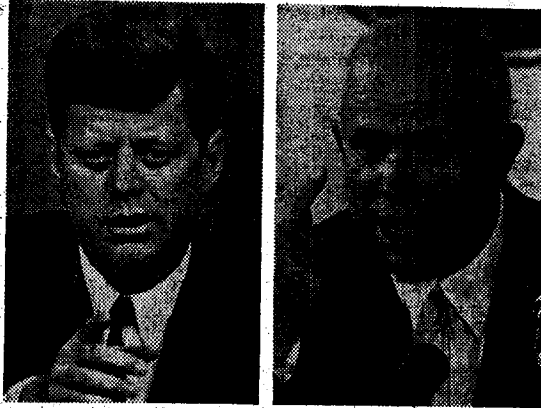
By the weekend of Oct. 21-22, the whole country knew a crisis was brewing in Washington.

The mystery ended—and the suspense began—Oct. 22 when Kennedy went on national television to tell the American people he had ordered a naval "quarantine" of Cuba and had demanded that Russia dismantle the installations and remove the missile components.

One hour earlier he had a letter delivered to the Russian Embassy in Washington and cabled an identical copy to the U.S. Embassy in Moscow for delivery to the Kremlin.

It was important, Kennedy wrote, that Khrushchev understand the will and determination of the United States.

"I have not assumed," he said, "that you or any other sage man would, in this nuclear age, deliberately



PRESIDENT KENNEDY PREMIER KHRUSHCHEV
... exchanged letters during 1962 Cuban missile crisis

plunge the world into war which it is crystal clear no country could win and which could only result in catastrophic consequences to the whole world, including the aggressor."

In the letter, which began "Dear Mr. Chairman," and was signed "Sincerely," Kennedy also said: "I hope that your government will refrain from any action which would widen or deepen this already grave crisis."

The Khrushchev reply, received the following morning, was addressed "Mr. President," and was signed only with the name "N. Khrushchev." It acknowledged both the note and Kennedy's speech of the night before, and said:

"I must say frankly that measures indicated in your statement constitute a serious threat to peace and to the security of nations . . ."

"We reaffirm that the armaments which are in Cuba, regardless of the classification to which they belong, are intended solely for defensive purposes in order to secure the Republic of Cuba against the attack of an aggressor . . ."

Kennedy's reply, sent the same day, was brief and curt: "I think you will recognize that the step which started the current chain of

evens was the action of your government in secretly furnishing offensive weapons to Cuba. We will be discussing this matter in the Security Council . . .

"I hope you will issue immediately the necessary instructions to your ships to observe the terms of the quarantine . . . which will go into effect at 1400 hours Greenwich time Oct. 24." It was signed "sincerely."

The Defense Department estimates that at that time, about 25 Soviet and satellite supply ships were heading for Cuba. Within the next few hours, 12 of them—presumably those carrying key military equipment—changed course to await the outcome of the feverish diplomatic activity.

The next Khrushchev letter, received on the morning of the 24th, was the one some White House sources at the time described as "hysterical," according to press reports.

It was long (almost 1,000 words), rambling and repetitive, liberally sprinkled with exclamation points and question marks. It had somewhat the tone of an elder scolding a hot-headed youngster. The formal diplomatic language of all of the other letters temporarily was abandoned, as he asked Kennedy to visualize his reaction if the positions were reversed:

"Imagine, Mr. President, that we had presented you with the conditions of an ultimatum which you have presented us by your action. How would you have reacted to this? I think that you would have been indignant at such a step on our part . . .

"You, Mr. President, are not declaring a quarantine but rather are setting forth an ultimatum and threatening that if we do not give in to your demands you will use force! Consider what you are saying! And you wish to convince me to agree to this! . . .

"What morality, what law can justify such an approach by the American government to international affairs? . . . The Soviet government considers that the violation of the freedom to use international waters and air space is an act of aggression which pushes mankind toward the abyss of a world

nuclear-missile war . . .

"Naturally, we will not simply be bystanders with regard to piratical acts by American ships on the high seas. We will then be forced on our part to take the measures we consider necessary and adequate in order to protect our rights. For this we have all that is necessary."

This letter was signed "respectfully yours,"

Kennedy, who was closeted almost around-the-clock with his brother Robert and top administration and congressional advisers, wrote a reply delivered in Moscow at 1:59 a.m. Oct. 25. The tone was softer:

"I regret very much that you still do not appear to understand what it is that has moved us in this matter . . . in August there were reports of important shipments of military equipment and technicians from the Soviet Union to Cuba. In early September I indicated very plainly that the United States would regard any shipment of offensive weapons as presenting the gravest issues.

"After that time, this government received the most explicit assurances from your government and its representatives, both publicly and privately, that no offensive weapons were being sent to Cuba . . .

"In reliance on these solemn assurances I urged restraint upon those in this country who were urging action in this matter at that time. And then I learned beyond doubt what you have not denied—namely, that all these public assurances were false and that your military people had set out recently to establish a set of missile bases in Cuba. I ask you to recognize clearly, Mr. Chairman, that it was not I who issued the first challenge in this case, and that in the light of this record these activities in Cuba required the responses I have announced . . .

It was signed "sincerely yours," and was a turning point. By then, U Thant, Secretary General of the U.S., urged a cooling-off period during which both great powers would back off

a bit and negotiate their differences.

Khrushchev's next letter, Oct. 26, was the longest of the exchange. It urged acceptance of U Thant's plea and it said that from Kennedy's most recent letter he had gotten "the feeling that you have some understanding of the situation which has developed and a sense of responsibility."

The basis for settlement of the crisis was offered

(and, essentially, soon accepted) when he said: "If assurances were given by the President and the government of the United States that the USA itself would not participate in an attack on Cuba and would restrain others from actions of this sort, if you would recall your fleet, this would immediately change every thing . . .

"Let us therefore display statesmanlike wisdom. I propose: We, for our part, will declare that our ships bound for Cuba are not carrying any armaments. You will declare that the United States will not invade Cuba . . . and will not support any other forces which might intend to invade Cuba . . .

"Mr. President, I appeal to you to weigh carefully what the aggressive, piratical actions which you have announced the United States intends to carry out in international waters would lead to. You yourself know that a sensible person simply cannot agree to this, cannot recognize your right to such action."

He concluded with these dramatic words:

"If you have done this as the first step towards unleashing war—well then—evidently nothing remains for us to do but to accept this challenge of yours. If you have not lost command of yourself and realize clearly what this could lead to, then, Mr. President, you and I should not now pull on the ends of the rope in which you have tied a knot of war, because the harder you and I pull, the tighter this knot will become . . .

"Therefore, if there is no intention of tightening this knot, thereby dooming the world to the catastrophe of

thermonuclear war, let us not only relax the forces straining on the ends of the rope, let us take measures for untying this knot. We are agreeable to this."

Instead of replying directly, Kennedy acknowledged the essential acceptance of the terms in a wire to U. Thant. The next day, the 27th, Khrushchev "went public" with another letter to Kennedy, which was broadcast on Moscow Radio. He recognized Kennedy's "reasonable" approach to U Thant and said: "It persuades me that you are showing solicitude for the preservation of peace."

It was in this letter that Khrushchev for the first time mentioned the presence of U.S. missiles in Turkey. It is now generally accepted that those intermediate-range missiles were removed under the terms of a private addendum to the agreement, although it was not formally acknowledged in any of the correspondence.

On Oct. 28, Kennedy restated his willingness to pledge no attack on Cuba, and the following day Khrushchev announced that he had issued "a new order to dismantle the weapons . . . and to crate and return them to the Soviet Union."