Ordeal By Fire

of this Hemisphere should fail to meet their commitments against outside Communist penetration — then I want it clearly understood that this Government will not hesitate in meeting its primary obligations which are to the security of our Nation!"

Having uttered this obscure but emphatic warning, he went on to define the lesson of the episode. Communism, he said, was now less interested in arms as the means of direct aggression than "as the shield behind which subversion, infiltration, and a host of other tactics steadily advance, picking off vulnerable areas one by one in situations which do not permit our own armed intervention." This "new and deeper struggle," Kennedy said, was taking place every day, without fanfare, in villages and markets and classrooms all over the globe. It called for new concepts, new tools, a new sense of urgency. "Too long we have fixed our eyes on traditional military needs, on armies prepared to cross borders, on missiles poised for flight. Now it should be clear that this is no longer enough — that our security may be lost piece by piece, country by country, without the firing of a single missile or the crossing of a single border."

He concluded: "We intend to reexamine and reorient our forces of all kinds — our tactics and our institutions here in this community." I was never quite clear what this last phrase meant, unless it referred to the CIA and the Joint Chiefs; but once again obscurity probably helped the impact of the speech. Certainly the occasion reestablished him in a fighting stance without committing him to reckless action.

The next step was to secure the administration against partisan attack. The Republicans, of course, were a little inhibited by their own role in conceiving the operation; but Kennedy took no chances. Later that day he called in Richard Nixon (whose advice on Cuba was to "find a proper legal cover and . . . go in"*), and by the weekend he had talked to Eisenhower, Nelson Rockefeller and Barry Goldwater. Harry S. Truman, being a Democrat, required only the attention of the Vice-President.

As part of the strategy of protection, he moved to stop the gathering speculation over responsibility for the project. When in one

* Richard M. Nixon, "Cuba, Castro and John F. Kennedy," *Reader's Digest*, November 1964.

his age had disqualified him from consideration as Secretary of State. He had spent much of his life in dealing with the Russians — ever since he had bargained with Trotsky over mining concessions in the twenties. During the Second World War he had worked with Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin and attended nearly all the wartime conferences. He had served as ambassador to Moscow and London. He had run the Marshall Plan in Europe and had been Truman's national security adviser during the Korean War. In all these years he had not succumbed to illusions either about communism or about the anti-communist crusade.

His world trip had shown him the brilliance of the hopes excited by the new President. Convinced that America had not had such potentialities of world influence since the days of F.D.R., he bounded back to Washington filled with energy, purpose and ideas, looking years younger than he had in his last melancholy days as a New York politician. I remember his coming shortly after his return to a farewell dinner I gave for Ken Galbraith, who was about to depart on his new assignment as Ambassador to India. Harriman, in the highest of spirits, talked everyone down, especially the guest of honor; this last, of course, was no inconsiderable feat. When Harriman reported to the White House, he delighted Kennedy, who had known him in his political rather than his diplomatic role, with his freedom and vigor of mind in foreign matters, his realism of judgment and his unconcealed contempt for received opinion. The President concluded that Washington ought to take a new look at Souvanna, and the prince was encouraged to add the United States to his world tour. Souvanna scheduled his Washington visit for April 19-20 but then canceled it when Rusk said he had a speaking engagement in Georgia and could not receive him. Snubbed again, as he thought, Souvanna returned to Moscow.

In the end Rusk did not keep his Georgia engagement, for this was the week of the Bay of Pigs. On Thursday, April 20, Kennedy, determined not to permit restraint in Cuba to be construed as irresolution everywhere, transformed the corps of American military advisers in Laos, who up to this point had wandered about in civilian clothes, into a Military Assistance and Advisory Group, authorizing them to put on uniforms and accompany the Laotian troops. Later that day, when Nixon saw the President and urged an invasion of Cuba, he also urged "a commitment of American air

power" to Laos. According to Nixon's recollection, Kennedy replied "I just don't think we ought to get involved in Laos, particularly where we might find ourselves fighting millions of Chinese troops in the jungles. In any event, I don't see how we can make any move in Laos, which is 5000 miles away, if we don't make a move in Cuba, which is only 90 miles away." *

On April 24 the Russians finally agreed on the cease fire appeal. They were perhaps impressed by the introduction of MAAG and undoubtedly swayed by the intervention of Nehru. (The Indian leader had been skeptical about the American desire for neutralization until Galbraith assured him that Americans were practical men and did not set military value on the Lao, "who do not believe in getting killed like the civilized races.") The next day the Laotian government gratefully accepted the call. So did Souvanna, still on his travels, and even Souphanouvong. But fighting did not cease; and, according to reports reaching Washington on Wednesday, April 26, the Pathet Lao were attacking in force, as if to overrun the country before the cease-fire could take effect. On Thursday the National Security Council held a long and confused session. Walt Rostow has told me that it was the worst White House meeting he attended in the entire Kennedy administration.

Rostow and the Laos task force, supported by Harriman who was now on a trip of inspection in Laos, still urged a limited commitment of American troops to the Mekong valley. But the Joint Chiefs [chastened] by the Bay of Pigs, declined to guarantee the success of the military operation, even with the 60,000 men they had recommended a month before. The participants in the meeting found it hard to make out what the Chiefs were trying to say. Indeed the military were so divided that Vice-President Johnson finally proposed that they put their views in writing in order to clarify their differences. The President, it is said, later received seven different memoranda, from the four Chiefs of Staff and three Service Secretaries. (It was about this time that a group of foreign students visited the White House and the President, introduced to a young lady from Laos, remarked, "Has anyone asked your advice yet?")

The military proved no more satisfactory in explaining the

* Richard M. Nixon, "Cuba, Castro and John F. Kennedy," *Reader's Digest*, November 1964

ism, he was taut, concentrated, vibrating with inner tension under iron control, possessed by a fatalism which drove him on against the odds to meet his destiny. One could only speculate about the roots of this fatalism — the days of danger, the months of sickness, the feeling that life was short, the cool but tormented sense of the importunities and frustrations of the age in which he lived.

Someone once asked him what he regretted most; he replied, "I wish I had had more good times." The shadow was never far from him: that rendezvous at midnight in some flaming town. One never knows to what extent retrospect confers significance on chance remarks; but he said so many things attesting to a laconic sense of the transience of the Presidency, if not to a haunted conviction of human mortality. So when he saw Nixon after the Bay of Pigs he said, "If I do the right kind of a job, I don't know whether I am going to be here four years from now." Nor could anyone interest him much in details of personal protection. "If someone is going to kill me," he would say, "they are going to kill me." Before he left on his trip to Mexico in June 1962, John McCone brought him a CIA report about assassination rumors. It had been a hard few days on the Hill; and Kennedy responded, without a second's hesitation, "If I am to die, this is the week for it." When we were preparing an exchange of letters with Harvard about the transfer of university land to the Kennedy Library whenever "The President" requested, he asked that this be rephrased; after all, "Who can tell who will be President a year from now?" * When Jim Bishop, the author of *The Day Lincoln Was Shot*, visited the White House in late October 1963, Kennedy chatted about his book, "He seemed fascinated, in a melancholy way," Bishop wrote, "with the accidental succession of events of that day which led to the assassination." President Kennedy never appeared ruffled or hurried. But time was his enemy, and he fought it to the end.

3. IN THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH

As a natural President, he ran his presidential office with ease and informality. He did this by instinct, not by theory. He was fond of Richard Neustadt but a little annoyed by his

* October 2, 1963.