

JFK Reversed '62 Policy On Cuba, Papers Show

No-Invasion Pledge Stymied Formal Pact

Associated Press

To defuse the Cuban missile crisis, President John F. Kennedy promised not to invade the island nation, but newly declassified documents show he later retreated from the pledge, fearing Cuba could become an "invulnerable base."

The change of heart meant that the U.S.-Soviet understandings that resolved the 1962 crisis were never made permanent.

When the crisis eased, Kennedy predicted in an Oct. 28 letter to Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev that the two sides could complete final arrangements "within a couple of days." But, while both countries took some steps to implement the agreement, including Soviet removal of offensive missiles, attempts to reach a formal agreement ended in failure.

The crisis was triggered by the U.S. discovery that Moscow had sent missiles to Cuba, which brought the two superpowers closer to nuclear war than at any time in their Cold War rivalry.

The trade-off that ensured a peaceful outcome involved a Soviet promise to remove the missiles in exchange for an end to a U.S. quarantine of Cuba, coupled with a U.S. no-invasion pledge.

New details about the abortive effort to negotiate a final settlement are spelled out in the "Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath," a 934-page State Department compilation of documents, virtually all of which were originally classified.

Subsequent U.S. administrations were vague about whether the Kennedy-Khrushchev agreement was binding. The documents suggest it

was not because there was no formal settlement.

Less than a month after the October agreements were announced, Kennedy's uneasiness about an unconditional no-invasion pledge was reflected in a message he sent Khrushchev: "There need be no fear of any invasion of Cuba while matters take their present favorable course."

In a Nov. 21, 1962, telephone conversation with George Ball, the State Department's third-ranking official, Kennedy said he was worried about how a no-invasion pledge would affect the U.S. ability to respond if Cuba undertook a major arms buildup, shot down U.S. planes or attacked a pro-American country.

In response to the latter scenario, Ball said the United States had a right to take action under the Rio Pact, the common defense treaty of the Western Hemisphere.

Four hours later, Kennedy told a National Security Council meeting, according to a summary, that the U.S. objective "is to reserve our right to invade Cuba in the event of civil war, if there were guerrilla activities in other Latin American countries or if offensive weapons were reintroduced in Cuba."

The Soviets strongly objected to Kennedy's attempt to renege on his pledge and invoke the Rio Pact.

Top U.S. officials who spent 5½ hours with Soviet diplomats in early December wrote a memo to Secretary of State Dean Rusk saying the Soviets interpreted it as an effort to give the U.S. commitment a "conditional character and hence is unacceptable."