

Defense Secretary Robert F. McNamara At A 1962 Briefing On Cuba



Taking "Liberties with the Truth . . ."

The Khrushchev Version of the Cuban Missile Crisis

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By Elie Abel

NIKITA KHRUSHCHEV'S account of the Cuban missile crisis has the ring of the genuine article, even though he gets essential facts wrong, misrepresents to a degree the attitude of the Kennedy brothers and gives himself the benefit of every possible doubt.

It was his own idea, Khrushchev now tells us, to install "missiles with nuclear warheads in Cuba without letting the United States find out until it was too late to do anything about them." The notion struck him while on a visit to Bulgaria in May, 1962, and kept "churning" in his head throughout that visit.

His purpose, Khrushchev insists, was not to make or threaten war against the United States but "to restrain the United States from precipitous military action" against Cuba. He depicts Fidel Castro, whose regime was to be guaranteed against invasion this

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way, as a passive beneficiary. He would be talked to later, Khrushchev writes, and after the Soviet strategy was explained to him the Cuban government would go along.

Upon returning to Moscow from Bulgaria, Khrushchev says, he put the plan to his colleagues in the Kremlin. "I presented my idea in the context of the counterrevolutionary invasion which Castro had just resisted [at the Bay of Pigs]. I said that it would be foolish to expect the inevitable second invasion to be as badly planned and executed as the first. I warned that Fidel would be crushed and said we were the only ones who could prevent such a disaster from occurring."

Khrushchev does not tell us whether his missile ploy was questioned or challenged at the time by any other Soviet leader; only that it was HIS ploy and that its adoption led to "a triumph of Soviet foreign policy and a personal triumph in my own career as a statesman and as a member of the collective leadership."

WE HAVE SINCE had reason to believe that the missile crisis, to say the least, was not uniformly regarded in Moscow as any kind of Soviet triumph. On the contrary, there is evidence that it was one of several "harebrained schemes" chalked up to Khrushchev's account by his Kremlin colleagues at the time of his overthrow in October, 1964.

In short, Khrushchev, now an unperson in his own country, is bent on vindicating his policies; note how subtly he reminds his former colleagues still in power that they shared in the decision to install Soviet missiles in Cuba.

All this is more understandable than the errors of fact that follow in his narrative.

For example, Khrushchev says it would not have made sense for the Russians to install surface-to-air antiaircraft missiles in Cuba before putting in ballistic missiles. He is countering an argument, so he tells us, made by unnamed people "with the benefit of hindsight".

Here the facts are beyond dispute. Whether or not Khrushchev knew it at the time—or whether an old man's memory is playing tricks—the Russians DID install surface-to-air missiles at a number of Cuban sites before assembling their medium-range missiles. In fact it was the placement of SAMs near San Cristobal, in a particular trapezoidal pattern, which prompted an American intelligence officer's surmise that a missile base might be under construction. That surmise, in turn, was checked out during a U-2 swoop over San Cristobal on October 14, 1962; the photographs it brought back amounted to the first hard evidence that ballistic missiles were going up inside the perimeter protected by the SAMs.

The informed reader is left to guess that Khrushchev may later on have faced reproaches within the ruling circle for his clumsy handling of the missile buildup. (No camouflage was attempted, for example, until President Kennedy knew all that he needed to know about the missile batteries in place). Conceivably, the hindsight argument may have been made in the Kremlin that many more SAMs should have been dotted round the Cuban shoreline in order to keep the prying U-2 planes at a safe distance and to preserve the Russians' gully secret a few days longer. But to argue, as Khrushchev appears to argue, that no SAMs were installed is plain nonsense.

The Khrushchev narrative takes other liberties with the truth as we know it. Writing about the blockade imposed by President Kennedy on the morning of Wednesday, October 24, Khrushchev says: "Our ships headed straight through the American Navy, but the Americans didn't try to stop our ships or even check them." The facts are that some 20 Cuba-bound Soviet ships stopped dead in the water and that a dozen or 14 of them later headed back to Europe rather than confront the blockade.

Khrushchev's account of the informal but highly important crisis talks between Robert Kennedy and Ambassador Dobrynin

suffers from the same disabilities. It is incomplete, self-serving and more than somewhat misleading. There is no mention, for example, of Dobrynin's September 4 visit to Kennedy's office in the Justice Department, when the Attorney General's expression of concern about the vast quantity of Soviet military equipment being landed in Cuba drew from the ambassador such assurances as these:

He told me I should not be concerned . . . [Kennedy later recalled in his crisis memoir] . . . he was instructed by Soviet Chairman Nikita S. Khrushchev to assure President Kennedy that there would be no ~~ground-to-ground~~ missiles or ~~offensive weapons~~ placed in Cuba. Further, he said, I could assure the President that this military buildup was not of any significance and that Khrushchev would do nothing to disrupt the relationship of our two countries during this period prior to the [1962 Congressional] election.

Robert Kennedy met again with Dobrynin at the Soviet Embassy on the evening of October 23. This time the President's brother knew that Khrushchev had lied even though he continued to believe that the Soviet ambassador himself was an honest man under great strain who just possibly was being duped by his own government. Dobrynin made no attempt to deny or disavow his September 4 assurances. In fact, he confirmed them, repeating his pledge that the Russians would not install in Cuba any missiles capable of reaching the continental United States.

ROBERT Kennedy told Dobrynin that the President had once believed him but now knew the Russians had deceived him; this could have "devastating implications" for the peace of the world.

Dobrynin stuck to his story: there were no missiles in Cuba; Khrushchev himself had said so and, as far as he knew, there were still no missiles in Cuba.

Not a word about the pattern of deception appears in the Khrushchev narrative. Presumably there is not much more he can say

after claiming personal credit for the scheme to install nuclear missiles in Cuba "without letting the United States find out until it was too late."

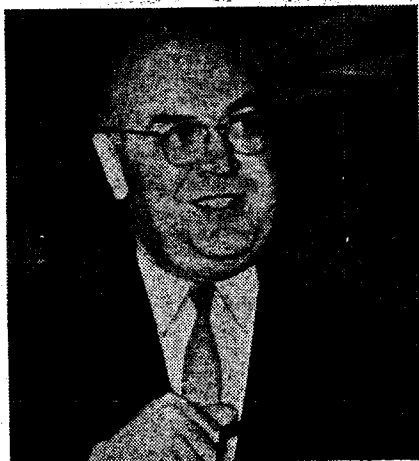
He mentions another meeting in which Robert Kennedy supposedly appealed in the President's behalf for Russian help:

President Kennedy implores Chairman Khrushchev to take into consideration the peculiarities of the American system. Even though the President himself is very much against starting a war over Cuba, an irreversible chain of events could occur against his will. That is why the President is appealing directly to Chairman Khrushchev for his help in liquidating this conflict. If the situation continues much longer, the President is not sure that the military will not overthrow him and seize power. The American army could get out of control.

Khrushchev supplies no date for this Kennedy-Dobrynin conversation. Certainly it bears little resemblance to those reported in *Thirteen Days*. My ear tells me that Bob Kennedy did not talk exactly that way. We are dealing, after all, with the dimming recollections of an old man, long since removed from power and from the documents that might jog his memory, whose words have been filtered through translators.

YET I am persuaded that the conversation or something like it, occurred. It was not in my view invented by Khrushchev, only transposed in time. The actual conversation involved not an appeal for help from a beleaguered President about to be overthrown by a cabal of Pentagon hawks but a deliberate Kennedy gambit designed to hoodwink the Russians into putting more pressure on Castro.

It happened in November, after Khrushchev had agreed to remove his missiles from Cuba. Russian sea captains cheerfully pulled back the tarpaulins covering the outward-bound missiles while American destroyers alongside counted them, 42 all told. Castro, however, refused to give up the Ilyushin-28 bombers the Russians had sent him. These,



"I have a birthday present for you," Dobrynin told Kennedy on Nov. 20, 1962.

unlike the missiles, had been formally handed over to Cuba and Castro was furious that the Russians should now want them back.

Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson, recently returned from Moscow, advised the President to keep the heat on. It was his theory that once Khrushchev had backed down by removing the missiles, at considerable cost to his dignity, he was not likely to balk much longer over removing the bombers, no matter how loudly Castro protested.

Following Thompson's advice, the President sent word to Moscow repeatedly, through one channel or another, that if the bombers were not promptly removed the United States Air Force would destroy them on the ground. These threats were mixed with warnings that if bad came to worse the Washington hawks might overpower the doves, invade Cuba and get rid of Castro.

THE Kennedy gambit was, in fact, mentioned in my book, published almost five years ago. I can recall a Presidential adviser telling me with some astonishment how willing the Russians were to accept the somewhat preposterous notion that the President, even at that moment with the missiles out of Cuba, might be overpowered by the hawks. "We were happy," he added, grinning broadly, "to leave them believing that could happen." Khrushchev, it now appears, was one of those who believed it could happen.

On November 20, Robert Kennedy's thirty-seventh birthday, Dobrynin again called on the Attorney General. "I have a birthday present for you," the ambassador said, handing over a letter from Khrushchev in which he at last agreed to remove the Ilyushin bombers from Cuba. That same day the President issued orders to terminate the blockade. The missile crisis was over.

The pity of it is that Khrushchev evidently still believes he was justified in sneaking those missiles into Cuba at the risk of a third world war. Otherwise, he argues, the United States would sooner or later have invaded Cuba and overthrown Castro.

"It was a great victory for us . . ." he writes, "that we had been able to extract

from Kennedy a promise that neither America nor her allies would invade Cuba."

If that was indeed his motive, rather than a significant alteration of the balance of terror in Russia's favor, the Kremlin was poorly informed about President Kennedy's plans and priorities. There is no persuasive evidence that I have been able to discover suggesting an imminent American invasion of Cuba at the time. The Pentagon had its contingency plans, of course, just as it certainly has plans to invade China or Russia itself, filling cabinets full. But, having been badly burned by the Bay of Pigs experience, the President had developed a healthy skepticism about such ventures, as even the most gung-ho of U.S. military men had reason to understand.

Ironically, Khrushchev's shaky grasp of American realities may also have contributed to his decision that the missiles must, after all, be withdrawn. By his own testimony it was his fear that Kennedy might be endangered by a generals' putsch which led him "to look for a dignified way out".

If he could believe that, as the Duke of Wellington once said to a gentlemen who addressed him as Mr. Smith, he would believe anything.