

# Gaps in the Cuban Missile Crisis Story

By Pierre Salinger

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*He says we didn't have the plans*

**D**uring last week's round-table discussion among Russians, Cubans and Americans who, like me, had lived through the Cuban missile crisis, the hope of coming closer to the origins and facts of the event was substantially realized. To my disappointment, however, some of the participants seemed to judge the events of 1962 from the perspective of the cooled political climate of 1989 détente. It seems clear, for instance, that the Kennedy Administration, under heavy political pressures, was indeed planning to invade Cuba in the fall of 1962, and that the Kremlin sent the missiles to Cuba to forestall an attack. But Robert S. McNamara, who was John F. Kennedy's Defense Secretary, denied that Washington had any such plans. Nevertheless, the conference established several important new facts. It verified a longstanding suspicion that the Soviets had managed to get 20 nuclear warheads to Cuba. Another 20 were aboard a ship blocked by the United States Navy. The 42 medium-range missiles shipped to Cuba (only half of them actually made it) represented about two-thirds of Russia's missile power in 1962.

During the crisis, Moscow had only 20 intercontinental ballistic missiles on Soviet soil. At the time, American

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intelligence thought they had 75 to 100. And we learned for the first time that the Kremlin had stationed 40,000 Soviet troops inside Cuba, four times more than the Americans believed it had there at the time. The Soviet participants admitted that the missiles had been targeted on cities like Washington and New York, and on U.S. military installations and industrial centers. But they convinced the conference that the nuclear warheads had never been attached to the missiles. They also denied a widely reported assertion that Sergei Khrushchev, son of the Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev, said privately during the conference that Fidel Castro had asked Mr. Khrushchev to launch the missiles to

prevent a U.S. invasion. Indeed, Sergei himself denied the story.

While supporting the point that the Cuban leader did not ask for a missile launch, however, Soviet sources said that conversations with Havana after the crisis convinced them that the Cubans did in fact want to launch the missiles. Cuba's fear of an invasion was that strong.

While the conference helped fill many gaps in the historical record, some questions remain. One major one is whether the U.S. didn't in some sense provoke a confrontation by planning a second invasion of Cuba, even after the embarrassing Bay of Pigs disaster in 1961.

I have a lot of respect for Mr. McNamara, and I consider him a friend. But his insistence that the U.S. never intended to invade Cuba, either before or during the crisis, flies in the face of the facts. However, he did acknowledge that "if I had been in Moscow or Havana at that time, I would have believed the Americans were preparing an invasion."

And why not? For reasons that remain a mystery, the Attorney General, Robert F. Kennedy, warned two days after the Bay of Pigs that the failed attack might lead to the deployment of Soviet missiles in Cuba. Cuba at that time was a sharp political issue and there was growing pressure on the White House to do something to get rid of Mr. Castro.

The Administration's response, according to sensitive, top secret documents recently declassified, was to create a vast covert program called Operation Mongoose. Its aim was to destabilize Cuba and bring down the Castro regime before Oct. 29, 1962. A document that Brig. Gen. Edward G. Lansdale handed to the President on Feb. 20, 1962, clearly indicates that Operation Mongoose brought together all the elements needed for a military overthrow of the Castro regime.

Even more interesting is the recent declassification of a report on the Cuban crisis by the commander in chief of the Atlantic Forces, Adm. Robert L. Dennison. He said that he received a memorandum from Mr. McNamara on Oct. 6 telling the Joint Chiefs of Staff to start effecting directives 314 and 316, both of them contingency plans for an invasion of Cuba.

Did the U.S. plan to invade a second time?

*many the history help*



Only two days earlier, Robert Kennedy told John A. McCone, Director of Central Intelligence, that his brother was "very concerned" about the developing situation in Cuba and urged Mr. McCone to undertake "massive activity" under the framework of Operation Mongoose.

This information clarifies Mr. Khrushchev's reasons for sending a message to President Kennedy through his back channel operator, the K.G.B. agent Georgi Bolshakov. We cannot but call the President's attention to the fact that the situation has been worsening of late chiefly owing to the American Government's hostile actions in the Caribbean with regard to Cuba," as Mr. Bolshakov recalls the message.

Mr. McNamara and my other colleagues present at the conference—McGeorge Bundy, the former special adviser to the President for national security affairs, and Theodore Sorenson, special assistant to the President—all argued that even at the moments of highest tension, President Kennedy would never have ordered an air strike against Cuba or an invasion of the country.

McNamara's denial doesn't seem to wash.

I agree that John Kennedy was not the kind of President who would have wanted to launch a military attack. But that's an academic issue. The real question is this: As it became clear that the missiles and warheads were already on Cuban soil, could he have withstood the pressure for military action from his advisers and the public?

Oct. 27, 1962, was a dramatic day. We had received the day before a message from Mr. Khrushchev offering to pull out his missiles if the U.S. would guarantee not to invade Cuba. But then we received a second, much tougher message from the Soviet leader adding the demand that we withdraw our Jupiter nuclear missiles from Turkey.

President Kennedy had already ordered the missiles removed from Turkey, but the pullout had been delayed at the request of the Turkish Government. The Turks had just spent a lot of money installing the missiles and didn't want to be abandoned by dismantling them immediately. For his part, Mr. Kennedy was extremely anxious to avoid the appearance of acceding to Mr. Khrushchev's demands. Eventually, he told Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin that the Jupiter missiles would be pulled out, but not as part of the deal.

It was clear at the meeting that day of the executive committee of the National Security Council that we were heading for escalation. The head of the Joint Chiefs, Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, called for an air strike against the missile sites on Monday, Oct. 28, and an invasion of Cuba soon afterwards.

As the day ended, there was no doubt in my mind that President Kennedy was being pushed to order an air strike against Cuba the next morning. Mr. McNamara says that no air strike or invasion would have been ordered, but that there might have been a tightening of the naval blockade. But even he says that when he left the White House that night he had the impression that he might not be alive the next Saturday.

The following morning, of course, Mr. Khrushchev announced the withdrawal of the missiles. But suppose he had not. What would we have done next, in the face of operational missiles in Cuba? Pressure from a number of members of the executive committee, not only General Taylor, might have forced the President to take a military action that he did not want to accept.

One thing is clear. Neither side "won" the Cuban missile crisis. Rather, two leaders reached an understanding that nuclear war was unthinkable. And the rapid evolution of relations after the crisis demonstrates that both leaders wanted to work toward a better understanding.

If Mr. Kennedy had lived and if Mr. Khrushchev had remained in power, they

*several times*

*He was not alone*