IN THE NATION
Tom Wicker

A Lesson Of Crisis

It all seems a bit ridiculous now, rather like looking back on a childhood squabble in the schoolyard in which both sides engaged in bluff and threat rather than real fighting.

But in 1962, what's become known as the Cuban missile crisis caused sensible American families to stock their basements with canned goods and bottled water. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara wondered if he had seen his last sunset. Nuclear war seemed more likely than ever before or since, an ominous reality that a few Soviet and American leaders could bring on or prevent.

Last week in Moscow, survivors among those officials met to exchange what they knew of what actually happened 26 years ago — since, apparently, neither side yet knows the whole truth. Much of what is known, however, is covered in the excellent documentary series "War and Peace in the Nuclear Age," now appearing on public television. An hour-long installment, to be broadcast Feb. 28 is devoted to the Cuban missile crisis.

One grim possibility that emerged in Moscow is that the world may have been nearer disaster than has been believed. Sergei Khrushchev, the son of the Soviet leader in 1962, told some Americans — so they thought — that his father had been urged by Fidel Castro to launch nuclear missiles on U.S. cities.

The younger Khrushchev and Soviet officials denied that he had told the Americans any such thing, leaving confusion as to whether Mr. Castro actually had called for use of the missiles.

But a reason that he might have done so also was disclosed in the Moscow meeting — another frustrated American scheme to get rid of Fidel Castro. "Operation Mongoose," directed by that fabled maestro of partisan warfare, Edward Lansdale, was planned to cause a popular uprising in Cuba in 1962 that would throw out the Castro Government in favor of one approved by Washington.

Americans in Moscow said President Kennedy never took Mongoose seriously — and it's easy to see why he would have been skeptical, owing to the abject failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion the year before to cause a general anti-Castro uprising. Gen. Maxwell Taylor counseled him, moreover, that Mongoose would require "decisive" U.S. military intervention; Mr. Kennedy had shown at the Bay of Pigs that he would not go that far.

The Mongoose pipe dream, no doubt known to Cuban and Soviet intelligence, nevertheless might have been one of numerous factors causing Mr. Castro and perhaps Mr. Khrushchev to believe that a U.S. invasion was imminent. But if Mr. Castro did urge the Soviet leader to shower nuclear missiles from Cuba on American cities, Mr. Khrushchev turned him down in a hurry.

No wonder. In 1962, despite much Khrushchev bluster — the Soviet Union, he claimed, was producing rockets "like sausages that come out of an automatic machine" — he knew that Moscow actually lagged far behind the U.S. in nuclear weapons. And despite Mr. Kennedy's 1960 campaign against the "missile gap," the U.S. knew it too. Mr. McNamara had said in 1961 that "our nuclear stockpile is several times that of the Soviet Union."

Thus, Mr. Khrushchev knew that a missile launch from Cuba — he had only 20 nuclear warheads there — would be suicidal for the Soviet Union, whatever damage might have been inflicted on U.S. cities. But Mr. McNamara and presumably Mr. Kennedy knew, for their part, that even after suffering a devastating response the Soviets still would be able to destroy the United States with their remaining nuclear weapons.

Actually, nuclear war probably was never as likely as feared at the time (save for the real possibility of a fatal miscalculation or misunderstanding on either side), because leaders in Washington and Moscow were coming to realize what is now commonly understood — that nuclear war between them would be suicidal for the attacking as well as the target nation.

Thus, terrifying as it was at the time, and though still not clear in every detail, the Cuban missile crisis dramatically taught the most crucial lesson for the nuclear era. As recently as 1980, unfortunately, it had not been absorbed by George Bush.

Then a Presidential candidate, Mr. Bush told Robert Scheer of The Los Angeles Times that a nuclear war could be won if "you have a survivability of command and control . . . of industrial potential, protection of a percentage of your citizens, and you have a capability that inflicts more damage on the opposition than it can inflict upon you."

Eight years in the Vice Presidency may have changed his mind. If so, a world that remembers the missile crisis needs to hear it from the horse's mouth. □