KENNEDY VS. KHRUSHCHEV THE SHOWDOWN IN CUBA

BY THEODORE C. SORENSEN

On September 6, 1962, in response to his urgent telephone request, I met with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin at the Russian Embassy. Two weeks earlier, in one of a series of get-acquainted luncheons Dobrynin held for administration officials, I had sought to dispel any Soviet assumption that the upcoming congressional campaign would inhibit the President's response to any new pressures on Berlin. His report of that conversation, the Ambassador now told me, had resulted in a personal message from Chairman Nikita Khrushchev, on which he suggested I take notes as he read, in order to convey it precisely to the President:

"Nothing will be undertaken before the American congressional elections that could complicate the international situation or aggravate the tension in the relations between our two countries . . . provided there are no actions taken on the other side which would change the situation. This includes a German peace settlement and West Berlin. . . . If the necessity arises for [the Chairman to address the United Nations], this would be possible only in the second half of November. The Chairman does not wish to become involved in your internal political affairs."

The Chairman's message, I replied, as the President had suggested, seemed both hollow and tardy. The late summer shipments of Soviet personnel, arms and equipment into Cuba had already aggravated world tensions and caused turmoil in our internal political affairs. I reported to Kennedy in my memorandum on the conversation, dictated that same afternoon: "Dobrynin said that he would report this conversation in full to the Chairman and that he was aware himself of the political and press excitement regarding this matter. He neither contradicted nor confirmed my reference to large numbers of Soviet military personnel, electronic equipment and missile preparations. He repeated several times, however, that they had done nothing new or extraordinary in Cuba—that the events causing all the excitement had been taking place somewhat gradually and quietly over a long period of time—and that he stood by his assurances that all these steps were defensive in nature and did not represent any threat to the security of the United States."

At the time the Ambassador was speaking (presumably, but not necessarily, with the knowledge of the actual facts), 42 Soviet medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles—each one capable of striking the United States with a nuclear warhead 20 or 30 times more powerful than the Hiroshima bomb—were en route to Cuba. Apparently, preparations for this move had been underway within the Soviet Union since spring and within Cuba all summer. Sites had been surveyed, protective antiaircraft missiles moved in, roads improved and local inhabitants evicted. A statement by the Soviet Government on September 11 declared flatly that its nuclear rockets were so powerful that there was no need to locate them in any other country, specifically mentioning Cuba, and that "the armaments and military equipment sent to Cuba are designed exclusively for defensive purposes" and could not threaten the United States. Khrushchev and Anastas Mikoyan told Georgi Bolshakov—the Soviet official in Washington through whom the Khrushchev letters had first arrived and who enjoyed friendly relations with several New Frontiersmen—to relay word that "no missiles capable of reaching the United States would be placed in Cuba." The message could not have been more precise—or more false.

The President was not lulled by these statements. (The Bolshakov message, in fact, reached him after he knew of the missiles' existence.) Over 100 voyages to Cuban ports by Communist-bloc and bloc-chartered vessels in July and August had caused him to pay close attention to the aerial photography, agent reports and other intelligence data on Cuba. But the principal concern inside the Government, as reflected in my August 23 luncheon conversation with Dobrynin, had been the possibility of a new Soviet move on West Berlin. With Khrushchev's post-Sputnik offensive failing, with neither his pressures nor negotiations on Berlin getting anywhere, a new and dangerous confrontation seemed likely; and these suspicions were heightened by the report that Khrushchev had told Robert Frost, when the aged poet visited the Soviet Union in September, that democracies were "too liberal" to fight. All thought he meant Berlin, and with Berlin chiefly in mind, the President obtained a congressional renewal of his authority to call up reservists.

"If we solve the Berlin problem without war," he said to me one evening, outlining the tack I should take with a columnist, "Cuba will look pretty small. And if there is a war, Cuba won't matter much either."

The movement of Soviet personnel and equipment into Cuba, however, had been the subject of a series of meetings and reports in the White House beginning in August. U.S. Navy ships and aircraft photographed every Soviet vessel bound for Cuban waters. Aerial reconnaissance flights covered the entire island twice

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monthly. A special daily intelligence report on Cuba began on August 27.

The intelligence picture was clouded by the constant rumors reported to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), to the press and to some members of Congress by Cuban refugees that Soviet surface-to-surface missiles had been seen on the island. All these rumors and reports, numbering in the hundreds, were checked out. All proved to be unfounded, resulting from the inability of civilians to distinguish between offensive and defensive missiles or from the wishful thinking of patriots hoping to goad the United States into an invasion of Cuba. (Those missiles later discovered were not those discussed in all these reports and were fully observable only through aerial photography.) Refugee reports of Soviet missiles on the island had in fact begun well before Cuba, in 1960, started receiving any Soviet arms. But these unfounded reports were used by Senators Kenneth Keating, Homer Capehart, Strom Thurmond, Barry Goldwater and others to inflame the domestic political scene and to call for an invasion, a blockade or unspecified "action."

The Republican Senatorial and Congressional Campaign Committees announced that Cuba would be "the dominant issue of the 1962 campaign." The public-opinion polls showed growing frustration over Communist influence on that island. Senator Keating talked of Soviet troops and then of offensive missile bases at a time when no credible, verifiable proof existed of either. His information later proved inaccurate in important respects, but his refusal to reveal his sources of information made it impossible for the CIA to check their accuracy. As the President would later comment at a news conference, "We cannot base the issue of war and peace on a rumor or report which is not substantiated or which some member of Congress refuses to tell us where he heard it. . . . To persuade our allies to come with us, to hazard . . . the security . . . as well as the peace of the free world, we have to move with hard intelligence."

Still concerned about West Berlin, he opposed an invasion of Cuba at his August 29 news conference, but he promised "to watch what happens in Cuba with the closest attention."

Photographs taken that same day, and reported to the President on August 31, provided the first significant "hard intelligence": antiaircraft surface-to-air missiles (SAMs), missile-equipped torpedo boats for coastal defense and substantially more military personnel. But neither these pictures nor those taken on September 5 (which also revealed MIG-21 fighter aircraft) provided evidence of offensive ballistic missiles, for which, in fact, no recognizable equipment had yet arrived. In a public statement on September 4 revealing the August 31 findings, the President repeated that there was as yet no proof of offensive ground-to-ground missiles or other significant offensive capability. But he added, "Were it to be otherwise, the gravest issues would arise."

With the exception of CIA chief John McCone, who speculated that the SAM sites might be intended to protect offensive missile installations, but whose absence on a honeymoon prevented his views from reaching the President, intelligence and Kremlinology experts stressed that no offensive Soviet missiles had ever been stationed outside of Soviet territory, not even in Eastern Europe where they could be constantly guarded and supplied; that the Soviets would in all likelihood continue to limit their military assistance to Cuba to defensive weapons; and that they evidently recognized that the development of an *offensive* military base in Cuba might provoke U.S. military intervention. This distinction between offensive and defensive capabilities, while not always clear-cut, was regarded as crucial by all concerned. The presence in Cuba of Soviet weapons incapable of attacking the United States was obnoxious, but not sufficiently different from the situation that had long existed in Cuba and elsewhere to justify a military response.

CHAPTER TWO

Continued Soviet shipments and the belligerent Moscow statement of September 11 impelled the President to deliver an even more explicit statement at his September 13 news conference. He was still concerned about the possibility that Khrushchev hoped to provoke him into another entanglement in Cuba that would make a martyr of Fidel Castro and wreck our Latin-American relations while the Soviets moved in on West Berlin. He refused to give in to the "war hawks" in Congress and press (and a few in the Pentagon) who wanted to drag us into a needless, irresponsible war without allies against a tiny nation that had not yet proven to be a serious threat to this country. He paid no more attention to Soviet assurances about defensive missiles than he did to refugee claims about offensive missiles—both were subject to proof, and the proof as yet was not present. But he thought it important that the American public and the Kremlin leaders alike understand distinctly what was and was not tolerable in Soviet aid to Cuba. After a series of meetings, he had decided upon a precise warning to the Soviets not to permit their Cuban build-up to achieve serious proportions. Striking out at "loose talk" about an American invasion, which could only "give a thin color of legitimacy to the Communist pretense that such a threat exists," he underlined again the difference between offensive and defensive capabilities:

"If at any time the Communist build-up in Cuba were to endanger or interfere with our security in any way . . . or if Cuba should ever . . : become an offensive military base of significant capacity for the Soviet Union, then this country will do whatever must be done to protect its own security and that of its allies."

Answering a questioner's reference to the Moscow warning that any U.S. military action against the build-up would mean "the unleashing of war," the President replied that, regardless of any threats, he would take whatever action the situation might require, no more and no less. (The added Soviet strength then known to be on the island, he had been told, could not save Castro, should the U.S. ever have to attack, for more than an extra 24 hours.)

When the Congress made clear that it wished to pass a resolution on the Cuban situation, he saw to it that the wording was as broad and nonbelligerent as possible, applying only to arms or actions endangering this nation's security.

Khrushchev, nevertheless, angrily warned that the actions contemplated by the resolution would mean the beginning of war—thermonuclear war. His various statements to reporters and diplomats also spoke of continuing the dialogue on Berlin after the November elections, hinting at a summit meeting at that time.

America's allies also warned of American hysteria over Cuba. Neither Latin America nor Western Europe showed any signs of supporting —or even respecting—a blockade or other sanctions. The Organization of American States (OAS) was induced, nevertheless, to lend its authority to our aerial surveillance; and that surveillance soon altered the situation drastically.

On October 9, the President—whose personal authorization was required for every U-2 flight and who throughout this period had authorized all flights requested of him—approved a mission over the western end of Cuba. The primary purpose of the mission was to obtain information on the actual operation of Soviet SAMs. The western end was selected because the SAMs in that area—first spotted on August 29—were believed most likely to be operational. A secondary objective, inasmuch as the September flights had only been able to survey other parts of the island, was to resurvey the military build-up in that sector—specifically, to check two convoy observations from inside Cuba (both delayed because of the difficulty in getting reports out) that had indicated more precisely than usual the possibility of a medium-range ballistic-missile site in that location. (It was not until one day after this authorization on October 10 that Senator Keating first asserted the presence of offensive missile bases in Cuba.) Delayed by bad weather until October 14, the U-2 flew high over western Cuba in the early morning hours of that cloudless Sunday, moving from south to north. Processed that night, the long rolls of film were analyzed, compared with earlier photos, and reanalyzed throughout Monday. Late that afternoon, the photo interpreters spotted in the San Cristóbal area the first rude beginnings of a Soviet medium-range missile base.

By Monday evening, October 15, the analysts were fairly certain of their findings. Between 8 and 10 p.m., the top CIA officials were notified, and they notified in turn the Defense and State

Department intelligence chiefs and, at his home, McGeorge Bundy.

Around 9 a.m. Tuesday, October 16, having first received a detailed briefing from top CIA officials, Bundy broke the news to the President as he was scanning the morning papers in his bedroom. Kennedy, though angry at Khrushchev's efforts to deceive him and immediately aware of their significance, took the news calmly, but with an expression of surprise. He had not expected the Soviets to attempt so reckless and risky an action in a place like Cuba and had accepted—perhaps too readily, in retrospect—the judgment of experts that such deployment of nuclear weapons would be inconsistent with Soviet policy. Even John McCone had assumed that no missiles would be moved in until an operational network of SAMS would make their detection from the air difficult.

The President asked Bundy to arrange for two presentations of the evidence that morning—first to him alone and then to a list of officials he requested Bundy to summon.

Shortly thereafter, upon arriving at his office, the President sent for me and told me the news. He asked me to attend the 11:45 a.m. meeting in the Cabinet Room. Those summoned to that session at the personal direction of the President, or taking part in the daily meetings that then followed, were the principal members of what would later be called the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, some 14 or 15 men who had little in common except the President's desire for their judgment.

At this meeting, I saw for the first time the crucial photographs, as Lt. Gen. Marshall Carter and his photo analysts pinpointed the evidence. Barely discernible scratches turned out to be motor pools, erector launches and missile transporters, some with missiles on them. They looked, said the President, "like little footballs on a football field," barely visible. Soviet medium-range ballistic missiles, said Carter, could reach targets 1,100 nautical miles away.

That covered Washington, Dallas, Cape Canaveral, St. Louis and all Strategic Air Command (SAC) bases and cities in between; and it was estimated that the whole complex of 16-24 missiles could be operational in two weeks. The photographs revealed no signs of nuclear warheads stored in the area—but no one doubted that they were there or soon would be.

The President was somber but crisp. His first directive was for more photography. He expressed the nation's gratitude to the entire photo collection and analysis team for a remarkable job. It was later concluded that late September photography of the San Cristóbal area might have provided at least some hints of suspicious activity more than three weeks earlier, but certainly nothing sufficiently meaningful to convince the OAS, our allies and the world that actual missiles were being installed. The contrast between the October 14 and August 29 photos indicated that field-type missiles had been very quickly moved in and all but assembled since their arrival in mid-September. Now, we had to have the most convincing evidence possible—and we had to know what else was taking place throughout the island. Even a gigantic hoax had to be guarded against. Daily flights were ordered, covering all Cuba.

Kennedy's second directive was to request that those present set aside all other tasks to make a prompt and intensive survey of the dangers and all possible courses of action—because action was imperative. More meetings were set up. Even at that initial 11:45 meeting the first rough outlines of alternatives were explored. One official said our task was to get rid of the missile complex before it became operational, either through an air strike knocking it out or by pressuring the Soviets into taking it out. He mentioned the possibilities of an OAS inspection team or a direct approach to Castro. Another said an air strike could not be limited to the missile complex alone, but would have to include storage sites, air bases and other targets, necessitating thousands of Cuban casualties and possibly an invasion. Still another spoke of adding a naval blockade, combined with a warning and increased surveillance. It was agreed the U.S. naval base at Cuba's Guantánamo Bay would have to be reinforced and dependents evacuated. No conclusions were reached, but all the possible conclusions were grim.

The President's third directive enjoined us all to strictest secrecy until both the facts and our response could be announced. Any premature disclosure, he stressed, could precipitate a Soviet move or panic the American public before we were ready to act. A full public statement later would be essential, he said, talking in the same vein about briefing former President Eisenhower. Once again, there was discussion about declaring a national emergency and calling up reserves. But for the present, secrecy was vital; and for this reason, advance consultations with the allies were impossible. He had already given the surface impression that morning that all was well, keeping his scheduled appointments, taking Astronaut Walter Schirra and his family out in back to see Caroline's ponies and meeting with the Panel on Mental Retardation. (Praised by the panel's chairman for his interest, the President had responded: "Thanks for the endorsement. . . . I'm glad to get some good news.") He had also proclaimed the last week in November to be National Cultural Center Week.

But even as he went about his other duties, the President meditated not only on what action he would take, but why the Soviets had made so drastic and dangerous a departure from their usual practice. Evidently, they had hoped, with the help of the SAMS and an American preoccupation with elections, to surprise the United States in November with a completed, operational missile chain. But why—and what next? The answer could not then—or ever—be known by Americans with any certainty; but in the course of our meetings, several theories, some overlapping and some inconsistent, were advanced:

Theory 1) **Cold War Politics**—Khrushchev believed that the American people were too timid to risk nuclear war and too concerned with legalisms to justify any distinction between our overseas missile bases and his, that once we were actually confronted with the missiles, we would do nothing but protest, thereby appearing weak and irresolute to the world, encouraging our allies to doubt our word and to seek accommodations with the Soviets, and permitting increased Communist sway in Latin America in particular. This was a probe, a test of America's will to resist. If it succeeded, Khrushchev could move in a more important place—in West Berlin or with new pressure on our overseas bases—with missiles staring down our throats from Cuba. A Lenin adage, said Charles Bohlen in one of our first meetings, compared national expansion to a bayonet drive: If you strike steel, pull back; if you strike mush, keep going. Khrushchev, having invested considerable money and effort in nuclear hardware he hoped never to use in battle, at least wanted one more try at using it for blackmail purposes.

Theory 2) **Diverting Trap**—If the United States did respond, presumably by attacking "little" Cuba, the allies would be divided, the UN horrified, the Latin Americans more anti-American than ever, and our forces and energies diverted while Khrushchev moved swiftly in on Berlin. (Some speculated that Khrushchev also calculated that any strong U.S. reaction would help him prove to the Stalinists and Chinese that the West was no "paper tiger.")

Theory 3) **Cuban Defense**—A Soviet satellite in the western hemisphere was so valuable an asset to Khrushchev—in both his drive for expansion and his contest with Red China—that he could not allow it to fall; and thus, in his view, an invasion from the United States or the more hostile Latin-American states, which seemed inevitable if Cuba collapsed internally, had to be prevented at all costs. The Castro brothers, requesting military aid, could cite the Bay of Pigs and the constant invasion talk in Congress and the Cuban-refugee community. Although they reportedly had expected no more than a firm Soviet pledge, the presence of Soviet missiles looked to them like an even tighter guarantee of their security. (The Soviets stuck to this position. Mikoyan claimed in a talk with the President weeks after the crisis was over that the weapons were purely defensive, that they had been justified by threats of invasion voiced by Richard Nixon and "Pentagon generals," and that the Soviets intended to inform the U.S. of these weapons right after the elections to prevent the matter from affecting the American political campaign.)

Theory 4) **Bargaining Barter**—Well aware of Cuba's sensitive role in domestic American politics, Khrushchev intended to use these bases in a summit or UN confrontation with Kennedy as effective bargaining power—to trade them off for his kind of Berlin settlement or for a withdrawal of American overseas bases.

Theory 5) **Missile Power**—The Soviets could no longer benefit from the fiction that the missile gap was in their favor. To close it with ICBMS (intercontinental ballistic missiles) and

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submarine-based missiles was too expensive. Providing Cuban bases for their existing MRBMs and IRBMs (medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles) gave them a swift, relatively inexpensive means of adding sharply to the number of missiles targeted on the United States, positioned to bypass most of our missile-warning system and permitting virtually no tactical-warning time between their launch and arrival on target. The 15-minute ground alert on which our nuclear bombers stood by on runways would no longer be enough. To be sure, these Cuban missiles, in view of the other megatonnage the Soviets were capable of unleashing, did not substantially alter the strategic balance in *fact*—unless these first installations were followed by so many more that the Soviets would be tempted to launch a preemptive first strike. But that balance would have been substantially altered in *appearance*; and in matters of national will and world leadership, as the President said later, such appearances contribute to reality.

His own analysis regarded the third and fifth theories as offering likely but insufficient motives, and he leaned most strongly to the first. But whichever theory was correct, it was clear that the Soviet move, if successful, would "materially. . . and politically change the balance of power" in the entire cold war, as he would later comment. Undertaken in secrecy, accompanied by duplicity, the whole effort was based on confronting Kennedy and the world in November with a threatening *fait accompli*, designed, perhaps, to be revealed by Khrushchev personally, we speculated, in a bristling UN speech, to be followed by a cocky demand for a summit on Berlin and other matters. With these somber thoughts in mind, our Tuesday morning meeting ended; and I went down the hall to my office with a sense of deep foreboding and heavy responsibility.

CHAPTER THREE

My recollection of the 96 hours that followed is a blur of meetings and discussions. The proposals varied, our progress varied. In order to clear my desk, particularly of the President's campaign speeches, I did not attend any preliminary meetings held that afternoon. One was in the Pentagon, where Robert McNamara and the Joint Chiefs of Staff executed the President's instructions to alert our forces for any contingency and to be ready in a week for any military action against Cuba. The other principal meeting that afternoon was in the State Department, where Soviet motives and possible actions were discussed. Both meetings imposed extra-tight security. Also meeting that afternoon, and every morning thereafter, was the United States Intelligence Board, on which the State Department and military intelligence officers were represented with the CIA.

At 6:30 p.m., we met again with the President in the Cabinet Room, as we would regularly for the next several weeks. That Tuesday was the first of 13 days of decision unlike any other in the Kennedy years—or, indeed, inasmuch as this was the first direct nuclear confrontation, unlike any in the history of our planet.

Much misinformation has been written about this series of meetings, about who said what and about such terms as "hawks and doves," "think tank," "ExCom" and "Trollope ploy," which I never heard used at the time. With all due respect to those Cabinet and other officers sometimes credited in these accounts with shaping our deliberations when the President was absent, the best performer in this respect was Atty. Gen. Robert Kennedy—not because of any particular idea he advanced, not because he presided (no one did), but because of his constant prodding, questioning, eliciting arguments and alternatives, and keeping the discussions concrete and moving ahead, a difficult task as different participants came in and out. Bundy and I sought to assist in this role. One of the remarkable aspects of those meetings was a sense of complete equality. Protocol mattered little when the nation's life was at stake. Experience mattered little in a crisis that had no precedent. Even rank mattered little when secrecy prevented staff support. We were 15 individuals on our own, representing the President and not different departments. Assistant secretaries differed vigorously with their secretaries; I participated much more freely than I ever had in a National Security Council meeting; and the absence of the President encouraged everyone to speak his mind.

It was after noting these tendencies in a Wednesday afternoon meeting, held while the President fulfilled a campaign commitment in Connecticut, that I recommended he authorize more such preparatory meetings without his presence. He agreed, and these meetings continued on the State Department's 7th floor. But inasmuch as some or all of us met daily with the President, those meetings over which he did not preside—held chiefly while he maintained his normal schedule for the sake of appearances and because of other duties—were not formulating policy or even alternatives without his knowledge. And when he did preside, recognizing that lower-ranking advisers like Llewellyn Thompson would not voluntarily contradict their superiors in front of the President, and that persuasive advisers like McNamara unintentionally silenced less articulate men, he took pains to seek everyone's individual views. In contrast with his first Cuban crisis, when he had conferred with a somewhat different group, he knew his men, we knew each other, and all weighed the consequences of failure.

As the week wore on, the tireless work of the aerial photographers and photo interpreters gave an even greater sense of urgency to our deliberations. More MRBM sites were discovered, for a total of six. They were no longer recognizable only, in the President's words, "to the most sophisticated expert." Their construction had proceeded at such a pace in those days that there could be no mistaking the Soviet intention to have them operational much earlier than we had anticipated on Tuesday. The literally miles of film taken of the island—which was blanketed daily with six or seven flights—now revealed excavations for three IRBM sites as well. The 2,200 nautical-mile IRBMs, when ready in December, would be capable of reaching virtually any part of the continental United States. At these locations, too, the fields and wooded areas photographed in earlier coverage had suddenly been transformed into networks of roads, tents, equipment and construction, all completely manned and closely guarded by Soviet personnel only.

The knowledge that time was running out dominated our discussions and kept us meeting late into the night. The stepped-up U-2 flights had apparently not alerted the Soviets to our discovery. But we wanted to formulate and declare our position, said the President, before they knew we knew, before the matter leaked out to the public and before the missiles became operational.

Despite the fatiguing hours and initially sharp divisions, our meetings avoided any loss of temper and frequently were lightened by a grim humor. Each of us changed his mind more than once that week on the best course of action to take—not only because new facts and arguments were adduced, but because, in the President's words, "whatever action we took had so many disadvantages to it and each [illegible] raised the prospect that it might escalate the Soviet Union into a nuclear war." It was an agonizing prospect; and in no other period during my service in the White House did I wake up in the middle of the night, reviewing the deliberations of that evening and trying to puzzle out a course of action. Not one of us at any time believed that any of the choices before us could bring anything but either prolonged danger or fighting, very possibly leading to the kind of deepening commitment of prestige and power from which neither side could withdraw without resort to nuclear weapons.

The Soviet statement of September 11 had warned that any U.S. military action against Cuba would unleash nuclear war. What would Khrushchev actually do if we bombed the missile sites, or blockaded the island, or invaded? What would we do in return, and what would his reaction be then? These were the questions we asked that week; and among the locations listed as possible targets for Soviet retaliation were West Berlin (first on everyone's list); Turkey (because our exposed Jupiter missiles there were most likely to be equated with the Soviet missiles in Cuba); Iran (where the Soviets had a tactical advantage comparable to ours in the Caribbean, and a long-standing desire for control); Pakistan; Scandinavia and Italy. Nor could we worry only about Soviet retaliation. Castro, not known for his steady reactions, might order an attack on Guantánamo,

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on Florida, or on whatever planes or ships we employed. He might also order the execution of the Bay of Pigs prisoners. The news that week that Red China had attacked India made us wonder whether this was a coincidence, or whether a whole round of conflagrations would include Formosa, Korea and the Indochinese peninsula. The most dire possibility of all was that the Soviets might conclude from a similar analysis of measures and counter-measures, as seen from their point of view, that all-out war was inevitable and thereupon launch a preemptive nuclear strike on the United States to make certain they hit us first.

The fact that Khrushchev had already made one major miscalculation—in thinking he could get away with missiles in Cuba—increased the danger that he would make more. Our predictions of the outcome were further clouded by the Soviet Chairman's known penchant for surprise, by the difficulty of halting an escalation once started, and by the possibility that he was deliberately trying to provoke us into an attack on Cuba to facilitate his moving on Berlin (just as the Suez invasion of 1956 had confused the opposition to his suppression of Hungary). We prepared all the arguments distinguishing Cuba from West Berlin—e.g. the latter was not a site for strategic weapons, and the U.S. had suggested an internationally supervised plebiscite to determine the wishes of its citizens—but we doubted that such distinctions would impress the Soviets.

We could not even be certain they would impress our allies. Most western Europeans cared nothing about Cuba and thought we were overanxious about it. They had long accustomed themselves to living next door to Soviet missiles. Would they support our risking a world war, or an attack on North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member Turkey, or a move on West Berlin, because we now had a few dozen hostile missiles nearby? And would not any disarray in the alliance weaken both our Cuba posture and our Berlin defense? On the other hand, if we failed to respond, would that not confirm the fears of Gen. Charles de Gaulle and others that the U.S. could not be depended upon to meet threats even further from our shores? Failure to consult could also weaken their support; yet consultation, with the inevitable leaks, disagreements and delays, could weaken our action. The situation appeared even worse in Latin America, where nonintervention by the U.S. was a religion, but a failure to intervene would bring a Castro-Communist trend.

The President asked Dean Rusk to prepare an analysis of possible allied reactions; and the Secretary summarized it for our Wednesday afternoon meeting in his department. When he concluded, I asked: "Are you saying in effect that if we take a strong action the allies and Latin Americans will turn against us, and if we take a weak action they will turn away from us?" "That's about it," replied Rusk. There was a moment of gloomy silence until Gen. Maxwell Taylor interjected: "And a Merry Christmas to you too!"

CHAPTER FOUR

The bulk of our time Tuesday through Friday was spent in George Ball's conference room canvassing all possible courses, as the President had requested, and preparing backup material: suggested time schedules, draft messages, military estimates and predictions of Soviet and Cuban responses. Initially, the possibilities seemed to divide into six categories:

1) Do nothing.

2) Bring diplomatic pressures and warnings to bear upon the Soviets. Possible forms included an appeal to the UN or OAS for an inspection team, or a direct approach to Khrushchev, possibly at a summit conference. The removal of our missile bases in Turkey in exchange was listed in our later talks as a possibility that Khrushchev was likely to suggest if we didn't.

3) Undertake a secret approach to Castro, to split him off from the Soviets, to warn him that the alternative was his island's downfall and that the Soviets were selling him out.

4) Initiate indirect military action by means of a blockade, possibly accompanied by increased aerial surveillance and warnings. Many types of blockade were considered.

5) Conduct an air strike—pinpointed against the missiles only or against other military targets, with or without advance warning. (Other military means of directly removing the missiles were raised—bombarding them with pellets that would cause their malfunctioning without fatalities, or a sudden landing of paratroopers or guerrillas—but none of these was deemed feasible.)

6) Launch an invasion or, as one chief advocate of this course put it: "Go in there and take Castro away from Cuba."

Other related moves were considered—such as declaring a national emergency, sending a special envoy to Khrushchev, or asking Congress for a declaration of war against Cuba (suggested as a means of building both allied support and a legal basis for blockade, but deemed not essential to either). But these six choices were the center of our deliberations.

Choice No. 1, doing nothing, and choice No. 2, limiting our response to diplomatic action only, were both seriously considered. As some (but not all) Pentagon advisers pointed out to the President, we had long lived within range of Soviet missiles, we expected Khrushchev to live with our missiles nearby, and by taking this addition calmly, we could prevent him from inflating its importance. All of the other courses raised so many risks and drawbacks that choice No. 2 had its appeal; all of us came back to it at one discouraged moment or another; and it was advocated to the President as a preferable alternative to blockade by one of the regular members of our group. But the President had rejected this course from the outset. He was concerned less about the missiles' military implications than their effect on global political balance. The Soviet move had been undertaken so swiftly and with so much deception—it was so sudden a departure from Soviet practice—that it represented a provocative change in the delicate *status quo*. Missiles on Soviet territory or submarines were very different from missiles in the western hemisphere, particularly in their political and psychological effect on Latin America. The history of Soviet intentions toward smaller nations was very different from our own. Such a step, if accepted, would be followed by more; and the President's September pledges of action called this step unacceptable. While he desired to combine diplomatic moves with military action, he was not willing to let the UN debate and Khrushchev equivocate while the missiles became operational.

Various approaches to Castro (choice No. 3) —either instead of or as well as to Khrushchev— were also considered many times during the week. This course was set aside rather than dropped. The President increasingly felt that we should not avoid the fact that this was a confrontation of the great powers—that the missiles had been placed there by the Soviets, were manned and guarded by the Soviets, and would have to be removed by the Soviets in response to direct American action.

The invasion course (choice No. 6) had surprisingly few supporters. One leader outside our group, whose views were conveyed to us, felt the missiles could not be tolerated, that the Soviet motivation was baffling, that a limited military action such as blockade would seem indecisive and irritating to the world, and that an American airborne seizure of Havana and the government was the best bet. But with one possible exception, the conferees shared President Kennedy's view that invasion was a last step, not the first; that it should be prepared, but held back; that an invasion—more than any other course—risked a world war, a Soviet retaliation at Berlin or elsewhere, a wreckage of our Latin-American policy and the indictment of history for our aggression.

Thus our attention soon centered on two alternatives—an air strike and a blockade—and initially more on the former. The idea of American planes suddenly and swiftly eliminating the missile complex with conventional bombs in a matter of minutes—a so-called "surgical" strike—had appeal to almost everyone first considering the matter, including Kennedy, on Tuesday and Wednesday. It would be over quickly and cleanly, remove the missiles effectively and serve as a warning to the Communists. It could be accompanied by an explanatory address to the nation and by a blockade or increased aerial surveillance to guard against future installations. The air-strike advocates in our group prepared an elaborate scenario, which provided for a Presidential announcement of the missiles' presence on Saturday, calling Congress back into emergency session and then

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knocking the missiles out early Sunday, simultaneously notifying Khrushchev of our action and recommending a summit. Cuba was to be notified at the UN shortly in advance. Leaflet warnings to Russians at the sites were also considered.

But there were grave difficulties to the air-strike alternative that became clearer each day.

1) The surgical strike, like the April, 1961, overthrow of Castro by a small exile brigade, was merely a hopeful illusion—and this time, it was so recognized. It could not be accomplished by a few sorties in a few minutes, as hoped, nor could it be limited to the missile sites alone. To so limit the strike, declared the Joint Chiefs firmly, would be "an unacceptable risk." Castro's planes—and newly arrived Soviet MIGs and IL-28 bombers, if operative—might respond with an attack on our planes, on Guantánamo or even on the southeastern United States. The SAMS would surely fire at our planes. Cuban batteries opposite Guantánamo might open fire. The nuclear-warhead storage sites, if identified, should not remain. All or most of these targets would have to be taken out in a massive bombardment. Even then, admitted the Air Force—and this in particular influenced the President—there could be no assurance that all the missiles would have been removed or that some of them would not fire first, unleashing their nuclear warheads on American soil. The more we looked at the air strike, the clearer it became that the resultant chaos and political collapse would ultimately necessitate a U.S. invasion. Most of the air-strike advocates openly agreed that their route took us back to the invasion course, and they added Cuban military installations and invasion-support targets to the list of sites to be bombed. But invasion was still opposed by Kennedy.

2) The problem of advance warning was unsolvable. A sudden air strike at dawn Sunday without warning, said the Attorney General, (in rather impassioned tones) would be "a Pearl Harbor in reverse, and it would blacken the name of the United States in the pages of history" as a great power who attacked a small neighbor. The Suez fiasco was cited as comparable. Latin Americans would produce new Castros in their bitterness; the Cuban people would not forgive us for decades; and the Soviets would entertain the very dangerous notion that the United States, as they had feared for years, was indeed capable of launching a preemptive first strike. But to provide advance warning raised as many difficulties as no warning at all. It would enable the Soviets to conceal the missiles and make their elimination less certain. It would invite Khrushchev to commit himself to bombing us if we carried out our attack, and give him time to take the propaganda and diplomatic initiative and stir up a host of UN, Latin-American and allied objections, which we would have to defy or let the missiles stand. Many of those originally attracted to the air-strike course had favored it in the hope that a warning would suffice and that the Soviets would then withdraw their missiles. But no one could devise any method of warning that would not enable Khrushchev either to tie us into knots or force us into obloquy. I tried my hand, for example, at an airtight letter to be carried from the President to the Soviet Chairman by a high-level personal envoy. The letter would inform Khrushchev that, only if he agreed in his conference with that courier (and such others as he called in) to order the missiles dismantled, would U.S. military action be withheld, while our surveillance oversaw their removal. But no matter how many references I put in to a summit, to peaceful intentions and to previous warnings and pledges, the letter still constituted the kind of ultimatum that no great power could accept and a justification for either a preemptive strike against this country or our indictment in the court of history. From that point on, I veered away from the air-strike course.

3) The air strike, unlike the blockade, would directly and definitely attack Soviet military might, kill Russians as well as Cubans and thus more likely provoke a Soviet military response. Not to respond at all would have been too great a humiliation for Khrushchev to bear, affecting his relations not only at home and with the Chinese, but with all the Communist parties in the developing world. Any Cuban missiles operational by the time of our strike might be ordered by Khrushchev to fire their nuclear salvos into the United States before they were wiped out —or, we speculated, the local Soviet commander, under attack, might order the missiles fired on the assumption that war was on. The air-strike advocates did not shrink from the fact that a Soviet military response was likely. The President's September statements served as warning, argued one consultant, in response to the "Pearl Harbor in reverse" argument. "What would the Soviets do then?" he was asked.

"I know the Soviets pretty well. I think they'll knock out our missile bases in Turkey."

"What do we do then?"

"Under our NATO treaty, we'd be obligated to knock out a base inside the USSR."

"What will they do then?"

"Why, then, we hope everyone will cool down and want to talk." It seemed rather cool in the conference room as he spoke.

CHAPTER FIVE

On Wednesday, October 17, President Kennedy—after a brief review of the situation with aides in the morning—flew to Connecticut to keep a campaign commitment. Cancellation would only have aroused suspicion; and Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson flew west to carry on his campaign tour. A day of meetings in the State Department had made some progress in defining the issues; and when we recessed for dinner, the Attorney General and I decided to meet the President's plane. It was after 9:00 when he arrived to find us sitting in his car to avoid attention. We filled him in as we drove to the White House. I had prepared a four-page memorandum outlining the areas of agreement and disagreement, the full list of possibilities and (longest of all) the unanswered questions. With this to ponder, and for the reasons earlier mentioned, the President decided not to attend our session that night. Dropping him at the White House, the Attorney General and I returned to the State Department.

At that meeting, one of the most influential participants—who had theretofore not indicated which course he favored—read a brief paper he had prepared on his position: On the following Wednesday, after we had informed Harold Macmillan, De Gaulle, Konrad Adenauer and possibly Turkey and a few Latin Americans, a limited air strike wiping out the missiles should be accompanied by a simultaneous Presidential announcement to the world and formal reference to the UN and OAS. We would expect a Soviet attack on Berlin, possibly Korea, or possibly the Turkish missile bases in response; and NATO and our Armed Forces should be so prepared.

This paper, another adviser pointed out, bypassed the question of warning to the Soviets and Castro. Advance warning, he said, was required if the rest of the world was not to turn against us. Moreover, if Khrushchev defied our warning or, in response, lied about the existence of offensive weapons, our hand would be strengthened. Others pointed out the objections to advance warning, the dangers of being trapped in a diplomatic wrangle, and the fact that no air strike could be limited and still effective. Still others repeated the objections to no warning. The original proponent, undecided on this key element, began to back away from his plan.

That discussion, and my inability the next day to draft a letter to Khrushchev that could stand the light of logic and history, turned increasing attention upon the blockade route. Most of the career diplomats in our group had initially favored the blockade course, although some had preferred waiting for Khrushchev's response to a letter before deciding which military move to make. As a consensus shifted from any notion of trying political or diplomatic pressure before resorting to military action, and from the surgical air strike as an impossibility, it shifted on Thursday toward the notion of blockade. It was by no means unanimous—the advocates of an air strike were still strong—but the blockade alternative was picking up important backers.

At first, there had been very little support of a blockade. It appeared almost irrelevant to the problem of the missiles, neither getting them out nor seeming justifiable to our many maritime allies, who were sensitive to freedom of the seas. Blockade was a word so closely associated with Berlin that it almost guaranteed a new Berlin blockade in response. Both our allies and world opinion would then blame the U.S. and impose

as a "solution" the lifting of both blockades simultaneously, thus accomplishing nothing.

Moreover, a blockade had many of the drawbacks of the air-strike plan. If Soviet ships ignored it, U.S. forces would have to fire the first shot, provoking Soviet action elsewhere—by their submarines against our ships there or in other waters, by a blockade of our overseas bases or by a more serious military move against Berlin, Turkey, Iran, or other trouble spots. One view held that Khrushchev and the U.S. could both pretend that an air strike on Cuba was no affair of the Soviet Union, but a blockade of Soviet ships was a direct challenge from which he could not retreat. And if Castro thought a blockade was effectively cutting him off, he might in desperation—or to involve Soviet help—attack our ships, Guantánamo or Florida.

We could not even be certain that the blockade route was open to us. Without our obtaining a two-thirds vote in the OAS—which appeared dubious at best—allies and neutrals as well as adversaries might well regard a blockade as illegal. If so, they might feel free to defy it. One member of the group warned of the complications of maritime insurance and claims in an illegal blockade.

But the greatest single drawback to the blockade, in comparison with the air strike, was time. Instead of presenting Khrushchev and the world with a *fait accompli*, it offered a prolonged and agonizing approach, uncertain in its effect and indefinite in its duration, enabling the missiles to become operational, subjecting us to counterthreats from Khrushchev, giving him a propaganda advantage, stirring fears and protests and pickets all over the world, causing Latin-American governments to fall, permitting Castro to announce that he would execute two Bay of Pigs prisoners for each day it continued, encouraging the UN or the OAS or our allies to bring pressure for talks, and in all these ways making more difficult a subsequent air strike if the missiles remained. Our own people would be frustrated and divided as tensions built.

Despite all these disadvantages, the blockade route gained strength on Thursday as other choices faded. It was a more limited, low-key military action than the air strike. It offered Khrushchev the choice of avoiding a direct military clash by keeping his ships away. It could at least be initiated without a shot being fired or a single Soviet or Cuban citizen being killed. Thus, it seemed slightly less likely to precipitate an immediate military riposte. Moreover, a naval engagement in the Caribbean, just off our own shores, was the most advantageous military confrontation the United States could have, if one were necessary. Whatever the balance of strategic and ground forces may have been, the superiority of the American Navy was unquestioned; and this superiority was worldwide, should Soviet submarines retaliate elsewhere. To avoid a military defeat, Khrushchev might well turn his ships back, causing U.S. allies to have increased confidence in our credibility and Cuba's Communists to feel they were being abandoned.

Precisely because it was a limited, low-level action, the argument ran, the blockade had the advantage of permitting a more controlled escalation on our part, gradual or rapid as the situation required. It could serve as an unmistakable, but not sudden or humiliating, warning to Khrushchev of what we expected from him. Its prudence, its avoidance of casualties, and its avoidance of attacking Cuban soil would make it more appealing to other nations than an air strike, permitting OAS and allied support for our initial position, and making that support more likely for whatever air strike or other action was later necessary.

On Thursday afternoon, subcommittees were set up to plot each of the major courses in detail. The blockade subcommittee first had to decide what kind of blockade it recommended. We chose to begin with the lowest level of action—also the level least likely to anger allies engaged in the Cuban trade—a blockade against offensive weapons only. Inasmuch as the President had made clear that defensive weapons were not intolerable, and inasmuch as the exclusion of all food and supplies would affect innocent Cubans most of all, this delineation helped relate the blockade route more closely to the specific problem of missiles and make the punishment more nearly fit the crime. It also avoided the difficulty of stopping submarines and planes (which would have trouble bringing in missiles and bombers, even in sections).

The next question, and one that would recur throughout the next ten days, was whether to include "POL," as the military called it—petroleum, oil and lubricants. A POL blockade, automatically turning back all tankers, would lead directly, though not immediately, to a collapse of the Cuban economy. Although these commodities could be justifiably related to the offensive war machine, it seemed too drastic a step for the first move, too likely to require a more belligerent response, and too obviously aimed more at Castro's survival than at Khrushchev's missiles. We recommended that this be held back as a means of later tightening the blockade should escalation be required.

Our next consideration was the likely Soviet response. The probability of acquiescence in the blockade itself by the Soviets—turning their ships back or permitting their inspection—was "high, but not certain," in the words of one Kremlinologist; but it was predicted that they might choose to force us to fire first. Retaliatory action elsewhere in the world seemed almost certain. The Soviets, we estimated, would impose a blockade on West Berlin, not merely against offensive weapons, which would mean little, but a general blockade, including the air routes and all civilian access as well, thus precipitating another serious military confrontation for both powers. Other blockades were listed as a possibility, as well as increased Communist threats in Latin America. Inside Cuba, a long and gradually tighter blockade would in time, it was predicted, produce military and political action. These studies completed, we proceeded to suggest possible U.S. responses to Communist responses, emphasizing that it was preferable to treat West Berlin on the basis of its own previously prepared contingency plans without regard to actions elsewhere. We then rejoined the air-strike subcommittee and the others to compare notes.

Meanwhile, the President—with whom some of us had met both in the morning and afternoon of that Thursday—was holding a long-scheduled two-hour meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko prior to the latter's return to Moscow from the UN. All agreed that the President should not tell Gromyko what we knew. Not only was our information incomplete after only two days, with new evidence coming in every day, but we were not yet ready to act—and Gromyko's relay of our information to Moscow would bring on all the delays, evasions, threats and other disadvantages of a diplomatic warning.

Alternatively, the wily Gromyko might decide to announce the build-up himself from the White House steps; and Kennedy felt strongly that, to retain the initiative and public confidence, it was essential that the facts first be disclosed to the people of the United States by their President, along with an announced plan of action. He was anxious as the meeting approached, but managed to smile as he welcomed Gromyko and Dobrynin to his office.

Gromyko not only failed to mention the offensive weapons, but carried on the deception that there were none. In a sense, Kennedy had hoped for this, believing it would strengthen our case with world opinion. The chief topic of conversation was Berlin—and on this, Gromyko was tougher, more insistent than ever. After the U.S. election, he said, if no settlement were in sight, the Soviets would go ahead with their treaty. ("It all seemed to fit a pattern," the President told me later, "everything coming to a head at once—the completion of the missile bases, Khrushchev coming to New York, a new drive on West Berlin. If that move is coming anyway, I'm not going to feel that a Cuban blockade provoked it.") Then Gromyko turned to Cuba, with complaints, not apologies. He cited the congressional resolution, the reservists call-up authority, various statements to the press and other U.S. interference with what he regarded as a small nation that posed no threat. He called our restrictions on allied shipping a blockade against trade and a violation of international law. All this could only lead to great misfortunes for mankind, he said, for his government could not sit by and observe this situation idly when aggression was planned and a threat of war was looming.

The President made no response, and Gromyko then read from his notes: "As to Soviet assistance to Cuba, I have been instructed to make it clear, as the Soviet Government has already done, that such assistance pursued solely the purpose of contributing to the defense capabilities of Cuba and to the development of its peaceful economy . . . training by Soviet specialists of Cuban nationals in handling defensive armaments was by no means offensive. If it were otherwise, the Soviet

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Government would have never become involved in rendering such assistance."

Kennedy was impassive, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with Gromyko's claims. He gave no sign of tension or anger, but to avoid misleading his adversary, he sent for and read aloud his September warning against offensive missiles in Cuba: "Gromyko must have wondered why I was reading it," he said later. "But he did not respond."

Two days earlier, the very day he had learned of the missiles, the President had been informed of a similar deception. Khrushchev, upon receiving our new ambassador to Moscow, Foy Kohler, had complained vigorously about reports that a new Russian fishing port in Cuba would become a submarine base. He would have held up the announcement of the port, he said, because he did not want to burden Kennedy during the campaign. He also wanted to state again that all activity in Cuba was defensive. (The one ominous note in that otherwise genial conversation had been a sharp reference to the U.S. Jupiter bases in Turkey and Italy.)

As Gromyko arrived at 8 p.m. that Thursday for a black-tie dinner on the State Department's 8th floor, our group was meeting on the 7th floor (minus Rusk and Thompson, who were with Gromyko).

In our earlier sessions that day, the President had requested a 9 p.m. conference at the White House. While we had been meeting only for three days (that seemed like thirty), time was running out. Massive U.S. military movements had thus far been explained by long-planned naval exercises in the Caribbean and an earlier announced build-up in Castro's air force. But the secret would soon be out, said the President, and the missiles would soon be operational.

The blockade course was now advocated by a majority. We were prepared to present the full range of choices and questions to the President. George Ball had earlier directed that the official cars conspicuously gathered by the front door be dispersed to avoid suspicion, and with the exception of Edwin Martin, who preferred to walk, we all piled into the Attorney General's limousine, some seated on laps, for the short ride to the White House. "It will be some story if this car is in an accident," someone quipped. In the Oval Room, the alternatives were discussed. Both the case for the blockade and for simply living with this threat were presented. The President had already moved from the air-strike to the blockade camp. He liked the idea of leaving Khrushchev a way out, of beginning at a low level that could then be stepped up; and the other choices had too many insuperable difficulties. Blockade, he indicated, was his tentative decision.

Work began that night on the details. Defense asked the Joint Chiefs to prepare an exact list of offensive weapons to be on the prohibited list, to consider the feasibility of blockading aircraft, to determine which Latin-American navies could join in the blockade and to consider whether any Cuban exile organizations should join as well. Also requested was a list of riot-control equipment we could make available to the Latin Americans; and on the following day, the Atlantic and Caribbean Commands were alerted against possible air attacks on the Panama Canal and other targets within reach of Castro. All U.S. ambassadors to Latin America who were away on leave or consultation were ordered back to their posts. At the end of the Gromyko dinner after midnight, Rusk and Thompson discussed the night's decisions with Ball, Martin and U. Alexis Johnson.

But it was not a final decision; and on Friday morning, October 19, it seemed more remote than ever. Preparing to take off as agreed for a weekend of campaigning in the Midwest and West, the President called me in, a bit disgusted. He had just met with the Joint Chiefs, who preferred an air strike or invasion; and other advisers were expressing doubts. In retrospect, it is clear that this delay enabled us to think through the blockade route much more thoroughly, but at the time, the President was impatient and discouraged. He was counting on the Attorney General and me, he said, to pull the group together quickly—otherwise, more delays and dissension would plague whatever decision he took. He wanted to act soon, Sunday, if possible—and Bob Kennedy was to call him when we were ready.

Our meetings that morning largely repeated the same arguments. The objections to the blockade were listed, then the objections to the air strike. I commented somewhat ungraciously that we were not serving the President well, and that my recently healed ulcer didn't like it much either. Yet it was true that the blockade approach remained somewhat nebulous; and I agreed to write the first rough draft of a blockade speech as a means of focusing on specifics.

But back in my office, the original difficulty with the blockade route stared me in the face: How should we relate it to the missiles? How would it help get them out of there? What would we do if they became operational? What should we say about our surveillance, about communicating with Khrushchev? I returned to the group late that afternoon with these questions instead of a speech; and as the concrete answers were provided in our discussions, the final shape of the President's policy began to take form. It was an amalgam of the blockade—air-strike routes; and a much stronger, more satisfied consensus formed behind it. Originally, I was to draft an air-strike speech as well, but that was now abandoned. That night—fortified by my first hot meal of the week, sent in a covered dish by a Washington matron to whom I appealed for help—I worked until 3 a.m. on the draft speech. Among the texts I read for background were the war declaration speeches of Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt. At 9 a.m. Saturday, my draft was reviewed, amended and generally approved, and a little after 10 a.m. our time, the President was called back.

"The President has a cold," announced Pierre Salinger to the reporters who had accompanied them to Chicago. He did have a cold, but it was not a factor in his decision.

Before boarding his plane, he called his wife at Glen Ora and asked her and the children to return to the White House. No other decision in his lifetime would equal this, and he wanted his family nearby. Once the decision was made, he asked Jacqueline if she would not prefer to leave Washington, as some did, and stay nearer the underground shelter to which the First Family was to be evacuated, if there was time, in case of attack. She told him no, that if an attack came, she preferred to come over to his office and share whatever happened to him.

The President's helicopter landed on the South Lawn a little after 1:30. After he had read the draft speech, we chatted in a relaxed fashion in his office before the decisive meeting scheduled for 2:30. I gave him my view of the key arguments: air strike, no, because it could not be surgical, but would lead to invasion, because the world would neither understand nor forget an attack without warning, and because Khrushchev could outmaneuver any form of warning; and blockade, yes, because it was a flexible, less aggressive beginning, least likely to precipitate war and most likely to cause the Soviets to back down.

Our meeting at 2:30 p.m. was held once again in the Oval Room upstairs. For the first time, we were convened formally as the 505th meeting of the National Security Council. We arrived at different gates at different times to dampen the now-growing suspicion among the press. The President asked John McCone to lead off with the latest photographic and other intelligence. Then the full ramifications of the two basic tracks were set before the President, either to begin with a blockade and move up from there as necessary, or to begin with a full air strike, moving in all likelihood to an invasion. The spokesman for the blockade emphasized that a "cost" would be incurred for whatever action we took, a cost in terms of Communist retaliation. The blockade route, he said, appeared most likely to secure our limited objective—the removal of the missiles—at the lowest cost.

At the conclusion of the presentations there was a brief, awkward silence. It was the most difficult and dangerous decision any President could make, and only he could make it.

In the next issue of LOOK—John F. Kennedy's Greatest Hour: Khrushchev Retreats in Cuba