

JFK's GREATEST HOUR

KHRUSHCHEV RETREATS IN CUBA

BY THEODORE C. SORENSEN

Angered by captious congressional critics at the height of the crisis, Kennedy told Sorensen: "If they want this - - - - job, they can have it; it's no great joy to me." But his irritation soon passed. A few minutes later, he and Sorensen sat alone in the Cabinet Room, reviewing the most important speech JFK would ever deliver.

THE TIME: Saturday afternoon, October 20, 1962.

THE PLACE: The Oval Room in the Executive Mansion.

THE EVENT: John F. Kennedy's decisive meeting with his key advisers on the Soviet missiles in Cuba.

BEFORE KENNEDY'S decision to blockade Cuba became final, he wanted to talk directly with the Air Force Tactical Bombing Command to make certain that a limited air strike was not feasible. But he wanted to start with limited action, he said, and a blockade was the place to start. The advocates of air strike and invasion should understand that those options were not ruled out for the future. The combination of approaches contained in the draft speech anticipated not only a halt of the buildup, but a removal of the missiles by the Soviets—or by us. The blockade route had the advantage, however, of preserving his options and leaving some for Nikita Khrushchev. That was important between nu-

clear powers, and he wanted our action directed against the specific offense of the other nuclear power, not at Fidel Castro. "Above all," he would say later at American University, "while defending our own vital interests, nuclear powers must avert those confrontations which bring an adversary to a choice of either a humiliating retreat or a nuclear war." Khrushchev had launched this crisis; but a blockade response might slow the escalation, instead of rushing him into an irrevocable position. It applied enough military pressure to make our will clear, but not so much as to make a peaceful solution impossible.

The President next reaffirmed a decision made earlier not to include at the start petroleum, oil or lubricants (POL), or carriers other than surface ships; and, in a major new decision, he adopted the term "quarantine" as less belligerent and more applicable to an act of peaceful self-preservation than "blockade."

Then he asked about Berlin. The Soviets would move there, he expected, but they probably would, whatever we did; and perhaps this continued

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show of strength would make them think twice about it: "The worst course of all would be for us to do nothing." I made a mental note to add that sentence to the speech.

"There isn't any good solution," he went on. "Whichever plan I chose, the ones whose plans we're not taking are the lucky ones—they'll be able to say 'I told you so' in a week or two. But at least this one is the least objectionable." By the time the President finished, those members of our group who had come to the meeting still advocating an air strike or invasion had been essentially won over to the course he outlined.

But bitter disagreement broke out over the diplomatic moves to accompany it. The President, although opposed to proposing a summit at that time, wanted to stress the desirability of a peaceful solution, of communications between the two powers, of an approach to the UN, of persuading the world our action was prudent and necessary. But, as one of those present pointed out, little had been done to work out the political-diplomatic side of the program, without which allied and OAS (Organization of American States) approval was more doubtful. We should go to the UN first, said this adviser, before the Russians, and have ready an acceptable resolution, worded our way. The President agreed.

There was disagreement, however, over what our diplomatic stance should be. This same adviser fully endorsed the blockade route, although casting doubt on any unilateral action we took without OAS approval. He wanted this military action accompanied, however, by diplomatic actions that the President found wholly unacceptable. He wanted the President to propose the demilitarization, neutralization and guaranteed territorial integrity of Cuba, thus giving up Guantanamo, which he maintained was of little use to us, in exchange for the removal of the Soviet missile bases on the island. Alternatively or subsequently, he said, we could propose to the Russians the withdrawal of our Turkish and Italian Jupiter-missile bases in exchange for the withdrawal of their Cuban missile bases, and send UN inspec-

tion teams to all the foreign bases maintained by both sides to prevent their use in a surprise attack. He also talked of a UN-supervised standstill of military activity on both sides—thus leaving the missiles in with no blockade—and of a summit, and of UN teams inspecting not only Cuba, but possible U.S. bases for attacking Cuba. The offer of such a political program, he later wrote in a follow-up memo, would avoid comparisons with the Suez invasion. The offer would not sound "soft" if properly worded, he declared, but "wise," particularly when made in conjunction with U.S. military action.

There was not a hint of "appeasing the aggressor" in these plans, as some would charge, only an effort to propose a negotiating position preferable to war and acceptable to the world. Even the synopsis prepared by the air-strike "hard liners" earlier in the week had included not only a call for a summit, but a pledge that the United States was prepared to withdraw promptly all nuclear forces based in Turkey, aircraft as well as missiles. The Joint Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy had, in 1961, also recommended the Jupiters' withdrawal. Now, an adviser who had served in the previous administration agreed, to the President's great interest, that the Jupiter missiles in Turkey and Italy were obsolescent, of little military value and had been practically forced on those countries. Nevertheless, several of those present joined in a sharp attack on these diplomatic proposals.

The President admired the courage of their proponent in adhering to his position under fire. He agreed we should beef up the political side of the speech, and said he had long ago asked Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara to review the overseas Jupiter missiles. But now, he felt, was no time for concessions that could break up the alliance, that could confirm European suspicions that the United States would sacrifice their security to our interests in an area of no concern to them. Instead of being on the defensive, we should be indicting the Soviet Union for its duplicity and threat to world peace.

ment prepared a thorough, highly efficient scenario, outlining the timing of each step by each agency. The Joint Chiefs of Staff advised all commanders in chief to be prepared for possible military action. They ordered Guantanamo reinforced and its dependents evacuated on Monday.

Former Secretary of State Dean Acheson earlier in the week had wisely suggested a special high-level emissary to brief President Charles de Gaulle of France and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Now he was given that assignment.

On Sunday morning, I incorporated all suggested changes for the speech into a fourth draft. Simultaneously, the President met with the chief of the Tactical Air Command, Gen. Walter Sweeney, Jr., and a few others (Army Gen. Robert Kennedy driving in directly from Virginia, still in his riding togs). Convinced that there was no way of making certain all the missiles would be removed by an air attack, the President agreed that the air strike was out, and the blockade was on. He met with the British ambassador, his close friend as well as ally. Presidential aides Lawrence O'Brien and Pierre Salinger were informed. O'Brien was to round up congressional leaders all over the country, with White House military aides arranging transportation. Salinger was to coordinate our information policy with his State Department, USIA and Pentagon counterparts.

News leaks and inquiries for the first time were a growing problem. Crisis was in the air. The movement of troops, planes and ships to Florida and the Caribbean, the unavailability of high officials, the summoning of congressional leaders, the Saturday night and Sunday activity, the cancellation of the Presidential and Vice-Presidential campaign trips and the need to inform a much wider circle of officials meant that our cherished hours of secrecy were numbered. Washington and New York newspapers were already speculating.

Publishers were asked not to disclose anything without checking. One newspaper obtained the story Sunday evening and patriotically agreed, at the President's personal request, not to print it. The direct questions of reporters were avoided, evaded, or answered incorrectly by officials who did not know the correct answers; and a few outright falsehoods were told to keep our knowledge from the Communists.

It was "the best-kept secret in Government history," said the President, amazed and pleased. For most of the week, very few people outside the 15 regulars, most of their wives and some of their secretaries knew the facts. (Of the three girls in my office, I worked two in alternate night shifts, believing it in the interest of the third that she be kept in the dark, inasmuch as her roommate worked for Sen. Kenneth Keating.) Some officials typed out their own papers or wrote them out in longhand. We stopped signing the entry book at the State Department door, used various entrances there and at the White House and kept routine appointments where possible.

At 2:30 that Sunday afternoon, October 21;

FINAL
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THIS
ADVISOR
GIVING
LIBILITY

CHAPTER TWO

THE PRESIDENT WANTED to speak on television and radio the next evening, Sunday. Secrecy was crumbling. Premature disclosure could alter all our plans. But the State Department stressed the need for our ambassadors to brief allied and Latin-American heads of state and the impossibility of reaching them all on a Sunday. The President agreed to Monday, but stated he would still speak Sunday if the story appeared certain to break. He was, moreover, going ahead, regardless of how the allies reacted, though he wanted them to be informed. The speech was set for 7 p.m. Monday, October 22 (P-Hour in the scenario).

We then returned to our offices. The speech

was circulated and redrafted. The quarantine proclamation was prepared. An approach to the OAS, letters to heads of state, a letter to West Berlin's mayor and a simple message of information to Khrushchev were all drafted. Former President Eisenhower was brought by helicopter from Gettysburg for his second briefing of the week by Central Intelligence Agency Director John McCone. Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson was brought back from his campaign tour in Hawaii—he had caught the President's cold. The United States Information Agency (USIA) prepared a special hookup with private, medium-wave radio stations to carry 24 hours of broadcasts, including the President's speech in Spanish to Cuba and all Latin America. The State Depart-

Handwritten notes at the top of the page: "The people were apparently..."

the President met with the National Security Council once again. He reviewed the State Department's drafts of instructions to embassies and Presidential letters to allies, all to be sent out in code that night and held for delivery. He reviewed the approaches to the OAS and UN, and agreed that UN supervision and inspection of the missiles' removal would be requested. He asked the Chief of Naval Operations, Adm. George Anderson, Jr., to describe plans and procedures for the blockade. First, said the Admiral, each approaching ship would be signaled to stop for boarding and inspection. Then, if no satisfactory response was forthcoming, a shot would be fired across her bow. Finally, if there was still no satisfactory response, a shot would be fired into her rudder to cripple, but not to sink. "You're certain that can be done?" asked the President, with a wry smile. "Yes, sir!" responded the Admiral.

Most of the meeting was spent in a page-by-page review of the latest speech draft. Among the issues raised then, and in my earlier and later meetings with the President, were the following:

1) Should the latest enlarged photographs be shown by the President on TV? No, he decided—both because the average viewer could discern too little for them to be intelligible and because the mere presence of pictures might contribute to panic. The desire to avoid panic also caused the President to delete all references to the missiles' megatonnage as compared with Hiroshima and to speak of their capability of "striking," instead of "wiping out," certain cities. But to increase hemispheric unity, he did include a reference to the Canadian and Latin-American areas within their target range.

2) Should the speech admit our secret surveillance by U-2 planes, internationally sensitive since 1960 and an illegal violation of Cuban airspace? Yes. Deciding to make a virtue out of necessity, the President listed increased surveillance as an announced part of his response, justifying it on the basis of an earlier OAS communiqué against secret military preparations in the hemisphere, adding that "further action will be justified" if the missiles remain and hinting at the nature of that action by urging a consideration of the hazards "in the interest of both the Cuban people and the Soviet technicians at the sites."

3) Would he institute the blockade without OAS approval? Yes, if we could not get it, because our national security was directly involved. But hoping to obtain OAS endorsement, he deliberately obscured this question in the speech by a call for unspecified OAS action and an announcement of the blockade and other steps "in the defense of our own security and of the entire Western Hemisphere."

4) Should his speech anticipate, and try to forestall, a retaliatory blockade of Berlin? Yes—by stressing that we were not "denying the necessities of life, as the Soviets attempted to do in their Berlin blockade of 1948," and by warning that we would resist "any hostile move anywhere in the world against the safety and freedom of peoples to whom we are committed—including,

in particular, the brave people of West Berlin."

5) What should he say about diplomatic action? Nothing that would tie our hands, anything that would strengthen our stand. Saturday's discussions, which obtained some added State Department support and refinement over the weekend, were of major help here. The President deleted from my first draft a call for a summit, preferring to state simply that we were prepared to present our case "and our own proposals for a peaceful world at any time . . . in the United Nations or in any other meeting that could be useful, without limiting our freedom of action. . . . I call upon Chairman Khrushchev . . . to join in an historic effort to end the perilous arms race and to transform the history of man. . . . We have in the past . . . proposed the elimination of all arms and military bases. . . . We are prepared to discuss . . . the possibilities of a genuinely independent Cuba." These remarks were a far cry from the Saturday afternoon proposals—but they were more than we had for the first draft.

6) How would we explain our action to other nations, long living in the shadow of missiles? The President deleted a specific reference to self-defense against armed attack under Article 51 of the UN Charter, but carefully chose his words for those who would cite that article: "We no longer live in a world where only the actual firing of weapons represents a sufficient challenge to a nation's security to constitute maximum peril. Nuclear weapons are so destructive, and ballistic missiles are so swift, that any substantially increased possibility of their use or any sudden change in their deployment may well be regarded as a definite threat to peace."

He made dozens of other changes. After his recitation of each Russian assurance—in September by the Soviet Government and in October by Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko—he inserted: "That statement was false." References to Latin America and the hemisphere were inserted along with, or in place of, references to this country alone. And a direct appeal to the Cuban people was expanded considerably by one of the President's top appointees in State from Puerto Rico, Arturo Morales Carrion, who understood the nuances in Spanish of references to "fatherland," "nationalist revolution betrayed," and the day when Cubans "will be truly free—free from foreign domination, free to choose their own leaders, free to select their own system, free to own their own land, free to speak and write and worship without fear or degradation."

But Kennedy struck from the speech any hint that the removal of Castro was his true aim. He did not talk of total victory or unconditional surrender, simply of the precisely defined objective of removing a specific provocation. In the same vein, he deleted references to his notification of the Soviets, to the treatment awaiting any ships attempting to run the blockade and to predictions of the blockade's effect on Castro, believing that making these matters public was inconsistent with his desire not to force Khrushchev's

Handwritten note: "OR: How can we handle this?"

hand Lesser-action items proposed by the State Department—specifically, a Caribbean Security Conference and further shipping restrictions—he deleted as too weak-sounding and insignificant for a speech about nuclear war. There was no mistaking that central subject, underlined most specifically in the words: "It shall be the policy of this Nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union."

Handwritten notes in the right margin: "Deletion... will be... possibly..."

Throughout Sunday evening and most of Monday, minor changes in the text were made, each one being rushed to USA translators and to the State Department for transmission to our embassies. The whole nation knew on Monday that a crisis was at hand—particularly after Salinger's announcement at noon that the President had obtained 7 p.m. network time for a speech of the "highest national urgency." Crowds and pickets gathered outside the White House, reporters inside. I refused all calls from newsmen, answering the telephoned questions of only one powerful congressman ("Is it serious?" "Yes.") and Ted Kennedy ("Should I give my campaign-dinner speech on Cuba?" "No."). I informed Myer Feldman and Lee White in my office by giving them copies of the speech. "It's a shame," cracked White, with heavy irony, gazing out the window. "They've just finished sanding that Executive Office Building." Upon hearing that Gromyko was to make an announcement on his departure for Moscow, a special monitor was arranged—but his remarks contained only the usual farewell.

For the President, that Monday, October 22, was a day of conferences. By telephone, he talked to former Presidents Hoover, Truman and Eisenhower. He met with our group in the morning and with the full National Security Council at 3 p.m. These were taut, organizational meetings, nothing more. The group he had originally summoned six days earlier was formally established as the "Executive Committee" of the National Security Council, with a standing order to meet with the President each morning at 10. At 4 p.m., he met with the Cabinet, briefly explained what he was doing and promptly adjourned the meeting. There were no questions and no discussion.

Just before the Cabinet meeting, he kept a long-scheduled appointment with Prime Minister Milton Obote of Uganda. He had hoped to cut it short; and Secretary of State Dean Rusk, who sat in, was visibly distracted. The Prime Minister blithely talked on, debating with the President the wisdom of U.S. aid to Rhodesian schools. The President found himself drawn into the debate, enjoying the change of subject and the clash of intellect. Rusk rustled his papers, the Cabinet paced outside the windows. Finally, the meeting ended, and the President escorted Obote to the door of the White House, looking more relaxed than he had all day. The following day, the Prime Minister, informed by Kennedy's speech of the grave matter with which he had compered for time, wrote the President that his patient at-

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attention at that hour was proof of his genuine regard for the new African nations.

Elsewhere, the State Department scenario was being effectively carried out. The President's speech, now ready, served as the basic briefing document in all world capitals and in a series of ambassadorial meetings in the State Department. Photographs were also provided.

Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin was invited to Rusk's office at 6 p.m. Ambassador Foy Kohler delivered the same message in Moscow a little later. Latin American governments were told of possible disorders and the availability of riot-control equipment. Our missions were instructed to tape their windows. Many State, Defense and White House officers went on a 24-hour watch, with cots in offices and personnel working in shifts.

The only sour note of the day was the President's meeting with some 20 congressional leaders at 5 p.m. They had been plucked from campaign tours and vacation spots all over the country, some by jet fighters and trainers. (Hale Boggs, for example, fishing in the Gulf of Mexico, was first buzzed by an Air Force plane, dropping a note to him in a plastic bottle, and finally taken by helicopter to New Orleans, and by jet to Washington.) Members of both parties, campaigning for reelection, gladly announced the cancellation of their speeches on the grounds that the President needed their advice.

In some cases, their advice was captious and inconsistent. Reacting to a McNamara-Rusk-McCone briefing with pictures the same way most of us originally did, many called the blockade irrelevant and indecisively slow, certain to irritate our friends, but doing nothing about the missiles. An invasion was urged by powerful and diverse Democratic senators. Republicans said they would support the President, but wanted the record to show they had been informed at the last minute, not consulted.

The President, seeking bipartisan unity, announced that he, the Vice-President and Cabinet had cancelled the rest of their campaign trips. An invasion could not begin immediately in any event, he said, and it was better to go slow with Khrushchev. To this, a senator complained that more than halfway measures were required.

The President, however, was adamant. He was acting by Executive Order, Presidential Proclamation and inherent powers, not under any resolution or act of the Congress. He had earlier rejected all suggestions of reconvening Congress or requesting a formal declaration of war, and he had summoned the leaders only when hard evidence and a fixed policy were ready. "My feeling is," he said later, "that if they had gone through the five-day period we had gone through—in looking at the various alternatives, advantages and disadvantages—they would have come out the same way that we did."

The meeting dragged on past 6 p.m. I waited outside the door with the President's reading copy, angry that they should be harassing him right up to the last minute. Finally, he emerged, a bit

angry himself, and hustled over to his quarters to change clothes for his 7 p.m. speech. As I walked with him, he told me of the meeting, muttering "If they want this ---- job, they can have it; it's no great joy to me." But in a few minutes, he was calm and relaxed again. Alone, back in the Cabinet Room, we reviewed the text once more; and in minutes, the most serious speech in his life was on the air:

"This Government, as promised, has maintained the closest surveillance of the Soviet military buildup on the island of Cuba. Within the past week, unmistakable evidence has established the fact that a series of offensive-missile sites is now in preparation on that imprisoned island. The purpose of these bases can be none other than to provide a nuclear-strike capability against the Western Hemisphere. . . . This urgent transformation of Cuba into an important strategic base—by the presence of these large, long-range, and clearly offensive weapons of sudden mass destruction—constitutes an explicit threat to the peace and security of all the Americas. . . . For many years, both the Soviet Union and the United States . . . have deployed strategic nuclear weapons with great care, never upsetting the precarious status quo. . . . Our own strategic missiles have never been transferred to the territory of any other nation under a cloak of secrecy and deception. . . . American citizens have become adjusted to living daily on the bull's eye of Soviet missiles located inside the U.S.S.R. or in submarines. . . . But this secret, swift and extraordinary buildup of Communist missiles—in an area well-known to have a special and historical relationship to the United States and the nations of the Western

Hemisphere, in violation of Soviet assurances, and in defiance of American and hemispheric policy—this sudden, clandestine decision to station strategic weapons for the first time outside of Soviet soil—is a deliberately provocative and unjustified change in the status quo which cannot be accepted by this country, if our courage and our commitments are ever to be trusted again by either friend or foe. The 1930's taught us a clear lesson: aggressive conduct, if allowed to go unchecked and unchallenged, ultimately leads to war. This nation is opposed to war. We are also true to our word. Our unswerving objective, therefore, must be to prevent the use of these missiles against this or any other country, and to secure their withdrawal or elimination from the Western Hemisphere. . . . We will not prematurely or unnecessarily risk the costs of worldwide nuclear war. . . . but neither will we shrink from that risk at any time it must be faced."

He went on to outline the initial steps to be taken—quarantine, surveillance of the buildup, action if it continued, our response to any use of these missiles, the reinforcement of Guantánamo, OAS and UN action, and an appeal to Khrushchev and the Cuban people.

"The path we have chosen for the present is full of hazards. . . . The cost of freedom is always high—but Americans have always paid it. And one path we shall never choose, and that is the path of surrender or submission. Our goal is not the victory of might, but the vindication of right—not peace at the expense of freedom, but both peace and freedom, here in this hemisphere, and, we hope, around the world. God willing, that goal will be achieved."

CHAPTER THREE

THE CRISIS HAD officially begun: Some Americans reacted with panic, most with pride. One of the congressional leaders telephoned the President that a group of them, watching together after leaving his office, now understood and supported his policy more fully. A U.S. resolution was presented to that month's UN Security Council President, Russia's Valerian Zorin. Briefings of diplomats and the press continued at the State Department and Pentagon: Strategic Air Command and North American Air Defense units had been put on maximum ground and air alert as the President began speaking. His remarks had been broadcast around the world by USTA in 38 languages. The OAS would meet the next day, and the formal proclamation of the blockade would not occur until then. After a chat with the President, I went home to get some sleep.

The President also went to bed early, having had no rest after lunch and only a brief swim before. Many marveled that he swam or slept at all. But throughout both the previous week and the week that followed, he adhered to as normal a life as possible, working nights with no sense of

hours, requesting the postponement of minor matters, never taking his mind off the Cuban missiles, but still eating with his family, meeting with unknowing foreign leaders and staff members, presenting an aviation trophy and dining the night after his speech with the British ambassador, Sir David Ormsby-Gore, and other guests. "His calmness . . . [and] unflinching good humor," said Ormsby-Gore, were "extraordinary to behold [and] kept everybody else calm and in a good mood." The telephone interrupted him constantly during that dinner, but he always returned immediately to the lighter conversations he had begun before the interruption. His wife saw more of him during the crisis than usual, as he sought her company at meals normally devoted to business, and on walks around the South Lawn.

Similarly, in our meetings and in his office during those two weeks, he was calm and deliberate, his mind clear, his emotions controlled, never brooding, always in command. He retained that composure even when fatigue was overtaking us all. After one meeting during the second week, he expressed concern to me that one official had overworked himself to the point of mental

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(When reassured again that these fears were unfounded, he ordered aerial photographs taken and found, to the discomfort of the military, that our aircraft were still highly concentrated.) Under that fall's congressional authorization, military tours of duty were extended. For the first time, low-level reconnaissance flights were ordered over Cuba, just over the treetops, below the range of the Soviet surface-to-air missiles (SAMs): These pictures showed in remarkable detail more Soviet military personnel and weapons than anticipated, all Cubans excluded from missile areas and two deadly medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) ready to operate.

The big question was the big ocean. To us, Khrushchev appeared—in a harsh but rambling Soviet Government statement Tuesday morning, rejecting the quarantine as "piracy"; in two private letters to Kennedy, Tuesday morning and Wednesday evening (both answered within hours with firm restatements of our position); and in his answers to appeals from Lord Russell and UN Acting Secretary General U Thant—to have been caught off-balance, to be maneuvering, to be seeking a consensus among the top Kremlin rulers, uncertain whether to admit that the missiles were there, in view of the widespread denunciations. The Soviets, it seemed, had counted on surprising us, on disunity in the West and on a sufficient fear of war in the United States to prevent any military response. They had been proven wrong, and we wondered whether their inconsistent positions reflected a possible internal struggle. We joked around the table about Khrushchev's apparently yielding to his hard liners on one day and his peace advocates on the next, and about the fact that—because of the time differential and slowness of transmission—we worked all day to send messages they would receive upon waking up, and they did exactly the same.

But the 18 Soviet dry-cargo ships still heading toward the quarantine were no joke. Five, with large hatches, were being watched with special care. The Executive Committee, in session most of each day, soon knew every Soviet ship by name and which of them were suspected of carrying armaments. Tuesday night, as the ships came on, tension built. Robert Kennedy was dispatched to find out from the Soviet ambassador whether any instructions had been issued to the Soviet ship captains. He learned nothing. "You fellows who thought the blockade was the most peaceful answer may find our differently pretty soon," said the President. At our Wednesday morning meeting, held just as the quarantine went into effect, some half-dozen Soviet submarines were reported to have joined these ships. Orders were prepared to sink any subs interfering with the quarantine: In the midst of the same meeting, more news arrived: The Soviet ships nearest Cuba had apparently stopped or altered their courses. A feeling of relief went round the table.

The prospects of confrontation at sea were not, however, by any means over. Soviet intentions were not yet clear. The quarantine had not yet been tested. Kennedy told U Thant, in re-

sponse to his initial appeal, that the blockade could not be suspended, that "the existing threat was created by the secret introduction of offensive weapons into Cuba, and the answer lies in the removal of such weapons." (A second U Thant proposal on Friday, negotiated through Stevenson, that both sides avoid unnecessary contact during the next few days, was more acceptable, Kennedy simply stating that there would be no incidents if Soviet ships stayed away.)

Khrushchev summoned a visiting American businessman to tell him that Kennedy should agree to a summit, that conflict in the Caribbean could lead to nuclear war (including the use of the offensive missiles he now admitted were in Cuba) and that Soviet submarines would sink any American vessel forcing a Soviet ship to stop.

At dawn Thursday, a Soviet tanker was hailed and, on the instructions of the President—who thought it possible the tanker had not yet received instructions from Moscow—passed through the barrier, like all nonsuspicious tankers, after identifying itself. So was an East German passenger ship. At dawn Friday, a U.S.-built, Panama-owned, Greek-manned, Lebanese-registered freighter under charter to the Soviet Union was hailed and boarded—after the Navy obtained the President's personal authorization. His preference was not to intercept any Soviet ships until necessary, but to have a nonbloc ship under Soviet charter boarded to show we meant business. Inspected by an unarmed boarding party and found to be carrying only trucks and truck parts, the freighter was passed. (One of the boarding ships, the President learned later, was the destroyer Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. About the same time, a replica of the PT-109—then in Florida for a film story—was commandeered in a side incident involving Cuban exiles, and the President felt these coincidences would never be believed.)

The real problem was not Lebanese freighters and Soviet tankers but the Soviet cargo ships and their submarine escorts. They would have to be stopped Friday, said the President, if U Thant's proposals had not altered their courses by then. The Navy was eager to go far out into the ocean to intercept the key Soviet ships. The President, backed by McNamara and Ormsby-Gore and watching the tracking of each ship on a large board in the White House "Situation Room," insisted that Khrushchev be given all possible time to make and communicate an uncomfortable decision to his ships. In a sharp clash with one Navy officer, he made certain his will prevailed.

Gradually, rather than dramatically, good news came in, mixed with the "bad" news recounted above. Sixteen of the 18 Russian ships, including all five with large hatches, were reported Wednesday to have stopped—then to be lying dead in the water or moving in uncertain circles—and, finally, Thursday and Friday, to have turned around.

"That's nice," observed one of our group. "The Soviets are reacting to us for a change."

U.S. planes followed them all the way to Soviet ports. A minimum of force had obtained

a maximum gain. The value of conventional strength in the nuclear age had been underlined as never before.

The quarantine, speculated the President later, "had much more power than we first thought it did because, I think, the Soviet Union was very reluctant to have us stop ships which carried... highly secret and sensitive material." The Soviets, he reasoned, obsessed with secrecy, could not risk letting their missiles, warheads and electronic equipment fall into our hands.

The dangers of a naval confrontation had not ended; but at least they had temporarily eased. The dangers posed by the missiles in Cuba, however, were increasing. More of the MRBMs—now hastily camouflaged—were becoming operational, reported McCone at the briefings that began each of our morning meetings. Work was going ahead full speed. All the MRBMs would be operational by the end of the week, with the longer-range intermediate-range ballistic missiles (IRBMs) to be ready a month or so later. Throughout Thursday and Friday, the President and the Executive Committee pondered new ways of stepping up the political, economic and military pressure on the Soviets, including:

- 1) Tightening the blockade. The addition of missile fuel to the proscribed list already provided a reason to stop tankers, if desired. The next step would be POT, then everything but food and medicine.
- 2) Increased low-level flights. These would provide improved reconnaissance and also a means of harassing the Soviets and humiliating Castro, particularly if night flights with flares were added. The fear of reprisal had stopped Cuban as well as Soviet attempts to down these planes. Their daily operations, moreover, would make more feasible a surprise air strike.
- 3) Action inside Cuba. The President authorized a leaflet drop directed at the Cuban people, asked USTA to prepare it, personally cleared its text and pictures (low-level photographs of the missile sites), ordered it to go ahead, then held it up temporarily. Meanwhile, ways of reaching Castro directly were explored again.
- 4) Air strike.
- 5) Invasion.

Those who had favored these last two courses the previous week now renewed their advocacy. The President refused to rush. Preparations for an invasion as well as other military contingencies were still under way. Soviet ships had turned back. Talks were going on at the UN. But in a message to U Thant, in a White House statement and in a State Department announcement, the continued work on the missile sites was noted in the gravest tones.

The State Department press officer, in making this announcement Friday noon, went beyond the White House position by referring to that passage in the President's Monday night speech that had said "further action will be justified" if work on the missiles continued. This remark, accompanied by some imprecise congressional and press speculation, touched off headlines

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that an invasion or air strike was imminent. For the first time, the President lost his temper. He called the Secretary of State, then an assistant secretary, then the press officer, Lincoln White, his voice rising and language intensifying with each

call. This was going to be a prolonged struggle, he said, requiring caution, patience and as little public pressure on him as possible. But in the next 24 hours, he was to joke that White's error might have had a helpful effect.

CHAPTER FIVE

A NEW Khrushchev-to-Kennedy letter was received at the State Department Friday evening, October 26—long, meandering, full of polemics, but in essence appearing to contain a reasonable settlement: Inasmuch as his missiles were there only to defend Cuba against invasion, Khrushchev would withdraw them under UN inspection, if the U.S. agreed not to invade. A similar offer came the same day from Zorin to U Thant and, in a highly informal channel, from the counselor of the Soviet Embassy in Washington, Aleksander Fomin, to the ABC-TV correspondent covering the State Department, John Scali. In Khrushchev's letter, the offer was a bit vague. It seemed to vary from one paragraph to the next and was accompanied by the usual threats and denunciations. Nevertheless, it was with high hopes that the Executive Committee convened Saturday morning, October 27, to draft a reply to the Soviet leader.

In the course of that meeting, our hopes faded. A new Khrushchev letter came in, this time public, making no mention of the private correspondence, and raising the ante: Our missiles in Turkey must be removed in exchange. In addition, we learned, Fomin and Zorin were talking about extending UN inspection to U.S. bases. Had Khrushchev's hard liners once again taken the lead, we speculated—or had the appearance of this same swap proposal in Washington and London newspapers encouraged the Soviets to believe we would weaken under pressure? Many Western as well as neutral leaders were, in fact, quick to endorse the new Soviet position. Still another possibility was that the second, public proposal had actually been written first.

More bad news followed. A new Soviet ship was reported approaching the quarantine zone. The latest photographs showed no indications that missile-site work was being held up awaiting our reply to the Friday letter. On the contrary, permanent and expensive installations of nuclear warhead storage bunkers and troop barracks were going ahead rapidly. Khrushchev's letter, said some, was designed merely to delay and deceive us until the missiles were complete. Then came the worst news: The first shooting and fatality of the crisis, ground fire on two low-flying reconnaissance planes, and the downing of a high-flying U-2 by a Soviet-operated SAM. The dead pilot, Maj. Rudolf Anderson, Jr., had flown the mission, 13 days before, that first discovered the buildup.

We had talked earlier in the week of what response this nation would make should an unarmed U.S. plane—on a publicly announced mis-

sion of surveillance—be shot down, and had decided tentatively on a single retaliatory strike against a SAM site, then knocking them all out if attacks continued. Now, the time had come to implement that policy, killing Russians in the process, probably flushing Castro's planes, possibly leading to a full air strike, an invasion or further Soviet ripostes. But the President had been careful not to give blanket authority to carry out this decision to the Air Force in advance, and he preferred not to give it now. He wanted to wait one more day—for more information on what happened to our plane and for Khrushchev's final negotiating position. He called off the flare-drop fight scheduled for that night (each reconnaissance flight had to be approved by the President) because of the danger that flares might be taken for air-to-ground fire from the planes. But he approved an announcement that all necessary measures would be taken "to insure that such missions are effective and protected," authorized fighter escorts, and ordered the fighters to respond to any attack by Russian-built MIG jets. He also urged State and Defense officials to prepare for the worst in Berlin, Turkey and Iran.

That same day, to make matters worse, an American U-2 plane over Alaska had encountered navigational difficulties and flown deep into Soviet territory, bringing up a bevy of Soviet fighters, but no fire, before regaining its course. The President decided to say nothing of this incident unless the Soviets publicized it; but he wondered if Khrushchev would speculate that we were surveying targets for a preemptive nuclear strike. (Khrushchev did, in fact, write later of the danger of such a plane "which might have been taken for a nuclear bomber . . . intruding when everything has been put into combat readiness.")

Everything was in combat readiness on both sides. The conventional and the nuclear forces of the United States were alerted worldwide. Air-strike planes and the largest invasion force mounted since World War II were massed in Florida. Our little group seated around the Cabinet table in continuous session that Saturday felt nuclear war to be closer than at any time in the nuclear age. If the Soviet ships continued coming, if the SAMs continued firing, if the missile crews continued working and if Khrushchev continued insisting on concessions with a gun at our head, then—we all believed—the Soviets wanted a war, and war would be unavoidable.

The President had no intention of backing down; but he thought it all the more imperative that our position be absolutely clear. He decided to treat the latest Khrushchev message as propa-

ganda and to concentrate on the Friday night letter. An impersonal "White House statement," issued at 4:30 p.m., dismissed the Saturday letter with a reference to "inconsistent and conflicting proposals . . . involving the security of nations outside the Western Hemisphere."

As soon as the Soviet-created threat is ended, the statement read, sensible negotiations on arms limitations can proceed. A private letter to U Thant stressed the rapidly approaching point of peril and asked him to ascertain urgently whether the Soviet Union was willing immediately to cease work on its Cuban bases and to render the weapons inoperable under UN verification so that solutions could be discussed.

The most attention was given to Khrushchev's letter of the previous night. Under the President's direction, our group worked over drafts in both morning and afternoon sessions. Fatigue and disagreement over the right course caused more wrangling and irritability than usual. Finally, the President asked the Attorney General and me to serve as a committee of two to pull together all suggested amendments. He also asked me to clear the text with Stevenson, who had skillfully advanced parallel talks at the UN. The final draft of his reply—which confined itself to the proposals made in Khrushchev's Friday letter, ignoring the Fomin and Zorin talks and any specific reference to Turkish bases—read into the Chairman's letter everything we wanted. Stevenson feared it might be too stiff. But with two minor amendments acceptable to the President, I obtained the UN Ambassador's clearance; and the President, in the interests of speed and psychology, released the letter publicly as it was being transmitted to Moscow, shortly after 8 p.m.

"The first thing that needs to be done . . . is for work to cease on offensive-missile bases in Cuba and for all weapons systems . . . capable of offensive use to be rendered inoperable, under effective United Nations arrangements."

"As I read your letter, the key elements of your proposals—which seem generally acceptable as I understand them—are as follows:

"1) You would agree to remove these weapons systems from Cuba under appropriate United Nations observation and supervision; and undertake, with suitable safeguards, to halt the further introduction of such weapons systems into Cuba.

"2) We, on our part, would agree—upon the establishment of adequate arrangements through the United Nations to ensure the carrying out and continuation of these commitments—(a) to remove promptly the quarantine measures now in effect and (b) to give assurances against all invasion of Cuba." (Note that, unlike the action to be undertaken by Khrushchev, ours was conditional upon UN arrangements.)

" . . . the first ingredient, let me emphasize, . . . is the cessation of work on missile sites in Cuba and measures to render such weapons inoperable, under effective international guarantees. The continuation of this threat, or a prolonging of this discussion concerning Cuba by linking these problems to the broader questions of Euro-

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pean and world security, would surely lead to an intensification of the Cuban crisis and a grave risk to the peace of the world."

At the private request of the President, a copy of the letter was delivered to the Soviet ambassador by Robert Kennedy, with a strong verbal message: The point of escalation was at hand; the United States could proceed toward peace and disarmament, or, as the Attorney General later described it, we could take "strong and overwhelming retaliatory action . . . unless [the President] received immediate notice that the missiles would be withdrawn."

Meanwhile, the Executive Committee was somewhat heatedly discussing plans for the next step. Twenty-four Air Force Reserve troop-carrier squadrons were called up. Special messages to NATO, De Gaulle and Adenauer outlined the critical stage we had reached. The POT blockade; air-strike and invasion advocates differed over what to do when. An invasion, it was observed; might not turn out as planned if the over-ground rockers, spotted by our planes in the Soviet armored division now in Cuba, were equipped with nuclear warheads. In front of the White House; more than a thousand pickets mustered, some pleading for peace, some for war, one simply calling JFK a traitor.

The President would not, in my judgment; have moved *immediately* to either an air strike or an invasion; but the pressures for such a move on the following Tuesday were rapidly and irresistibly growing, strongly supported by a minority in our group. The downing of our plane could not be ignored. Neither could the approaching ship, nor the continuing work on the missile sites, nor the Soviet SAMs. We stayed in session all day Saturday, and finally, shortly after 8 p.m., noting rising tempers and irritability, the President recessed the meeting for a one-hour dinner break: Pressure and fatigue, he later noted privately, might have broken the group's steady demeanor in another 24 or 48 hours. At dinner in the White House staff "mess," Vice-President Johnson, Treasury Secretary Douglas Dillon and I talked of entirely different subjects. The meeting at 9 p.m. was shorter, cooler and quieter; and with the knowledge that our meeting the next morning at 10 a.m. could be decisive—one way or the other—we adjourned for the night.

Upon awakening Sunday morning, October 28, I turned on the news on my bedside radio, as I had each morning during the week. In the course of the 9 a.m. newscast, a special bulletin came in from Moscow. It was a new letter from Khrushchev, sent publicly in the interest of speed. Kennedy's terms were being accepted. The missiles were being withdrawn. Inspection would be

permitted. The confrontation was over:

Hardly able to believe it, I reached McGeorge Bundy at the White House. It was true: He had just called the President, who took the news with "tremendous satisfaction" and asked to see the message on his way to Mass. Our meeting was postponed to 11 a.m. It was a beautiful, sunny morning in Washington in every way.

With deep feelings of relief and exhilaration, we gathered in the Cabinet Room at 11, on our 13th consecutive day of close collaboration: Just as missiles are incomparably faster than all their predecessors, so this worldwide crisis had ended incredibly faster than all its predecessors: The talk preceding the meeting was boisterous: "What is Castro saying now!" chortled someone: Bob McNamara said he had risen early that morning to draw up a list of "steps to take short of invasion." When he heard the news, said John McCone, "I could hardly believe my ears." Waiting for the President to come in, we speculated about what would have happened

—if Kennedy had chosen the air strike over the blockade;
—if the OAS and other allies had not supported us;

—if both our conventional and our nuclear forces had not been strengthened over the past 21 months;

—if there had not been the combined genius and courage that produced U-2 photographs and their interpretations;

—if a blockade had been instituted before we could prove Soviet duplicity and offensive weapons;

—if Kennedy and Khrushchev had not been accustomed to communicating directly with each other and had not left that channel open;

—if the President's speech of October 22 had not taken Khrushchev by surprise;

—if John F. Kennedy had not been President of the United States.

John F. Kennedy entered, and we all stood up. He had, as Harold Macmillan would later say, earned his place in history by this one act alone: He had been engaged in a personal as well as national contest for world leadership, and he had won. He had reassured those nations fearing we would use too much strength and those fearing we would use none at all. Cuba had been the site of his greatest failure, and now, his greatest success. The hard lessons of the first Cuban crisis were applied in his steady handling of the second with a carefully measured combination of defense, diplomacy and dialogue. Yet he walked in and began the meeting without a trace of excitement or even exultation.

Earlier, in his office—told by Bundy and

Carl Kaysen that his simultaneous plea to India and Pakistan to resolve their differences over Kashmir in view of the Chinese attack would surely be heeded, now that he looked "ten-feet tall"—he had evenly replied: "That will wear off in about a week, and everyone will be back thinking only of his own interests."

Displaying the same caution and precision with which, for 13 days, he had determined exactly how much pressure to apply, he quickly and quietly organized the machinery to work for a UN inspection and reconnaissance effort. He called off the Sunday overflights and ordered the Navy to avoid halting any ships on that day. He asked that precautions be taken to prevent Cuban exile units from upsetting the agreement through one of their publicity-seeking raids. He laid down the line we were all to follow—no boasting, no gloating, not even a claim of victory: We had won by enabling Khrushchev to avoid complete humiliation—we should not humiliate him now. If Khrushchev wanted to boast that he had won a major concession and proved his peaceful manner, that was the loser's prerogative. Major problems of implementing the agreement still faced us. Other danger spots in the world remained. Soviet treachery was too fresh in our memory to relax our vigil now.

Rejecting the temptation of a dramatic TV appearance, Kennedy issued a brief three-paragraph statement welcoming Khrushchev's "statesmanlike decision . . . an important and constructive contribution to peace." Then the President's fourth letter of the week—a formal, conciliatory reply to the Chairman's "firm undertakings"—was drafted, discussed, approved and sent on the basis of the wire-service copy of the Chairman's letter, the official text having not yet arrived through diplomatic channels.

Weeks later, the President would present to each of us a little silver calendar of October, 1962, mounted on walnut, with the 13 days of October 16 through October 28 as extra deeply engraved as they already were in our memories. But on that Sunday noon, concealing the enormous sense of relief and fatigue that swept over him, he merely thanked us briefly, called another meeting for Monday morning and rejoined his family as he had each night of the crisis.

I went down the hall to where my secretary, Gloria Sitrin, was at work, as she had been day and night for almost two weeks. From her bookcase, I picked up a copy of *Profiles in Courage* and read to her a part of the quotation John Kennedy had selected for the frontispiece from Burke's eulogy of Charles James Fox: "He may live long, he may do much. But here is the summit. He never can exceed what he does this day."

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In *If Kennedy Had Lived*, in a future issue of LOOK, Sorensen gives JFK's estimate of potential Republican candidates in 1964, his plans for his second term, and his thoughts about his life after 1968.