

Newsday 10/27/96



AP Photo, 1961

Nikita Khrushchev greets President John F. Kennedy in Vienna during June, 1961, conference as Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko looks on smiling.

Missile Crisis Tapes Released

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Boston — President John F. Kennedy felt outmaneuvered by Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev during the Cuban missile crisis and his generals were pushing for war, according to newly declassified White House tape recordings.

Kennedy worried that Khrushchev's offer to remove Soviet missiles from Cuba if the United States removed its nuclear missiles from Turkey seemed so reasonable that it would turn world public opinion to the Soviet side.

"If we don't take it, we're going to be blamed, and if we do take it, we're going to be blamed," the president complained in tapes released Thursday by the National Archives.

His military leaders had a different view.

"We don't have any choice but military action," Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Curtis LeMay insisted Oct. 19, three days before the public knew about the crisis.

In the end, Kennedy accepted the deal, though he managed to keep

it a secret.

The glimpse of the Oval Office during the 1962 standoff was contained in 15 hours of tapes from the Kennedy White House.

Much of the material has been recounted in the writings of participants, but the tapes illustrate the tension of the times that had many Americans believing nuclear war was imminent between the Soviets and the United States.

Kennedy revealed to America on Oct. 22, 1962, that the Soviets had secretly installed offensive nuclear missiles in Cuba. Kennedy had demanded the Soviets remove the missiles or face retaliation.

Six days later Khrushchev agreed to dismantle the missiles, but during those few days the nation waited and worried.

LeMay, like other military leaders, had wanted immediate military intervention to destroy Soviet missiles and unfinished silos that had been detected by aerial reconnaissance in Cuba. He said blockading ships bound for Cuba, as other presidential advisers urged, would lead to war anyway.

Several of Kennedy's advisers, foremost among them Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, also urged an attack.

The president several times on the tapes broached the issue of potential civilian casualties should it come to nuclear war. His aides informed him that 92 million people lived in range of the Cuban missiles; but there was room in the fallout shelters for only 40 million.

"We can do the air strike but we still have got to face the fact that if we invade, by the time we get to these sites, after a very bloody fight, we will have [the missiles] fired at us," Kennedy said.