



The Leader Who Led

MIX MATHY

By Theodore C. Sorensen

While reading the newly published transcripts of the deliberations of President John F. Kennedy and his advisers during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, I recalled the chilling question from the floor of a religious convocation that I addressed some months after the crisis ended: "By what authority, Mr. Sorensen, did President Kennedy last October threaten the incineration of 180 million Americans?"

It was a fair question, with no wholly satisfactory answer then or now. As these transcripts remind us, the possibility of setting a fatal match to the global nuclear tinderbox in which we all lived during the cold war did indeed hang over the President and his advisers throughout the 13 days and nights we met in October 1962. No person or persons had the authority to knowingly light that particular match. No person ever should.

President Kennedy did take our case to the United Nations — but not to ask for intervention or authorization. He sought instead to use that unique world forum to put the Soviets on the defensive diplomatically for their sudden and surreptitious installation of strategic nuclear missiles 90 miles from our shores.

In this, Kennedy succeeded. The quiet communications to both sides by U Thant, the Secretary General of the United Nations, and the world's condemnation of Nikita Khrushchev's action were of help in the crucial days that followed.

More important than from a legal point of view, Kennedy asked our neighbors in the Organization of American States to both authorize and participate in our naval blockade of Cuba (termed a "Quarantine Against Offensive Weapons" to make it sound less belligerent). That elevated the blockade to an act of regional self-defense under international law. But even before approaching the O.A.S., Kennedy had decided that he had no choice but to proceed, with or without any endorsements from the international community.

But what was he to do at home, consistent with "government by the consent of the governed"? He was not willing to be guided by a quick public opinion poll, much less the mass of demonstrators and counter-demonstrators who gathered across from the White House once he announced the presence of the missiles in Cuba and our resolve to see them removed.

Theodore C. Sorensen was special counsel to President Kennedy and a member of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council that advised the President on the Cuban missile crisis. He now practices international law in New York.

Of course, when first learning of the existence of the missiles, Kennedy could have chosen to forfeit the advantages of secrecy and dispatch by convening a special session of Congress, requesting a declaration of war or other authorization, and adopting whatever course of action Capitol Hill's divisive debates instructed him to pursue. But, for the technically minded, he already had one broadly worded Congressional resolution on Cuba that he had not sought, authorizing virtually anything that got tough with Castro.

But what would have been Congress's mandate had Kennedy laid

Kennedy had no guidebook for brinkmanship.

the missile problem before it? His last-minute briefing of Congressional leaders produced, as starkly shown in the transcripts, only dangerous scorn for his initial package of limited responses to the new Soviet threat: the naval blockade, continuing aerial surveillance, diplomatic pressure and harsh warnings of further, unspecified American action.

To Senator William Fulbright, the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, a naval blockade, which could have been deemed an act of war under international law, was "the worst alternative." Far better to invade Cuba, he said, than to provoke Moscow's retaliation by halting — or, even worse, firing upon — a Soviet vessel.

Senator Richard Russell, chairman of the Armed Services Committee, believed a war on which our very destiny hinged was "coming someday, Mr. President," and added, "Will it ever be under more auspicious circumstances?" Like both Senator Fulbright and Senator Russell, Representative Carl Vinson, the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, wanted to "strike with all the force and power [we possessed] and try to get it over with as quickly as possible."

That had also been the unanimous recommendation of the Joint Chiefs of Staff three days earlier. "This blockade and political action . . . will lead right into war," Gen. Curtis LeMay of the Air Force warned. "This is almost as bad as the appeasement at Munich."

It "would be considered by a lot of our friends and neutrals as being a pretty weak response to this," the general said. "And I'm sure a lot of our own citizens would feel that way, too. You're in a pretty bad fix, Mr. President."

Kennedy was indeed in a pretty bad fix. He had no good choices, no

options free from the risk of either war or the erosion of our security and alliances, and no reliable forecasts on how Moscow would respond to our response. Dean Acheson, the Secretary of State under President Harry S. Truman, in recommending to our group (in an untaped meeting at the State Department) an air strike against the Soviet missile sites in Cuba, acknowledged that this would then obligate the Soviets to knock out our missile complex in Turkey, thereby obligating us to knock out a missile complex inside the Soviet Union, thereby obligating . . . et cetera, et cetera. When Kennedy's more cautious approach succeeded, Acheson wrote the President an eloquent note praising his handling of the crisis. But in a magazine article several years later he said that "the Kennedys" had prevailed in this perilous situation only through "dumb luck." They were indeed lucky, I said at the time — lucky they didn't take Dean Acheson's advice.

The newly published transcripts of the first meeting of the National Security Council's Executive Committee show that virtually all of us, including the President, initially believed that at the very least an air strike against the missile sites would be necessary. And we soon learned that the only safe and sure air strike would require such a widespread bombardment of Cuba that an American invasion and occupation of that island would be an unavoidable next step. It was with this contingency in mind that the Defense Department, at the President's instruction, began to assemble in Florida the largest American invasion force since World War II.

We now know from Soviet documents that an American military attack would have been met with fierce resistance from local Soviet troops authorized to use tactical nuclear weapons against American forces on the beaches, at sea and in the air. Although we were less certain of that back in 1962, questions on our agenda nevertheless included the number of deaths from nuclear fallout in American cities.

So we were all lucky that week, if luck it was. We were lucky that this nation had a conventional and nuclear superiority that made Khrushchev think twice about risking an armed clash in the Western Hemisphere; lucky that, through aerial photography and C.I.A. photo interpretation, we had enough early warning to devise in secret a response to Khrushchev's missiles that would give him an opportunity to think twice about such a clash; lucky that Kennedy had advisers like Llewellyn Thompson, the senior State Department Kremlinologist, who was quietly steadfast throughout in urging that we not force Khrushchev into a quick choice between humiliation and escalation. We were lucky, too, that Khrushchev was statesman enough to recognize that his bold gamble had failed. And lucky, finally,

DEAR HAROLD, AS YOU ASKED, HERE IS MORE ABOUT THAT
LUCKY STARS, AND NOT THE GODS OF WAR,
TO HIS ADVISORS, THE MILITARY, CONGRESS
NUCLEAR DUST! THE NEW YORK TIMES OP-

FATEFUL DAY IN OCTOBER, 1962 THAT WE CAN THANK OUR
THAT JACK KENNEDY WAS PRESIDENT OF THE U.S.A! HAD HE LISTENED
(AND IF TRUMAN WERE PRESIDENT) THE WORLD WOULD NOW BE AT
P.S. WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF THIS PRESIDENT?
ED SATURDAY, OCTOBER 18, 1997 LOVE TO LIA NE A25

that during the world's first and only (I hope) nuclear confrontation, John F. Kennedy, whose cool, prudent, prodding leadership shines through these transcript pages, was President in October 1962.

He had, after all, been elected in 1960 by only a tiny margin.

So, instead of merely saying, "Well, no one was incinerated," how should I have answered the question from that religious audience in the winter of 1962-63? By what authority did Kennedy instigate his blockade

and other measures? Was his action grounded in the inherent powers of the Commander in Chief? The right of national self-defense on a nuclear-triggered planet? The moral authority of the free world leader obligated to preserve its security?

"Pick whichever makes you feel the least uncomfortable," I should have said. "The President had no choice but to lead, and he led."

I realize some philosophers and historians teach that, in the inexorable sweep of historical tides, one person, no matter how wise or influential, cannot make a difference, cannot alter the future. In this instance, they were wrong. □

Joe

Murder of an Anatomy

It's getting more and more difficult to put out a family newspaper.

Can we describe what is happening to the President of the United States without ruining people's breakfasts? And if so, do we do it with euphemisms, legalisms or lurid bluntness?

It is now clear that Paula Jones will not be going gently. The legal stances of Ms. Jones and the President have grown intractable. He has failed to persuade the judge to dismiss her case without exploring the evidence. She has rejected a settlement proposal recommended by her original lawyers and taken on an aggressive new team — including her flamboyant Svengali, the noisy Clinton-hater Susan Carpenter-McMillan. The once unthinkable trial now seems likely.

Before they have even resolved how much and how graphically to describe the lubricious new twists in the case, journalists are reserving their rooms in Little Rock next May for a circus that promises to put previous low points in American history to shame.

"Barring some *deus ex machina* (summary judgment? an eve-of-trial settlement?)," writes Stuart Taylor in the Oct. 20 issue of *The Legal Times*, "we will be treated next summer to the spectacle of a trial exploring ad nauseam, *inter alia*, whether the President of the United States when in a certain state of excitement, is, or ever was, afflicted with an eye-catching curvature of the ... Well, let's just call it the *pumpkin*."

Mr. Taylor told me that, while many in the media have shied away from writing about the claim in Paula Jones's sworn affidavit about the President's alleged "distinguishing characteristics," "they may now be forced to confront the likelihood that either proof or disproof of Jones's pumpkin claim could be crucial to the outcome of the case."

In other words, covering the White House will seem like a scriptwriting meeting for a Fox TV sitcom or an excerpt from the new John Updike novel.

American culture has been getting steadily more obsessed with fame and prurience. (No sooner had MSNBC ended the Versace wake than it started the Princess Diana wake, and now it's into the John Denver wake.) And American politics has partaken of this slide into celebrity. (In the new issue of *Vanity Fair*, the styling of the cover boy, the President, is described as though he

were Brad Pitt. "The president wears a tie by the Donna Karan Collection. Clinton's hair by Frédéric Fekkai.")

But the Paula Jones case has provided a repugnant new nadir of vulgarity. Even Mr. Clinton's attorney, forced to defend the President's anatomy on "Face the Nation" last Sunday, can't seem to believe the stuff that's coming out of his mouth.

"This is awful to even have to discuss this — but the plaintiff has forced this on us — in terms of size, shape, direction, whatever the devious mind wants to concoct, the President is a normal man," Robert Bennett said, describing Mr. Clinton's recent medical examination.

It may be that Mr. Bennett is right and Ms. Jones's claim about the

Too much information.

President's physiognomy is "a sham." It does seem that, in the sway of Ms. Carpenter-McMillan, Ms. Jones is more interested in self-promotion than a settlement. Unfortunately, this is an issue of the day, as Mr. Clinton and Ms. Jones career toward a horrific face-off.

Some think this is poetic (or prosaic) justice for the imprudent Bill Clinton, who has not led the life that someone who has wanted to be President since boyhood should have. But I feel sorry for him.

Maybe I simply feel sorry for us, not only for the lost dignity of the Presidency but for the lost dignity of the citizenry. The President of the United States should not be publicly strip-searched.

The American public does not have a right to know *this*. For better and worse, sexual harassment law sometimes drives us where we really don't want to go. With one woman's word pitted against one man's, it is especially difficult to figure out what happened. The blunt instrument of the law is not always precise enough to protect all the victims without victimizing some of the alleged harassers. It can lead to unseemly and intrusive explorations of the most private details of people's lives.

This, alas, is becoming one of the distinguishing characteristics of American society. □