

JFK tapes show criticism for refusal to invade Cuba

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Tapes of secretly recorded White House conversations released yesterday show that President John F. Kennedy resisted intense pressure from his military advisers to bomb and invade Cuba during the missile crisis 34 years ago this week.

Blasting Kennedy's patient, cautious approach, the Air Force chief, Gen. Curtis LeMay, told the president at a White House meeting on Oct. 19, 1962, "This is almost as bad as the appeasement at Munich," and declared that Kennedy's refusal to invade Cuba would certainly embolden the Soviets to take Berlin.

Kennedy, whose father, Ambassador Joseph P. Kennedy, was a leading supporter of England's 1938 efforts to placate Nazi Germany and avoid war, pointedly ignored the remark, in one of several moments revealed on 15½ hours of tapes that could reshape historians' accounts of a critical time in Kennedy's presidency.

Smaller batches of tapes released in 1994 revealed that Kennedy had spurned US congressional leaders' urgings for a Cuban invasion and provided glimpses into his agonized speculations that he could trigger the "final failure" of nuclear war with the Soviets.

The Cuban missile crisis is
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JFK was conciliatory on Cuba

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commonly known as the cold-warrior Kennedy's ultimate macho moment, a two-week standoff in which Kennedy deftly avoided nuclear holocaust while forcing Soviet leader Nikita S. Khrushchev to back down and remove atomic warheads he had placed 90 miles off Florida.

The tapes released yesterday considerably enhance a picture that has been emerging in recent years of a Kennedy who sought repeatedly to avoid confrontation and considered many of Khrushchev's complaints and negotiating offers entirely reasonable.

Kennedy is also heard agonizing over the risks of nuclear war, calling it "a hell of an alternative" and pressing civil defense officials to explain whether he could protect Americans and evacuate them from cities.

Through those days Kennedy was fending off strong pressure for an attack on Cuba from congressional and military leaders such as LeMay, who told him, "We don't have any choice but direct military action . . . I see no other solution. This blockade and political action I see leading to war," in much the same scenario as World War II.

LeMay told Kennedy not only that he disagreed with the president's view that the Soviets would retaliate for an invasion on Cuba by seizing West Berlin, but also that he believed that only an attack on Cuba would prevent the Soviets from "knocking off Berlin" (LeMay later became famous for his vow to bomb the North Vietnamese "back into the Stone Age.")

Kennedy Library historian Shelton M. Stern said, "LeMay was really sticking the knife in to say that. It must have been a deep, personal insult" in light of Kennedy's father's strong identifi-

cation with the Nazi appeasement effort. "I would love to know what Kennedy's face looked like."

Truffs University history professor Martin Sherwin, who has taught several classes on Kennedy's presidency, said he believes Kennedy would have hated to see the tapes made public. "He saw himself as a tough person, a warrior, and yet here he was in these meetings, playing the softie."

Some other details from the tapes released yesterday:

■ There was an indication that White House

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officials had intelligence information early on indicating that Soviet forces had brought tactical nuclear weapons to Cuba that they probably would have used to annihilate US invading forces. The presence of such weapons became public at a 1992 conference in Cuba.

■ Kennedy told his brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, that he believed he would have been impeached if he had not opposed the Soviet weapons in Cuba, even if it was a hugely risky and politically nerve-racking move.

■ Kennedy repeatedly saying that Khrushchev's offer to remove his missiles from Cuba if the United States would remove its Jupiter weapons from Turkey was "reasonable" and "a very

fair trade." Ultimately Kennedy agreed to such a removal as a secret condition of the deal that ended the Cuban crisis.

Although the tapes released yesterday represent the last of the available recordings from the Cuban missile crisis period, another 200 hours covering August 1962 to October 1963 remain to be released.

Some historians have criticized the Kennedy Library for not moving more quickly to release the tapes, but library officials have blamed national security agencies for long declassification reviews that have only recently been streamlined by a new law.

On the 15½ hours of tapes released yesterday, a total of 32 minutes remains secret on grounds of national security, almost all of it in snippets of a few seconds each.

"I think the history of the Kennedy administration is going to be rewritten in the next 10 years," Martin said. "There's all this information that's just going to pour out," potentially including new insights into discussions about Cuba, Vietnam, civil rights and plans for the 1964 campaign.

Although exciting to historians for their you-are-there quality, the tapes are an imperfect record. As copies of copies of recordings made by microphones in electrical outlets, they contain many incomprehensible passages and unknown speakers. Determining dates and participants requires much research.

Also, they are not necessarily candid moments. Kennedy controlled the recorders with a button at his Oval Office desk or Cabinet Room table, but Robert Kennedy — as well as the president's secretary and some Secret Service agents — knew of the recording system, which the president is thought to have installed to help compile his memoirs later.