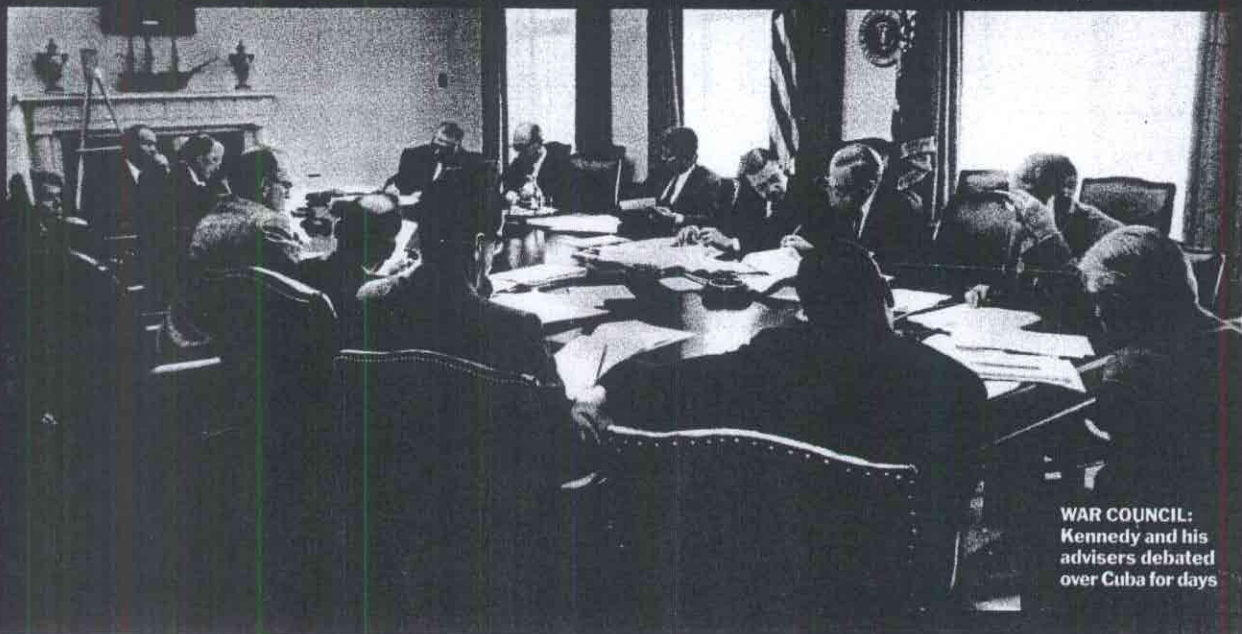


ARMAGEDDON'S ECHOES

A new book lets us listen in as a crisis almost blows up the planet



WAR COUNCIL:
Kennedy and his
advisers debated
over Cuba for days

CECIL STOUTON—LIFE

By **BRUCE W. NELAN**

"We are eyeball to eyeball, and I think the other fellow just blinked."

—Dean Rusk, Oct. 24, 1962

THE WORLD HAS NEVER BEEN CLOSER to nuclear war than it was 35 years ago, during the heart-stopping days of the Cuban missile crisis. The confrontation started when the Soviet Union began covertly shipping into Fidel Castro's Cuba 72 nuclear-armed ballistic missiles, capable of wiping out U.S. cities from Florida to the Pacific Northwest. American U-2 spy planes spotted them, and on Oct. 16, 1962, President John F. Kennedy began 13 days of crisis meetings with senior advisers in what he called the Executive Committee of the National Security Council. As the wise men secretly gathered in the White House and debated what to do, lining up as "hawks" and "doves," Kennedy taped the meetings without telling them.

Those tapes have now been declassified and enhanced with modern audio technology. The first complete, painstakingly verified transcripts will be published next week by Harvard University Press. Titled *The Kennedy Tapes*, the book is 700 pages of terror and drama, edited by histo-

rians Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow.

Most of Kennedy's key advisers were hawks, concerned about not showing "weakness" and arguing for military action. From the beginning, President Kennedy was dovishly cautious. He was willing to pledge not to invade Cuba if that would get the missiles out. He also thought it made sense to accept Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's call to take 15 intermediate-range U.S. Jupiter missiles out of Turkey as part of the deal. After much debate, Robert Kennedy was sent down the street to tell Soviet Ambassador Anatoli Dobrynin privately that the Jupiters would soon be out of Turkey.

Overshadowing every meeting at which the American leaders weighed plans for a blockade, air strikes or a full-scale invasion of Cuba was the awful realization that nuclear holocaust could be the result of any step they might take. Some condensed excerpts from the transcripts:

OCT. 16, the Cabinet Room of the White House

Secretary of State Dean Rusk: I think we'll be facing a situation that could well lead to general war. We have an obligation to do what has to be done, but to do it in a way that gives everybody a chance to

pull away from it before it gets too hard.
Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara: Direct military action will lead to a Soviet military response of some type, someplace in the world.

National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy: That's why [Khrushchev] has been very, very explicit with us about how dangerous this is.

President Kennedy: That's right. But he's initiated the danger, really, hasn't he? He's the one that's playing God, not us.

Rusk: We could be just utterly wrong, but we've never really believed that Khrushchev would take on a general nuclear war over Cuba.

McNamara: Mr. President, we need to develop a specific strike plan. The second thing is to consider the consequences. I don't know quite what kind of world we live in after we've struck Cuba, and we've started it.

President Kennedy: I can't understand their viewpoint. We never had a case where it's been quite this ... Well, it's a goddam mystery to me.

Bundy: I think any military action does change the world. And I think that not taking action changes the world.

Under Secretary of State George Ball: You go in there with a surprise attack. You put out all the missiles. This isn't

the end. This is the beginning, I think.

OCT. 18 The President decides to launch a naval blockade, or "quarantine," to halt the arrival of more offensive weapons from the U.S.S.R.

President Kennedy: Whatever action we take against Cuba, a lot of people would regard this as a mad act by the U.S.

State Department Soviet Expert Llewellyn Thompson: If they're prepared to say, "You do this, then this is nuclear world war," then they would do that anyway.

President Kennedy: I think it is more likely he would just grab [Allied-occupied West] Berlin.

McNamara: What do we mean exactly? That they take it with Soviet troops?

President Kennedy: That's what I would think.

Bundy: It's then general war.

President Kennedy: You mean a nuclear exchange?

Unidentified: Mmmh-hmm.

McNamara: At the moment, I lean to the blockade because I think it reduces the very serious risk of large-scale military action.

General Maxwell Taylor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff: What is your objection to taking out the missiles and the [Soviet] aircraft?

McNamara: My real objection to it is that it kills several hundred Russians.

OCT. 19 The President calls in the Joint Chiefs of Staff, all of them hawks who favor air strikes followed by an invasion.

President Kennedy: There's bound to be a reprisal from the Soviet Union. Just going in and taking Berlin by force. Which leaves me only one alternative, which is to fire nuclear weapons, which is a hell of an alternative, and begin a nuclear exchange.

Taylor: I think we'd all be unanimous in saying that really our strength in Berlin, our strength any place in the world, is the credibility of our response under certain conditions.

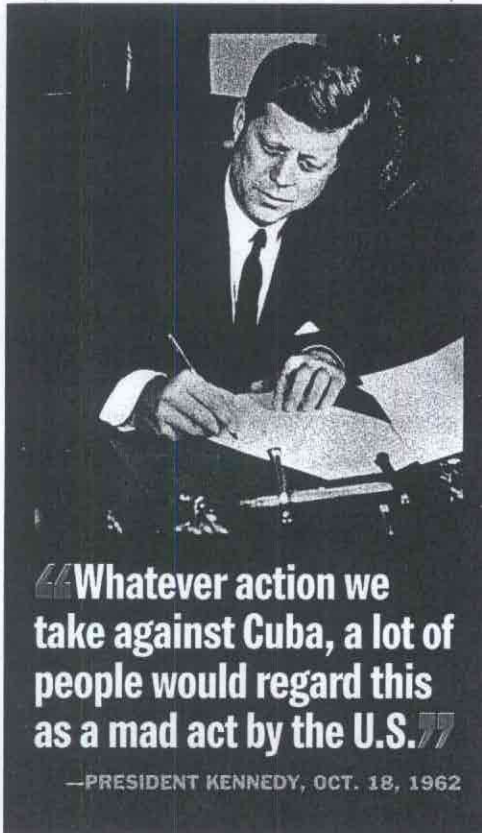
President Kennedy: That's right. That's why we've got to respond. Now the question is, What is our response?

General Curtis LeMay, Air Force Chief of Staff: I think that a blockade, a political talk, would be considered by a lot of our friends and neutrals as being a pretty weak response to this. You're in a pretty bad fix, Mr. President.

President Kennedy: What did you say?

LeMay: You're in a pretty bad fix.

OCT. 22 The President speaks to the nation on television and warns that any missile fired from Cuba will be considered an attack by the Soviet Union on the U.S. American forces go on worldwide alert.



“Whatever action we take against Cuba, a lot of people would regard this as a mad act by the U.S.”

—PRESIDENT KENNEDY, OCT. 18, 1962

President Kennedy: Well, this is unsettling now, George, because he's got us in a pretty good spot here.

Bundy: It would be clear that we were trying to sell our allies for our own interests.

President Kennedy: Let's not kid ourselves. They've got a very good proposal, which is the reason they made it public. We can't very well invade Cuba, with all the toil and blood it's going to be, when we could have got them out by making a deal on the same missiles in Turkey. If that's part of the record, then I don't see how we'll have a very good war.

McNamara: We shouldn't start this until we minimize the Soviet response against NATO and until we know how we are going to respond to a Soviet response against NATO. I am not prepared at the moment to recommend air attacks against Cuba.

Robert Kennedy: I think if you have a meeting of NATO tomorrow ... I admit you are risking something because some of the allies are going to say you're out of your mind.

President Kennedy: They don't realize that in two or three days we may have a military strike that

would bring perhaps the seizure of Berlin or a strike on Turkey. We all know how quickly everybody's courage goes when the blood starts to flow, and that's what's going to happen to NATO.

Robert Kennedy (as the meeting breaks up): How are you doing, Bob?

McNamara: Well. How about yourself?

Robert Kennedy: All right.

McNamara: You got any doubts?

Robert Kennedy: Well, no. I think that we're doing the only thing we can do.

OCT. 28 Khrushchev announces publicly that he will accept Kennedy's no-invasion pledge and dismantle all his offensive weapons in Cuba and ship them back to the Soviet Union. He keeps secret Kennedy's private assurances on removing the U.S. missiles from Turkey.

OCT. 29, the Oval Office

President Kennedy (on the phone): I want to get a [memento] for the Executive Committee of the National Security Council. What I thought of was something that would have the month of October on it and would have a line drawn around the calendar days. Yeah, just like a page out of a calendar. How could I get that so it wouldn't be too expensive? ■

OCT. 23 Khrushchev denounces the blockade, and Castro puts his forces on wartime alert.

President Kennedy (sitting with his brother Robert after a meeting): It looks really mean, doesn't it? On the other hand, there wasn't any other choice [than to declare a blockade]. If he's going to get this mean on this one, in our part of the world, no choice.

Robert Kennedy: Well, there wasn't any other choice. I mean, you would have been impeached.

President Kennedy: I think I would have been impeached.

OCT. 24 Soviet ships begin to turn away from the quarantine zone. Rusk whispers his famous comment to Bundy.

OCT. 27 In a private letter, Khrushchev offers to withdraw his missiles if Kennedy pledges not to invade Cuba. In a public message, he also demands that the U.S. pull its 15 Jupiter missiles out of Turkey.

President Kennedy: In the first place, we last year tried to get the missiles out of [Turkey] because they're not militarily useful, number one. Number two, to any rational man it will look like a very fair trade.

Ball: If we talked to the Turks, I mean, this would be an extremely unsettling business.