

Word for Word: The Cuban Missile Crisis

THE world never came closer to nuclear war than it did 35 years ago this month in the Cuban missile crisis. Now, from transcripts of decaying tapes kept secret for decades, Americans can learn what their leaders actually said and thought while contemplating Armageddon in 1962.

As the United States and the Soviet Union faced off over Cuba, where the Soviets had secretly installed nuclear weapons, President John F. Kennedy surreptitiously recorded his conversations in the Cabinet Room and the Oval Office with his closest White House advisers. Millions of words written about the crisis — memoirs, monographs, histories, hagiographies — give the big picture: how the United States blocked Cuba, how the Soviets backed down, how the world lived under the threat of annihilation.

But the transcripts — published in a new book, "The Kennedy Tapes" (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), and excerpted on page 7 — capture the power and drama of the moment. They show just how raw things were in the White House. They let readers hear leaders thinking out loud about what to do to force the Soviets to withdraw the missiles. They raise ideas



President Kennedy and advisers during the Cuban missile crisis. Identifications appear on page 7.

about nuclear weapons, political power and civilian control of the military that remain vital today. Gen. Curtis LeMay of the Air Force, champion of American nuclear weapons, all but calls the President a coward to his face. Gen. David Shoup of the Marines

curses behind the President's back after Kennedy rejects the generals' plans for an all-out attack on Cuba. Later, Kennedy tells an aide to make sure that the Joint Chiefs of Staff do not start a war without his approval. "I don't want these nuclear

weapons firing without our knowing it," he says. "I don't think we ought to accept the Chiefs' word on that one." The tapes show men mulling over a global chess game in which the wrong move kills millions. If we hit Cuba, will the Russians hit

West Berlin? Will that start World War III?

In 1962, the United States could have launched 2,000 nuclear weapons at the Soviet Union at a moment's notice — less than a tenth of its total force. The Soviets had about 340 warheads capable of striking the United States, including the 40 in Cuba.

President Kennedy weighs what 40 more missiles might mean to the fate of the United States: "What difference does it make? They've got enough to blow us up now anyway." Hundreds of warheads were enough to start — or deter — a full-tilt nuclear war. The United States and Russia now count their nuclear arsenals in five figures.

The tapes were classified for decades — portions remain under the seal of national security — and only fragments surfaced in the 1980's. They were painstakingly transcribed this year by two Harvard professors, Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, editors of the new volume. The words are a record of decision-making in a nuclear crisis that has no equal.

TIM WEINER

Excerpts from
the transcripts, page 7.

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When Kennedy Faced Armageddon,
And His Own Scornful Generals

THIS is how the world didn't end. Thirty-five years ago, on Sunday, Oct. 14, 1962, a U-2 spy plane discovered Soviet missiles secretly being installed in Cuba. Once armed with nuclear warheads, they could kill millions of Americans.

President John F. Kennedy had to decide whether to risk World War III over the crisis. He and his advisers met for 13 days and nights.

And he secretly taped most of the talks. The low-fidelity recordings, transcribed by Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, were published this month as "The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis" (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press). Ellipses in the excerpts below are from editing by The New York Times or denote unclear taped passages.

TIM WEINER

Tuesday morning, Oct. 16. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara has outlined three choices — negotiate, blockade or attack:

President Kennedy: There isn't any doubt that if we announced that there were [missile] sites going up ... we would secure a good deal of political support. ... This really would put the burden on the Soviets. On the other hand, the very fact of doing that makes the military ... lose all the advantages [of a surprise attack].

McNamara: [MIG jets] could drop one or two or 10 high-explosive bombs someplace along the East Coast. And that's the minimum risk to this country we run as a result of advance warning.

Gen. Maxwell Taylor, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff: I'd like to stress this last point, Mr. President. We are very vulnerable to conventional bombing attack, low-level bombing attacks, in the Florida area. ...

Treasury Secretary C. Douglas Dillon: What if they carry a nuclear weapon?

The President: Well, if they carry a nuclear weapon. ...

Secretary of State Dean Rusk: We could just be utterly wrong — but we've never really believed that [Nikita S.] Khrushchev [the Soviet leader] would take on a general nuclear war over Cuba.

The President: We certainly have been wrong about what he's trying to do in Cuba. ...

McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy aide: What is the strategic impact [of the Cuban missiles]? How gravely does this change the strategic balance?

McNamara: Mac, I asked the Chiefs that ... and they said, "Substantially." My own personal view is: not at all.

The President: What difference does it make? They've got enough to blow us up now anyway. ... This is a political struggle as much as military.

The discussion turns to a "limited strike" to blow up the missile sites:

McNamara: You have to put in a blockade following any limited action.

Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy: Then we're gonna have to sink Russian ships. Then we're gonna have to sink Russian submarines. ... [Think about] whether we should just get into it, and get it over with, and take our losses. ...

Bundy: Our principal problem is to try and imaginatively to think what the world would be like if we do this, and what it will be like if we don't.

Thursday morning, Oct. 18. Should the United States warn Khrushchev before attacking the missile sites and killing Soviet soldiers?

Under Secretary of State George Ball: [If] we strike without warning, that's like Pearl Harbor. It's the kind of conduct that one might expect of the Soviet Union. ... And I have a feeling that this 24 hours to Khrushchev is really indispensable.

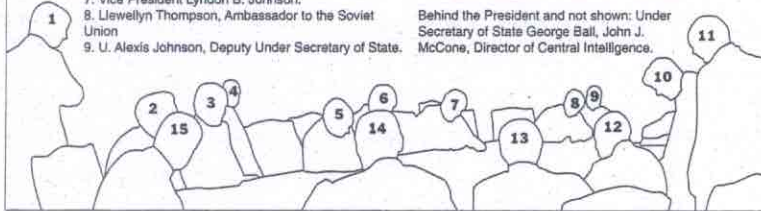
The President: And then if he says: "If you are going to do that, we're going to grab Berlin." ... He'll grab Berlin, of course. Then either way it would be, we lost Berlin, because of these missiles. ...

McNamara: Well, when we're talking about taking Berlin, what do we mean exactly? That they take it with Soviet troops?

The President: That's what I would think. ...

The Kennedy White House in crisis mode: Cabinet Room, October 1962.

1. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy.
2. Don Wilson (partly hidden), United States Information Agency.
3. Theodore C. Sorensen, Presidential adviser.
4. Bromley Smith (rear), National Security Council.
5. McGeorge Bundy, Presidential adviser.
6. Treasury Secretary C. Douglas Dillon.
7. Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson.
8. Llewellyn Thompson, Ambassador to the Soviet Union.
9. U. Alexis Johnson, Deputy Under Secretary of State.
10. President John F. Kennedy.
11. Secretary of State Dean Rusk.
12. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara.
13. Roswell Gilpatric, Deputy Defense Secretary.
14. Gen. Maxwell Taylor, Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff.
15. Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze.



Behind the President and not shown: Under Secretary of State George Ball, John J. McCone, Director of Central Intelligence.

Unidentified: Then what do we do?

Ball: Go to general war.

Bundy: Then it's general war.

The President: You mean a nuclear exchange?

Unidentified: Mmm-hmm.

Unidentified: That's right.

A little later, during discussion of an attack on Cuba, the President's brother speaks up:

Robert Kennedy: I think George Ball has a hell of a good point.

The President: What?

R. Kennedy: I think it's the whole question of, you know, assuming that you do survive all this, ... what kind of a country we are.

Ball: This business of carrying the mark of Cain on your brow for the rest of your life ...

R. Kennedy: It's a hell of a burden to carry.

Friday morning, Oct. 19. The Joint Chiefs — especially Gen. Curtis LeMay of the Air Force, architect of nuclear strategy — want to attack:

General LeMay: If we don't do anything to Cuba, then they're going to push on Berlin, and push real hard because they've got us on the run. ... This blockade and political action, I see leading into war. ... This is almost as bad as the appeasement at Munich. ... I just don't see any other solution except direct military action right now. ... A blockade, and political talk, would be considered by a lot of our friends and neutrals as being a pretty weak response to this. And I'm sure a lot of our own citizens would feel that way, too. You're in a pretty bad fix, Mr. President.

The President: What did you say?

General LeMay: You're in a pretty bad fix.

The meeting ends. General LeMay and Gen. David Shoup of the Marines linger. General Shoup is impressed by the other's bluntness:

General Shoup: You pulled the rug right out from under him. Goddamn.

General LeMay: Jesus Christ. What the hell do you mean?

General Shoup: Somebody's got to keep them from doing the goddamn thing piecemeal. That's our problem. ... Do the son of a bitch, and do it right. ...

Monday morning, Oct. 22. President Kennedy asks Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze to make sure no American officer can fire nuclear weapons without the President's say-so:

The President: We may be attacking the Cubans, and a reprisal may come. I don't want these nuclear weapons firing without our knowing it. ... Can we take care of that, Paul? We need a new instruction out.

Nitze: All right. I'll go back and tell them.

The President: They object to sending a new one out?

Nitze: They object to sending it out because it, to their view, compromises their standing instructions. ... NATO strategic contact [jargon for a Soviet nuclear attack] requires the immediate execution of E.D.P. in such events.

The President: What's E.D.P.?

Nitze: The European defense plan, which is nuclear war. ...

The President: No, that's why we ordered that ... And what we've got to do is make sure these fellows do know, so that they don't fire them of and put the United States under attack. ... I don't think we ought to accept the Chiefs' word on that one, Paul.

Monday, Oct. 22, 5 P.M. Before informing the American people of his plan for a blockade, the President briefs senior Congressmen. Senator Richard Russell of Georgia, the Armed Services Committee chairman, urges "stronger steps":

Senator Russell: The time is going to come, Mr. President, when we're going to have to take this step for Berlin and Korea and Washington, D.C. and Winder, Georgia, for the nuclear war. ... We've got to take a chance somewhere, some time, if we're going to retain our position as a great world power. ...

The President: But it's a very difficult problem that we're faced with. ...

Russell: Oh my God. I know that. A war, our destiny, will hinge on it. But it's coming someday Mr. President. Will it ever be under more auspicious circumstances?

Saturday night, Oct. 27. A Soviet tanker keeps approaching the blockade. A U-2 is shot down over Cuba. The Joint Chiefs urge an all-out attack, which will start in 36 hours if the Soviets don't yield. The last recorded conversation that night:

McNamara: You got any doubts?

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

McNamara: I think the one thing, Bobby, we ought to seriously do before we act is be damned sure they understand the consequences. In other words, we need to really show them where we are now, because we need to have two things ready: a government for Cuba, because we're going to need one. ... and secondly, plans for how to respond to the Soviet Union in Europe, because sure as hell they're going to do something there. ... I suggest it will be an eye for an eye.

Dillon: That's the mission.

Unidentified: I'd take Cuba back.

Unidentified: I'd take Cuba away from Castro.

Unidentified: Suppose we make Bobby mayor of Havana?

Monday, Oct. 29, 10:10 A.M. The crisis breaks. Khrushchev announces he will remove the missiles from Cuba. The President reflects:

The President: My guess is, well, everybody sort of figures that, in extremis, that everybody would use nuclear weapons. The decision to use any kind of a nuclear weapon, even the tactical ones, presents such a risk of it getting out of control so quickly, that there's —

Unidentified: But Cuba's so small compared to the world.

President Kennedy appears to agree.