Kennedy Qualified Vow Not to

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Highly classified correspondence between President John F. Kennedy and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev as they settled the 1962 Cuban missile crisis does not contain an unconditional commitment by Kennedy that the United States would not mount another invasion of Cuba.

The long-withheld correspondence was released yesterday in Washington and Moscow. The subject of intense speculation in the nearly 30 years since the United States and Soviet Union came close to the brink of nuclear war, it shows that Kennedy carefully qualified his no-invasion pledge that helped to end the crisis.

The confrontation began after the United States verified reports that the Soviets were building launching sites in Cuba for offensive missiles that could easily reach the U.S. mainland. On Oct. 22, 1962, Kennedy ordered a naval blockade around the island and demanded withdrawal of all missiles. After two dramatic weeks of international tension, Khrushchev agreed to withdraw them.

At the peak of the crisis on Oct. 27, 1962, Kennedy agreed to "give assurances against an invasion of Cuba" and to call off the U.S. naval quarantine in return for Khrushchev's agreement to remove the missiles under U.N. supervision and not to reintroduce them.

This crucial letter from Kennedy was published by the State Department in 1973, but 11 succeeding letters between the two leaders were disclosed only yesterday, in the face of a lawsuit by American University professor Philip Brenner and in advance of a historic meeting on the missile crisis involving former U.S., Soviet and Cuban officials starting Thursday in Havana.

American conservatives have speculated for years about whether Kennedy provided iron-clad guarantees that the United States would not invade Cuba. But some questions have been unanswered because of the refusal of the State Department to release the rest of the correspondence, on grounds that it was privileged and confidential communications between heads of state. A statement by State Department spokesman Margaret Tutwiler suggested that the agreement of the Russian government was important in the decision to finally release the 83-page packet of letters.

In addition to shedding new light on the terms for ending the missile crisis, the correspondence included a number of intriguing statements exchanged by the two leaders:

■ Khrushchev, in an Oct. 30, 1962, letter to Kennedy, declared that "even in this crisis, as our saying goes, there is no evil without good. . . . The good is that now people have felt more tangibly the breathing of the burning flames of thermonuclear war and have a more clear realization of the threat looming over them if the arms race is not stopped." The Soviet leader, who was general secretary of the Communist Party, asked Kennedy to begin negotiations for a non-aggression pact between the two military blocs and said "the best thing to do" would be to disband both blocs.

■ In a statement not qualified by other details, Kennedy said in a Nov. 6, 1962, letter that "we must attach the greatest importance to the personal assurances you have given that submarine bases will not be established in Cuba." This Soviet commitment was the subject of controversy and heated exchanges between Washington and Moscow in the 1970s and 1980s.

■ On Nov. 12, 1962, shortly after the U.S. midterm election in which Democrats did well and Richard M. Nixon lost his race for governor of California, Khrushchev wrote that while the balloting was an internal U.S. matter, Kennedy's success "does not upset us." The Soviet leader added, "You managed to pin your political rival, Mr. Nixon, to the mat. This did not draw tears from our eyes either."

■ On Dec. 10, 1962, as the confrontation neared its end, Khrushchev observed that "within a short period of time we and you have lived through a rather acute crisis. The acuteness of it was that we and you were already prepared to fight and this would lead to a thermonuclear war. Yes, to a thermonuclear world war with all its dreadful consequences. We took it into account and, being convinced that mankind would never forgive the statesmen who would not exhaust all possibilities to prevent catastrophe, agreed to a compromise. . . ."

■ Kennedy, in response to complaints about leaks to the news media of confidential messages between them, chastised Khrushchev on Dec. 14, 1962, for using a newsman, ABC News diplomatic correspondent John Scali, as a channel between the Soviet Embassy and the State Department. "This is always unwise in our country," Kennedy wrote, "where the members of the press often insist on printing at some later time what they may learn privately." Kennedy added, "The competition for news in this country is fierce. A number of the competitors are not great admirers of my administration, and perhaps an even larger number are not wholly friendly to yours."

■ Khrushchev, in the Dec. 19, 1962, letter that ends the series released yesterday, agreed to major compromises in an effort to win agreement with Kennedy on a nu-

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clear test ban. The Soviet leader, who had been adamantly opposed to on-site inspections on Soviet territory, offered to accept "2-3 inspections a year . . . in the seismic areas where some suspicious earth's tremors might occur" similar to underground nuclear tests. Such a Soviet position at this stage had not been documented before, experts said.

Regarding Kennedy's no-invasion pledge about Cuba, his letter dated Nov. 6, 1962, noted that this assurance had already come under attack in the United States. Kennedy added, in a qualification of the pledge, that "the very minimum that is necessary . . . is, as we agreed, the verified removal of the [Soviet] missile and bomber systems, together with real safeguards against their introduction." Kennedy added that "the continuing verification" that these weapons are not in Cuba is "an explicit condition" for his no-invasion pledge and that this was a serious problem.

In another letter to Khrushchev dated Nov. 15, Kennedy said that "real progress" on continuing international observation of weapons in Cuba was "essential" before he could state his no-invasion assurance in more formal terms.

In a message to Khrushchev dated Nov. 20, Kennedy expressed regret that the Soviet leader had been unable to persuade Cuban Premier (later President) Fidel Castro to accept "a suitable form of inspection or verification." Kennedy added, in a highly qualified statement, that "there need be no fear of any invasion of Cuba while matters take their present favorable course."

In the face of extensive efforts by Khrushchev to obtain a more binding and clear-cut U.S. commitment, Kennedy repeated in a Dec. 14 letter the requirement for "adequate assurances that all offensive weapons are removed from Cuba and are not re-introduced, and that Cuba itself commits no aggressive acts against any of the nations of the Western Hemisphere."

Adlai E. Stevenson, who was Kennedy's ambassador to the United Nations, was attempting to negotiate a formal no-invasion commitment in return for Soviet pledges in New York. These negotiations ultimately were unsuccessful.

Raymond L. Garthoff of Brookings Institution, who was a State Department official at the time of the missile crisis and is the author of a 1989 book on the subject, said the most important revelation from the newly published correspondence is that "there is no smoking gun" in the form of an iron-clad Kennedy pledge banning a new U.S. invasion of Cuba. Earlier, Kennedy's administration had sponsored the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion by Cuban exiles, aided by the Central Intelligence Agency.

Brenner, whose Freedom of Information Act suit helped to bring about release of the letters, said they seem to validate Castro's suspicions about Kennedy's no-invasion pledge. "Kennedy was tougher and Khrushchev more conciliatory and more willing to sell out Cuba" than had been proven before, Brenner said.

The unusual historical inquiry into the missile crisis began with a meeting of former U.S. officials in 1987, followed by a meeting of U.S. and Soviet participants in the crisis later that year and two meetings of U.S., Soviet and Cuban participants in 1989 and 1990. The Havana meeting planned for this week, at which Castro is expected to speak, will probably be the final meeting in the three-nation series and may involve extensive publication of messages between Moscow and the Soviet embassies in Washington and Havana, according to Garthoff.