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JFK, Khrushchev — crisis pen pals

By Johanna Neuman
USA TODAY

Correspondence between John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev over the 1962 Cuban missile crisis show the president every bit a match for the cagey Soviet leader.

Declassified Monday, the letters show a "very confident" Kennedy and a "desperate" Khrushchev, says American

University's Phillip Brenner, who sought their release. They reveal little more than differences in personality.

Khrushchev's letters were long and chatty; Kennedy's short and businesslike.

In the letters, Khrushchev:
▶ Rejected the claim the Soviets meant to launch nuclear missiles from Cuba. Why choose Cuba as "a bridge-head" for war, he asked.

▶ Claimed the bombers he sent to Cuba were obsolete.

But Kennedy wrote they "could carry nuclear weapons for long distances."

▶ Tried to flatter Kennedy by applauding Richard Nixon's 1962 defeat in the California governor's race. "You managed to pin your political rival, Mr. Nixon, to the mat. This did not draw tears from our eyes."
A U.S. blockade and a deal

ended the crisis. Khrushchev withdrew the weapons; Kennedy agreed not to invade Cuba. Khrushchev wrote: "As a result, there has been achieved the purpose which had been intended" by sending the weapons to Cuba — no invasion. The letters were released in response to a Freedom of Information request.

▶ Excerpts of letters, 4A

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TIPS FOR FLIERS
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TUESDAY



UPI
KENNEDY: Ordering Cuban blockade, letters were curt.



BEFORE CUBA: President Kennedy and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev meet in Vienna in 1961. AP

What was said at height of '62 crisis

Following are excerpts from letters in 1962 between Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev and President Kennedy during the latter stages of the Cuban missile crisis. The letters, written in the period that brought the world to the brink of nuclear war, are among 12 previously classified documents released Monday by the United States and Russia.

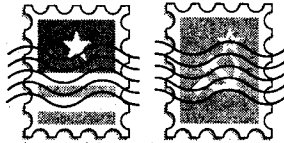
Khrushchev to Kennedy, Oct. 30, 1962:

Mr. President, I believe that you as a military man and your military people understand that we were not preparing for war when we delivered means of defense to Cuba.

...
Do you really think that we are so narrow-minded in our understanding of military matters that in preparing for war against the U.S. we picked up Cuba as a bridgehead for such a war? ...

THE
**KENNEDY
KHRUSHCHEV**

LETTERS



And the means there — a certain number of missiles. This is foolish. For Cuba is no good as a bridgehead for a big war and it cannot be used for those purposes and, of course, nobody ever contemplated that. ...

It is our opinion that the crisis has been eliminated on the compromise basis through reciprocal concessions. We are satisfied with it. We also appreciate your cooperation in the elimination

of the crisis and your understanding of the necessity for reciprocal concessions and compromise so that the conflict be prevented from going beyond the limits that might really break into a thermonuclear war. ...

All the peoples of the world, the peoples of the United States and the Soviet Union as well as the peoples of all other countries, are interested in eliminating this conflict.

To our mutual satisfaction we may have even sacrificed self-esteem. ...

Apparently, there will be such scribblers who will engage in hair-splitting over our agreement, will be digging as to who made greater concessions to whom. ...

As for me, I would say that we both made a concession to reason and found a reasonable solution which enabled us to ensure peace for all.

Kennedy to Khrushchev, Nov. 6, 1962:

Not only did this action threaten the whole safety of this hemisphere, but it was, in a broader sense, a dangerous attempt to change the worldwide status quo. ...

Secret action of this kind seems to me both hazardous and unjustified. But however one may judge that argument ... your government repeatedly gave us assurances of what it was not doing: these assurances were announced as coming from the highest levels, and they proved inaccurate. ...

In the aftermath of this shock, to which we replied with a measured but necessary response, I believe it is vital that we should re-establish some degree of confidence in communication between the two of us. ...

If the leaders of the two great nuclear powers cannot judge with some accuracy the intentions of each other, we shall find ourselves in a period of gravely increasing danger — not only for our two countries, but for the whole world.

► Kennedy confident, 1A

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