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Transcripts Confirm Kennedy Linked Removal of Missiles in Cuba, Turkey

Deal With Khrushchev Defused Missile Crisis of 1962

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President John F. Kennedy was determined during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis to trade away obsolete U.S. nuclear missiles based in Turkey in order to get Soviet nuclear arms out of Cuba and avoid a serious military confrontation with Moscow, according to a transcript of Cabinet room conversations secretly recorded at the time.

Although officials 25 years ago denied there was any such arrangement, it has long been known that such a secret deal was struck as part of the solution to the crisis. The four hours of conversations at key White House meetings on Oct. 27, 1962, released yesterday by the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library, bring vividly to light how strongly Kennedy pushed the idea of the trade.

When his top aides argued about the difficulty in getting approval of Turkey and other NATO allies for removal of the American-made Jupiter missiles, Kennedy replied that he faced a situation where "because we wouldn't take the missiles out of Turkey, then maybe we'll have to invade or make a massive strike on Cuba, which may lose Berlin. That's what concerns me."

Kennedy went on, "We all know how quickly everybody's courage goes when the blood starts to flow, and that's what's going to happen in NATO When we start these things, and [the Soviets] grab Berlin . . . everybody's going to say, 'Well, that [exchange of Soviet missiles in Cuba for U.S. Jupiters in Turkey] was a pretty good proposition.'"

"Today it sounds great to reject it," Kennedy said, "but it's not going to, after we do something."

In a subsequent evening meeting in the Oval Office, which was not recorded, Kennedy, at Secretary of State Dean Rusk's suggestion, structured the secret proposal to remove the missiles from Turkey after the Soviets took theirs out of Cuba, but agreed not to link the two actions publicly.

The released transcript also shows how Kennedy's advisers had to talk the president out of responding positively to Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's first public proposal—made that morning—that Soviet nuclear missiles be removed from Cuba only if Washington did the same with its equivalent arms in Turkey.

Paul H. Nitze, who participated then as assistant secretary of defense and currently is President Reagan's special adviser on arms control, told Kennedy in 1962 that he should publicly only discuss an earlier Khrushchev proposal that called for removal of the Soviet weapons in return for a U.S. pledge not to invade Cuba.

"After the Cuban thing is settled, we can thereafter be prepared to discuss anything," Nitze said, advising delay in dealing with the U.S. missiles in Turkey.

"I don't think we can," Kennedy replied. "I don't think we can take that position."

McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's national security adviser, agreed with Nitze that the president could deal with the purely Cuban solution that had been the subject of a Khrushchev note the night before.

Throughout the subsequent discussions that day, while most aides pushed for a delay before agreeing to discuss the Jupiter missiles with the Soviets, Kennedy kept returning to the subject.

At one point late in the day, after reports of the shooting down of a U.S. U2 reconnaissance aircraft over Cuba, then-CIA Director John A. McCone suggested delivering an ultimatum to Khrushchev "by fast wire."

It was to protest the downing of the aircraft, to "demand he stop this business and stop it right away or we're going to take those SAM [surface-to-air missile] sites out immediately."

McCone also said part of the message should be that "I'd trade these Turkish things [the U.S. missiles] out right now. I wouldn't even talk to anybody about it."

Ironically, after the crisis, Adlai E. Stevenson, then U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, was identified in a controversial magazine article based on interviews with senior Kennedy administration officials as a "superdove" because he wanted to trade removal of U.S. missiles in Turkey for removal of Soviet missiles in Cuba.

Rusk, who drafted the exchange proposal that was carried out, was the man who at the time described the Soviets as blinking in what he termed an eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation.

Rusk revealed earlier this year that in fact Kennedy had secretly ordered him to propose through an intermediary to U Thant, then secretary-general of the United Nations, that if Thant publicly pro-

posed a removal of the missiles in Turkey for those in Cuba, the United States would accept the offer. But that plan was not implemented because Khrushchev agreed to withdraw his missiles from Cuba in return for a secret U.S. assurance to dismantle the Jupiter missiles in Turkey.

The transcript also shows that the participants talked of employing only conventional forces and never discussed in these sessions the use of nuclear weapons by either the Soviet Union or the United States.

Then-Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara told the group at one point that U.S. forces had detected three Soviet submarines off the U.S. coast in the previous 48 hours but that "as far as we know they don't carry missiles."

A new book on the crisis by Raymond L. Gartoff, a State Department official at the time and now a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, will report that although key officials at the time believed nuclear warheads were present in Cuba, new information indicates that the Soviet ship carrying warheads was headed toward the island but never even approached the U.S. naval blockade.

The transcript also shows that the participants did not have completely accurate information on the military situation, despite the presence of McNamara and Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Kennedy, for example, thought the 15 liquid-fueled Jupiter missiles in Turkey were owned by the United States and "under American control, not Turkish control."

McNamara had to tell him "they belong to Turkey and are manned by Turks, but the warheads are in U.S. custody."

The secret tape recorder was turned on and off by someone at the meetings, and thus some conversations were not recorded, according to an official who was present and has reviewed the tape.