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The 13 Days Of Crisis

By Robert F. Kennedy

'That kind of pressure does strange things to a human being, even to brilliant, self-confident, mature, experienced men. For some it brings out characteristics and strengths that perhaps even they never knew they had, and for others the pressure is too overwhelming.'

ON TUESDAY MORNING, Oct. 16, 1962, shortly after 9 o'clock, President Kennedy called and asked me to come to the White House. He said only that we were facing great trouble. Shortly afterward, in his office, he told me that a U-2 had just finished a photographic mission and that the intelligence community had become convinced that Russia was placing missiles and atomic weapons in Cuba.

That was the beginning of the Cuban missile crisis—a confrontation between the two giant atomic nations, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., which brought the world to the abyss of nuclear destruction and the end of mankind. From that moment in President Kennedy's office until Sunday morning, Oct. 28, that was my life—and for Americans and Russians, for the whole world, it was their life, as well.

At 11:45 that same morning, in the Cabinet Room, a formal presentation was made by the Central Intelligence Agency to a number of high officials of the Government. Photographs were shown to us. Experts arrived with their charts and their pointers and told us that if we looked carefully, we could see there was a missile base being constructed in a field near San Cristobal, Cuba.

I, for one, had to take their word for it. I examined the pictures carefully and what I saw appeared to be no more than the clearing of a field for a farm or the basement of a house. I was relieved to hear later that this was the same reaction of virtually everyone at the meeting, including President Kennedy. Even a few days later, when more work had taken place on the site, he remarked that it looked like a football field.

The dominant feeling at the meeting was stunned surprise. No one had expected or anticipated that the Russians would deploy surface-to-surface ballistic missiles in Cuba.

Meeting With Dobrynin

I THOUGHT BACK to my meeting with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin in my office some weeks before. He came to tell me that the Russians were prepared to sign an atmospheric test ban treaty if we could make certain agreements on underground testing.

I told him we were deeply concerned within the Administration about the amount of military equipment being sent to Cuba. There was some evidence that, in addition to the surface-to-air-missile (SAM) sites that were being erected, the Russians, under the guise of a fishing village, were constructing a large naval shipyard and a base for submarines. This was all being watched carefully—through agents within Cuba who were reporting the military buildup in a limited but frequently important way, through the questioning of refugees who were screened and processed as they arrived in Florida and through U-2 flights.

Ambassador Dobrynin told me I should not be concerned, for he was instructed by Soviet Chairman Nikita S. Khrushchev to assure President Kennedy that there would be no ground-to-ground missiles or offensive weapons placed in Cuba. Further, he said, I could assure the President that this military buildup was not of any significance and that Khrushchev would do nothing to disrupt the relationship of our two countries during this period prior to the election. Chairman Khrushchev, he said, liked President Kennedy and did not wish to embarrass him.

I told him we were watching the buildup carefully and that he should know it would be of the gravest consequence if the Soviet Union placed missiles in Cuba. That would never happen, he assured me, and left.

I reported the conversation to President Kennedy, Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, relayed my own skepticism and suggested that it might be advisable to issue a statement making it unequivocally clear that the United States would not tolerate the introduction of offensive surface-to-surface missiles, or offensive weapons of any kind, into Cuba.

That same afternoon, Sept. 4, from a draft prepared by Nicholas Katzenbach, the Deputy Attorney General, and myself, the President issued exactly this kind of warning and pointed out the serious consequences that would result from such a step.

This is the first of three installments from a manuscript dictated by the late Sen. Kennedy in the fall of 1967 on the basis of his personal diaries and recollections of the Cuban missile crisis of 1962. Former Presidential Counsel Theodore C. Sorensen, who "made a number of small corrections" in the manuscript "for the sake of clarity, structure and grammar," says that the Senator intended to add "a discussion of the basic ethical question involved: What, if any, circumstances or justification gives this government or any government the moral right to bring its people and possibly all people under the shadow of nuclear destruction?"

Moscow's Public Stance

A WEEK LATER, on Sept. 11, Moscow disclaimed publicly any intention of taking such action and stated that there was no need for nuclear missiles to be transferred to any country outside the Soviet Union, including Cuba.

During this same period of time, an important official in the Soviet Embassy, returning from Moscow, brought me a personal message from Khrushchev to President Kennedy, stating that he wanted the President to be assured that under no circumstances would surface-to-surface missiles be sent to Cuba.

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Now, as the representatives of the CIA explained the U-2 photographs that morning, Tuesday, Oct. 16, we realized that it had all been lies, one gigantic fabric of lies. Thus the dominant feeling was one of shocked incredulity. We had been deceived by Khrushchev, but we had also fooled ourselves. No official with the Government had ever suggested to President Kennedy that the Russian buildup in Cuba would include missiles.

We heard later, in a postmortem study, that reports had come from agents within Cuba indicating the presence of missiles in September of 1962. Most of the reports were false; some were the result of confusion by untrained observers between surface-to-air missiles and surface-to-surface missiles.

Several reports, however, turned out to be accurate—one from a former employe at the Hilton Hotel in Havana, who believed a missile installation was being constructed near San Cristobal, and another from someone who overheard Premier Fidel Castro's pilot talking in a boastful and intoxicated way one evening about the nuclear missiles that were going to be furnished Cuba by Russia.

But before these reports were given substance, they had to be checked and rechecked. They were not even considered substantial enough to pass on to the President or other high officials within the Government. In retrospect, this was perhaps a mistake. But the same postmortem study also stated that there was no action the United States could have taken before the time we actually did act, on the grounds that even the films available on Oct. 16 would not have been substantial enough to convince the governments and peoples of the world of the presence of offensive missiles in Cuba. Certainly, unsubstantiated refugee reports would not have been sufficient.

The important fact, of course, is that the missiles were uncovered and the information was made available to the Government and the people before the missiles became operative and in time for the United States to act.

Men Under Pressure

THE SAME GROUP that met that first morning in the Cabinet Room met almost continuously through the next 12 days and almost daily for some six weeks thereafter. Others in the group, which was later to be called the "ExComm" (the Executive Committee of the National Security Council), included Secretary of State Dean Rusk; Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara; Director of the Central Intelligence Agency John McCone; Secretary of the Treasury Douglas Dillon; President Kennedy's adviser on national security affairs, McGeorge Bundy; Presidential Counsel Theodore C. Sorensen; Under Secretary of State George Ball; Deputy Under Secretary of State U. Alexis Johnson; Gen. Maxwell Taylor, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Edward Martin, Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America; originally, Charles Bohlen, who, after the first day, left to become Ambassador to France and was succeeded by Llewelyn Thompson as the adviser on Russian affairs; Roswell Gilpatric, Deputy Secretary of Defense; Paul Nitze, Assistant Secretary of Defense, and, intermittently at various meetings, Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson; Adlai Stevenson, Ambassador to the United Nations; Kenneth O'Donnell, special assistant to the President, and Donald Wilson, who was deputy director of the United States Information Agency.

They were men of the highest intelligence, industrious, courageous and dedicated to their country's well-being. It is no reflection on them that none was consistent in his opinion from the very beginning to the very end. That kind of open, unfettered mind was essential. For some there were only small changes, perhaps varieties of a single idea. For others there were continuous changes of opinion each day; some, because of the pressure of events, even appeared to lose their judgment and stability.

Blockade vs. Air Strike

THE GENERAL FEELING in the beginning was that some form of action was required. There were those, although they were a small minority, who felt the missiles did not alter the balance of power and therefore necessitated no action. Most felt, at that stage, that an air strike against the missile sites could be the only course. Listening to the proposals, I passed a note to the President: "I now know how Tojo felt when he was planning Pearl Harbor."

After the meeting in the Cabinet Room, I walked back to the Mansion with the President. It would be difficult; the stakes were high—of the highest and most substantial kind—but he knew he would have to act. The U.S. could not accept what the Russians had done.

To keep the discussions from being inhibited and because he did not want to arouse attention, he decided not to attend all the meetings of our committee. This was wise. Personalities change when the President is present, and frequently even strong men make recommendations on the basis of what they believe the President wishes to hear. He instructed our group to come forward with recommendations for one course or possibly several alternative courses of action.

It was during the afternoon and evening of that first day, Tuesday, that we began to discuss the idea of a quarantine or blockade. Secretary McNamara, by Wednesday, became the blockade's strongest advocate. He argued that it was limited pressure, which could be increased as the circumstances warranted. Further, it was dramatic and forceful pressure, which would be understood yet, most importantly, still leave us in control of events.

Later he reinforced his position by reporting that a surprise air strike against the missile bases alone—a surgical air strike, as it came to be called—was militarily impractical in the view of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; that any such military action would have to include all military installations in Cuba, eventually leading to an invasion. Perhaps we would come to that, he argued. "But let's not start with that course."

Those who argued for the military strike pointed out that a blockade would not in fact remove the missiles and would not even stop the work from going ahead on the missile sites themselves. The missiles were already in Cuba, and all we would be doing with a blockade would be "closing the door after the horse had left the barn."

Their most forceful argument was that our installation of a blockade around Cuba invited the Russians to do the same to Berlin. If we demanded the removal of missiles from Cuba as the price for lifting our blockade, they would demand the removal of missiles surrounding the Soviet Union as the reciprocal act.

And so we argued, and so we disagreed—all dedicated, intelligent men, disagreeing and fighting about the future of their country, and of mankind. Meanwhile, time was slowly running out.

An examination of photography taken on Wednesday, the 17th of October, showed several other installations, with at least 16 and possibly 32 missiles of over 1000-mile range. Our military experts advised that these missiles could be in operation within a week.

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The next day, Thursday, estimates by our intelligence community placed in Cuba missiles with an atomic-warhead potential of about one-half the current ICBM capacity of the entire Soviet Union. The photography having indicated that the missiles were being directed at certain American cities, the estimate was that within a few minutes of their being fired 80 million Americans would be dead.

LeMay Urged Attack

THE MEMBERS of the Joint Chiefs of Staff were unanimous in calling immediate military action. They forcefully presented their view that the blockade would not be effective. Gen. Curtis LeMay, Air Force chief of staff, argued strongly with the President that a military attack was essential. When the President questioned what the response of the Russians might be, Gen. LeMay assured him there would be no reaction.

President Kennedy was skeptical. "They no more than we can let these things go by without doing something. They can't, after all their statements, permit us to take out their missiles, kill a lot of Russians and then do nothing. If they don't take action in Cuba, they certainly will in Berlin."

The President went on to say that he recognized the validity of the arguments made by the Joint Chiefs and the likelihood, if we did nothing, that the Russians would move on Berlin and in other areas of the world, feeling the United States was completely impotent. Then it would be too late to do anything in Cuba, for by that time all their missiles would be operational.

Gen. David M. Shoup, commandant of the Marine Corps, summed up everyone's feelings: "You are in a pretty bad fix, Mr. President." The President answered quickly, "You are in it with me." Everyone laughed and, with no final decision, the meeting adjourned.

Later, Secretary McNamara, although he told the President he disagreed with the Joint Chiefs and favored a blockade rather than an attack, informed him that the necessary planes, men and ammunition were being deployed and that we could be ready to move with the necessary air bombardments on Tuesday, Oct. 23, if that was to be the decision. The plans called for an initial attack, consisting of 500 sorties, striking all military targets, including the missile sites, air fields, ports and gun emplacements.

I supported McNamara's position in favor of a blockade. This was not from a deep conviction that it would be a successful course of action, but a feeling that it had more flexibility and fewer liabilities than a military attack. Most importantly, like others, I could not accept the idea that the United States would rain bombs on Cuba, killing thousands and thousands of civilians in a surprise attack.

Former Secretary of State Dean Acheson began attending our meetings, and he was strongly in favor of an air attack. He said that the President of the United States had the responsiblity for the security of the people of the United States and of the whole free world; that it was his obligation to take the only action which could protect that security and that that meant destroying the missiles.

With some trepidation, I argued that, whatever validity the military and political arguments were for an attack in preference to a blockade, America's traditions and history would not permit such a course of action. Whatever military reasons he and others could marshal, they were nevertheless, in the last analysis, advocating a surprise attack by a very large nation against a very small one. This, I said, could not be undertaken by the United States if we were to maintain our moral position at home and around the globe.

We spent more time on this moral question during the first five days than on any other single matter. At various times, it was proposed that we send a letter to Khrushchev 24 hours before the bombardment was to begin, that we send a letter to Castro, that leaflets and pamphlets listing the targets be dropped over Cuba before the attack—all these ideas and more were abandoned for military or other reasons. We struggled and fought with one another and with our consciences, for it was a question that deeply troubled us all.

Gromyko's Reassurance

IN THE MIDST of all these discussions, Andrei Gromyko came to see the President. It was an appointment made long before the missiles were uncovered, and the President felt it would be awkward to cancel it. He debated whether he should confront the Soviet Foreign Minister with our knowledge of the missiles' presence and finally decided that, as he had not yet determined a final course of action and the disclosure of our knowledge might give the Russians the initiative, he would simply listen to Gromyko.

They met late Wednesday afternoon in the President's office in the White House. Gromyko began the conversation by saying the United States should stop threatening Cuba. All Cuba wanted was peaceful coexistence, he said; she was not interested in exporting her system to other Latin American countries. Cuba, like the Soviet Union, wanted only peace. Premier Khrushchev had instructed him, Gromyko said, to tell President Kennedy that the only assistance being furnished Cuba was for agriculture and land development, so the people could feed themselves, plus a small amount of defensive arms. In view of all the publicity in the American press, he said, he wanted to emphasize that the Soviet Union would never become involved in the furnishing of offensive weapons to Cuba.

President Kennedy listened, astonished, but also with some admiration for the boldness of Gromyko's position. Firmly, but with great restraint considering the provocation, he told Gromyko that it was not the United States which was formenting discord, but the Soviet Union. The U.S.S.R.'s supplying of arms to Cuba was having a profound effect on the people of the United States and was a source of great concern to him. Because of the personal assurances he had received from Khrushchev, he had been taking the public position that no action was required against Cuba, and yet the situation was becoming steadily more dangerous.

Gromyko repeated that the sole objective of the U.S.S.R. was to "give bread to Cuba in order to prevent hunger in that country." As far as arms were concerned, the Soviet Union had simply sent some specialists to train Cubans to handle certain kinds of armament, which were only "defensive." He then said he wished to emphasize the word "defensive" and that none of these weapons could ever constitute a threat to the United States.

The President replied that there should be no misunderstanding of the position of the United States—that that position had been made clear to the Soviet Union in meetings between the Attorney General and Ambassador Dobrynin and in his own public statements. To avoid any misunderstanding, he read aloud his statement of Sept. 4, which pointed out the serious consequences that would arise if the Soviet Union placed missiles or offensive weapons within Cuba.

Gromyko assured him this would never be done, that the United States should not be concerned. After touching briefly on some other matters, he said goodby.

I came by shortly after Gromyko left the White House. The President of the United States, it can be said, was displeased with the spokesman of the Soviet Union.

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From Agreement to Discord

BY THURSDAY NIGHT, there was a majority opinion in our group for a blockade. Our committee went from the State Department to the White House around 9:15 that night. In order to avoid the suspicion that would have ensued from the presence of a long line of limousines, we all went in my car—John McCone, Maxwell Taylor, the driver and myself all crowded together in the front seat, and six others sitting in back.

We explained our recommendations to the President. At the beginning, the meeting seemed to proceed in an orderly and satisfactory way. However, as people talked, as the President raised probing questions, minds and opinions began to change again, and not only on small points. For some, it was from one extreme to another—supporting an air attack at the beginning of the meeting and by the time we left the White House, supporting no action at all.

The President, not at all satisfied, sent us back to our deliberations. Because any other step would arouse suspicion, he returned to his regular schedule and his campaign speaking engagements.

The next morning, at our meeting at the State Department, there were sharp disagreements again. The strain and the hours without sleep were beginning to take their toll. However, even many years later, those human weaknesses—impatience, fits of anger—are understandable.

Each one of us was being asked to make a recommendation which would affect the future of all mankind, a recommendation which, if wrong and if accepted, could mean the destruction of the human race. That kind of pressure does strange things to a human being, even to brilliant, self-confident, mature, experienced men. For some it brings out characteristics and strengths that perhaps even they never knew they had, and for others the pressure is too overwhelming.

Finally, we agreed on a procedure by which we felt we could give some intelligent recommendations to the President. We split into groups to write up our respective recommendations. In the early afternoon, we exchanged papers, each group dissected and criticized the other, and then the papers were returned to the original group to develop further answers. Gradually from all this came the outline of definitive plans.

Rusk Frequently Absent

DURING ALL these deliberations, we all spoke as equals. There was no rank and, in fact, we did not even have a chairman. Dean Rusk—who, as Secretary of State, might have assumed that position—had other duties during this period of time and frequently could not attend our meetings. As a result, the conversations were completely uninhibited and unrestricted. It was a tremendously advantageous procedure that does not frequently occur within the Executive Branch of the Government, where rank is often so important.

We met all day Friday and Friday night. Then again early Saturday morning we were back at the State Department. I talked to the President several times on Friday. He was hoping to be able to meet with us early enough to decide on a course of action and then broadcast it to the Nation Sunday night. Saturday morning at 10 o'clock I called him at the Blackstone Hotel in Chicago and told him we were ready to meet with him. He canceled his trip and returned to Washington.

As he was returning to Washington, our Armed Forces across the world were put on alert. Telephoning from our meeting in the State Department, Secretary McNamara ordered four tactical air squadrons placed at readiness for an air strike in case the President decided to accept that recommendation.

The President arrived back at the White House at 1:40 p.m. and went for a swim. At 2:30 we walked up to the Oval Room. The meeting went on until ten minutes after 5.

Convened as a formal meeting of the National Security Council, it was a larger group of people who met, some of whom had not participated in the deliberations up to that time. Bob McNamara presented the arguments for the blockade; others presented the arguments for the military attack.

The discussion, for the most part, was able and organized, although, like all meetings of this kind, certain statements were made as accepted trusims which I, at least, thought were of questionable validity. One member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, for example, argued that we could use nuclear weapons, on the basis that our adversaries would use theirs against us in an attack. I thought, as I listened, of the many times that I had heard the military take positions which, if wrong, had the advantage that no one would be around at the end to know.

The President Decides

THE PRESIDENT made his decision that afternoon in favor of the blockade. There was one final meeting the next morning, with Gen. Walter C. Sweeney Jr., commander in chief of the Tactical Air Command, who told the President that even a major surprise air attack could not be certain of destroying all the missile sites and nuclear weapons in Cuba. That ended the small, lingering doubt that might still have remained in his mind. It had worried him that a bloackade would not remove the missiles—now it was clear that an attack could not accomplish that task completely, either.

Adlai Stevenson had come from New York to attend the meeting Saturday afternoon, as he had attended several of the Ex-Comm meetings. He had always been dubious about the air strike, but at the Saturday meeting he strongly advocated what he had only tentatively suggested to me a few days before—namely, that we make it clear to the Soviet Union that if it withdrew its missiles from Cuba, we would be willing to withdraw our missiles from Turkey and Italy and give up our naval base at Guantanamo Bay.

There was an extremely strong reaction from some of the participants to his suggestion, and several sharp exchanges followed. The President, although he rejected Stevenson's suggestion, pointed out that he had for a long period held reservations about the value of Jupiter missiles in Turkey and Italy and some time ago had asked the State Department to conduct negotiations for their removal; but now, he said, was not the appropriate time to suggest this action, and we could not abandon Guantanamo Bay under threat from the Russians.

Stevenson has since been criticized publicly for the position he took at this meeting. I think it should be emphasized that he was presenting a point of view from a different perspective than the others, one which was therefore important for the President to consider. Although I disagreed strongly with his recommendations, I thought he was courageous to make them and I might add they made as much sense as some others considered during that period of time.

The President's speech was now scheduled for Monday evening. Under the direction of George Ball, Alex Johnson and Ed Martin, a detailed hour-to-hour program was arranged, to inform our allies, prepare for a meeting of the OAS, inform the ambassadors stationed in Washington and prepare for them and others, in written form, the legal justification on which our action was predicated.

More and more Government officials were brought into the discussions, and finally word began to seep through to the press that a serious crisis was imminent. Through the personal intervention of the President with several

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newspapers, the only stories written Monday morning were reports that a major speech was to be given by the President and that the country faced a serious crisis.

Support From Allies

THE DIPLOMATIC EFFORT was of great significance. We were able to establish a firm legal foundation for our action under the OAS Charter, and our position around the world was greatly strengthened when the Organization of American States unanimously supported the recommendation for a quarantine. Thus the Soviet Union and Cuba faced the united action of the whole Western Hemisphere.

Further, with the support of detailed photographs, Dean Acheson—who obliged the President by once again being willing to help—was able quickly to convince Prime Minister Harold Macmillan of Great Britain and French President Charles de Gaulle of the correctness of our response.

Gen. de Gaulle said, "It is exactly what I would have done," adding that it was not necessary to see the photographs as "a great government such as yours does not act without evidence." Chancellor Konrad Adenauer of West Germany voiced his support, as well, and the Soviet Union was prevented from separating the United States from Europe. (John Diefenbaker, Prime Minister of Canada, was the only NATO leader who voiced skepticism and disbelief.)

During this same period, military preparations went forward. Missile crews were placed on maximum alert. Troops were moved into Florida and the southeastern part of the United States. Late Saturday night, the First Armored Division began to move out of Texas into Georgia and five more divisions were placed on alert. The base at Guantanamo Bay was strengthened.

The Navy deployed 180 ships into the Caribbean. The Strategic Air Command was dispersed to civilian landing fields around the country, to lessen its vulnerability in case of attack. The B-52 bomber force was ordered into the air fully loaded with atomic weapons. As one came down to land, another immediately took its place in the air.

An hour before the President's speech, Secretary Rusk called in Ambassador Dobrynin and told him of the speech. The newspapers reported that Dobrynin left the Secretary's office looking considerably shaken.

The President met with the members of the Cabinet and informed them for the first time of the crisis. Then, not long before the broadcast, he met with the leaders of Congress. This was the most difficult meeting. I did not attend, but I know from seeing him afterward that it was a tremendous strain.

Many congressional leaders were sharp in their criticism. They felt that the President should take more forceful action, a military attack or invasion, and that the blockade was far too weak a response. Sen. Richard B. Russell of Georgia said he could not live with himself if he did not say in the strongest possible terms how important it was that we act with greater strength than the President was contemplating.

Sen. J. William Fulbright of Arkansas also strongly advised military action rather than such a weak step as the blockade. Others said they were skeptical but would remain publicly silent only because it was such a dangerous hour for the country.

The President, after listening to the frequently emotional criticism, explained that he would take whatever steps were necessary to protect the security of the United States but that he did not feel greater military action was warranted initially. Because it was possible that the matter could be resolved without a devastating war, he had decided on the course he had outlined. Perhaps in the end, he said, direct military action would be necessary, but that course should not be followed lightly. In the meantime, he assured them, he had taken measures to prepare our military forces and place them in a position to move.

He was upset by the time the meeting ended. When we discussed it later he was more philosophical, pointing out that the congressional leaders' reaction to what we should do, although more militant than his, was much the same as our first reaction when we first heard about the missiles the previous Tuesday.

At 7 o'clock, he went on television to the Nation to explain the situation in Cuba and the reasons for the quarantine. In his speech, he emphasized that the blockade was the *initial* step. He had ordered the Pentagon to make all the preparations necessary for further military action.

Secretary McNamara, in a confidential report, had listed the requirements: 250,000 men, 2000 air sorties against the various targets in Cuba and 90,000 Marines and Airborne in the invasion force. One estimate of American casualties put the expected figure over 25,000.

A Temporarily Light Mood

THE NEXT DAY, Tuesday, our group met with the President at 10 in the morning. There was a certain spirit of lightness—not gaiety certainly, but a feeling of relaxation, perhaps. We had taken the first step, it wasn't so bad and we were still alive.

John McCone reported to our committee that as yet there had been no general alert of the Soviet forces in Cuba or around the globe. In Cuba, the Russians were beginning to camouflage the missile sites. It was never clear why they waited until that late date to do so.

The President ordered preparations to proceed for a possible blockade of Berlin. We also discussed in detail what would be done if a U-2 plane were to be shot down, agreeing that—after obtaining specific permission from the President—bomber and fighter planes would destroy a surface-to-air-missile site. Secretary McNamara said that such an attack could take place within two hours after notification of the firing on one of our planes.

By this time, the relaxed, lighter mood had completely disappeared. It had taken only a few minutes.

At the end of the meeting, the President pointed out that an attack on one of their installations might very well bring an attack against our airfields. He asked for a report from the military as to whether our own planes had been dispersed. When it was reported to him that our photography showed that the Russians and Cubans had inexplicably lined up their planes wingtip to wingtip on Cuban airfields, making them perfect targets, he requested Gen. Taylor to have a U-2 fly a photographic mission over our fields in Florida. "It would be interesting if we have done the same thing," he remarked. We had. He examined the pictures the next day and ordered the Air Force to disperse our planes.

Rules of Quarantine

WE CAME BACK about 6 o'clock that evening. The OAS had announced its support, and the President prepared the proclamation which would put the quarantine into effect at 10 o'clock the next morning.

During the course of this meeting, we learned that an extraordinary number of coded messages had been sent to all the Russian ships on their way to Cuba. What they said we did not know then, nor do we know now, but it was clear that the ships as of that moment were still straight on course.

The President composed a letter to Khrushchev asking him to observe the quarantine legally established by a vote of the OAS, making it clear that

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the United States did not wish to fire on any ships of the Soviet Union and adding at the end: "I am concerned that we both show prudence and do nothing to allow events to make the situation more difficult to control than it is."

We then discussed in detail the rules that were to be given to the Navy for intercepting a merchant vessel in the quarantine zone. To avoid a major military confrontation if a vessel refused to stop, the Navy was to shoot at its rudders and propellers, disabling the vessel but hopefully avoiding any loss of life or the sinking of the ship.

The President then expressed concern about the boarding of these vessels if the Russians decided to resist. We could anticipate a rough, fierce fight and many casualties, he said. Secretary McNamara felt the vessel might not have to be boarded but would, within a reasonably short period of time, have to be towed into Jacksonville or Charleston.

"What would you do then," the President said, "if we go through all of this effort and then find out there's baby food on it?"

'The Guns of August'

OUR PROBLEMS for that day were hardly over. John McCone reported that Russian submarines were beginning to move into the Caribbean. One had refueled the day before in the Azores and was headed now toward Cuba. The President ordered the Navy to give the highest priority to tracking the submarines and to put into effect the greatest possible safety measures to protect our own aircraft carriers and other vessels.

After the meeting, the President, Ted Sorensen, Kenny O'Donnell and I sat in his office and talked. "The great danger and risk in all of this," he said, "is a miscalculation—a mistake in judgment." A short time before, he had read Barbara Tuchman's book "The Guns of August," and he talked about the miscalculations of the Germans, the Russians, the Austrians, the French and the British. They somehow seemed to tumble into war, he said, through stupidity, individual idiosyncrasies, misunderstandings and personal complexes of inferiority and grandeur.

Neither side wanted war over Cuba, we agreed, but it was possible that either side could take a step that—for reasons of "security" or "pride" or "face"—would require a response by the other side, which, in turn, for the same reasons of security, pride or face, would bring about a counter-response and eventually an escalation into armed conflict. That was what he wanted to avoid.

He did not want anyone to be able to write, at a later date, a book on "The Missiles of October" and say that the U.S. had not done all it could to preserve the peace. We were not going to misjudge, or miscalculate, or challenge the other side needlessly or precipitately push our adversaries into a course of action that was not intended or anticipated.

Afterward, the President and I talked for a little while alone. He suggested I might visit Ambassador Dobrynin and personally relate to him the serious implications of the Russians' duplicity and the crisis they had created through the presence of their missiles within Cuba.

I called Dobrynin and made arrangements to see him at 9:30 that same Tuesday night. I met with him in his office on the third floor of the Russian Embassy. I reviewed with him the circumstances of the past six weeks which had brought about this confrontation. I pointed out to him that, when I had met with him in early September, he had told me that the Russians had not placed any long-range missiles in Cuba and had no intentions of doing so in the future.

Dobrynin's answer was that he told me there were no missiles in Cuba, that this was what Khrushchev had said and, as far as he knew, there were still no missiles in Cuba. He then asked me why President Kennedy had not told Gromyko the facts when he had seen him the previous Thursday.

I replied by saying there was nothing the President could tell Gromyko that Gromyko didn't already know—and, after all, why didn't Gromyko tell the President? In fact, the President was shocked that Gromyko's statements even at that late date were so misleading. Dobrynin was extremely concerned. As I left, I asked him if the Soviet ships were going to go through to Cuba. He replied that that had been their instructions and he knew of no changes.

I left the Russian Embassy around 10:15 p.m. and went back to the White House. I found the President meeting Ambassador David Ormsby-Gore of Great Britain, an old friend whom he trusted implicitly. I related the conversation to both of them. The President talked about the possibility of arranging an immediate summit with Khrushchev but finally dismissed the idea, concluding that such a meeting would be useless until Khrushchev first accepted, as a result of our deeds as well as our statements, the U.S. determination in this matter. Before a summit took place, and it should, the President wanted to have some cards in his own hands.

The next morning, Wednesday, the quarantine went into effect, and the reports during the early hours told of the Russian ships coming steadily on toward Cuba. I talked with the President for a few moments before we went into our regular meeting. He said, "It looks really mean, doesn't it? But then, really, there was no other choice. If they get this mean on this one in our part o fthe world, what will they do on the next?"

"I just don't think there was any choice," I said, "and not only that, if you hadn't acted, you would have been impeached." The President thought for a moment and said, "That's what I think—I would have been impeached."

This Wednesday morning meeting, along with that of the following Saturday, Oct. 27, seemed the most trying, the most difficult and the most filled with tension. The Russian ships were proceeding, they were nearing the 500-mile barrier and we either had to intercept them or announce we were withdrawing.

The U-2s and low-flying planes had returned the previous day with their film, and through the evening it was analyzed—by now in such volume that the film alone was more than 125 miles long and 25 miles wide. The results were presented to us at the meeting.

The launching pads, the missiles, the concrete boxes, the nuclear storage bunkers, all the components were there, by now clearly defined and obvious. Comparisons with the pictures of a few days earlier made clear that the work on those sites was proceeding and that within a few days several of the launching pads would be ready for war.

It was now a few minutes after 10 o'clock. Secretary McNamara announced that two Russian ships, the Gagarin and the Komiles, were within a few miles of our quarantine barrier. The interception of both ships would probably be before noon Washington time.

Then came the disturbing Navy report that a Russian submarine had moved into position between the two ships.

It had originally been planned to have a cruiser make the first interception but, because of the increased danger, it was decided in the past few hours to send in an aircraft carrier supported by helicopters, carrying antisubmarine equipment, hovering overhead. The carrier Essex was to signal the submarine by sonar to surface and identify itself. If it refused, said Secretary McNamara, depth charges with a small explosive would be used until the submarine surfaced.

Continued

Some Personal Thoughts

I THINK these few minutes were the time of gravest concern for the President. Was the world on the brink of a holocaust? Was it our error? A mistake? Was there something further that should have been done? Or not done?

His hand went up to his face and covered his mouth. He opened and closed his fist. His face seemed drawn, his eyes pained, almost gray. We stared at each other across the table. For a few fleeting seconds, it was almost as though no one else was there and he was no longer the President.

Inexplicably, I thought of when he was ill and almost died; when he lost his child; when we learned that our oldest brother had been killed; of personal times of strain and hurt. The voices droned on, but I didn't seem to hear anything until I heard the President say: "Isn't there some way we can avoid having our first exchange with a Russian submarine—almost anything but that?"

"No, there's too much danger to our ships. There is no alternative," said McNamara. "Our commanders have been instructed to avoid hostilities if at all possible, but this is what we must be prepared for, and this is what we must expect."

We had come to the time of final decision. "We must expect that they will close down Berlin—make the final preparations for that," the President said. I felt we were on the edge of a precipice with no way off.

One thousand miles away, in the vast expanse of the Atlantic Ocean, the final decisions were going to be made in the next few minutes. President Kennedy had initiated the course of events, but he no longer had control over them. He would have to wait—we would have to wait.

'Dead in the Water'

THEN IT WAS 10:25—a messenger brought in a note to John McCone. "Mr. President, we have a preliminary report which seems to indicate that some of the Russian ships have stopped dead in the water." A short time later, the report came that the 20 Russian ships closest to the barrier had stopped, and were dead in the water or had turned around.

"So no ships will be stopped or intercepted," said the President. I said we should make sure the Navy knew nothing was to be done, that no ships were to be interfered with. Orders would go out to the Navy immediately.

"If the ships have orders to turn around, we want to give them every opportunity to do so. Get in direct touch with the Essex and tell them not to do anything, but give the Russian vessels an opportunity to turn back. We must move quickly because the time is expiring," said the President.