

THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS:

A POLITICAL ANALYSIS

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Except for the correction of some typographical errors, this “digitally remastered” version is identical to the original seminar paper. (It does incorporate small handwritten changes made to the typed paper before it was turned in.) The paper was written for Professor Glenn H. Snyder, who was visiting Berkeley during the 1963-64 academic year. Professor Snyder had taught previously at the University of Denver, moved to SUNY Buffalo after leaving Berkeley, and then concluded his career at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where is now Professor Emeritus.

I. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the Cuban missile crisis in terms of bargaining tactics and political power generally. An analysis of conflict, I think must be conducted from the point of view of one or other or both participants. The conflict cannot really be viewed from “above looking down,” unless one’s purpose is merely to pass judgment on the merits of the case, or to conclude that neither side acts rationally, rather than to understand how the conflict originated, develops, and is resolved. It is, of course, the essential characteristic of a conflict that there are two different vantage points, both at “ground level.” Given this necessity, the present analysis must be somewhat one-sided. First, only the behavior of the United States is relatively well-known and documented and thus analyzable in any detail. Second, the fact is that the crisis itself was rather one-sided. The United States took the initiative and held it until its objective was achieved. Thus a study of the crisis is primarily a study of the strategy and tactics by which the United States accomplished its objective.

It is not the primary purpose of this paper to tell a story. Therefore events are not always discussed in chronological order and they may be mentioned without full explanation. For this reason, a fairly complete chronological outline has been included separately. Also rather extensive use has been made of footnotes to present brief excerpts from important documents and to provide other supplementary information, as well as for the usual citations.

A few words should be said on the range of the study — or rather the limits of the range. The study does not cover the history of Cuban-American relations or any inequities in those relations. It does not consider the period since the crisis and the consequences the crisis may have had for world politics. It does not cover the immediate aftermath of the crisis — the actual removal of the missiles and the verification of that removal. Little is said about the work done during the crisis by the Office of the Secretary-General and by others who were not direct participants. A close analysis of the messages exchanged by the President and Premier would be a worthwhile paper in itself. Finally, I do not pass moral judgment on either of the participants or the righteousness of their causes. I will offer only a political judgment and say that Mr. Kennedy's performance was an admirably competent exercise in power politics.

II. Chronology

The first column lists events as they became known to the public. The second lists events as they became known to the Administration. The third lists Soviet activities regarding missiles in Cuba.¹

Phase One

July - Raul Castro visits July Soviet Union

July – Khrushchev says Berlin problem can be deferred until after U.S. elections (Nov.6).

August – Che Guevara visits Soviet Union

Later August onwards – rumors of missiles in Cuba, Republican and other critics demand blockade, etc.

Aug. 29 – President's news conference, rejects Sen. Capehart's call for blockade but says "We are watching Cuba with the closest attention," says no information on ground to-air missiles in Cuba.

June (?) – Preliminary Soviet decision to put strategic weapons in Cuba

July – Large Soviet military buildup, including ground-to-air (air defense) missiles begins in Cuba.

August – Refugee reports to U.S. intelligence of secret Soviet ship unloadings in Cuba.

Later August – Refugee reports of missile installations.

Aug. 29 – Regular high-altitude reconnaissance by U-2's begins, revealing ground-to-air missile installations.

Aug. 31 – U.S. U-2 accidentally overflies Sakhalin Island, Soviet Union.

¹ This is not a definitive chronology. It does not make full use of the public record, and the public record itself is often incomplete and inconsistent. It may include some outright errors, but I believe it is generally adequate for the purpose of the paper. It is based on the *New York Times* and the other sources listed in the bibliography.

Sept. 1 – Cuban-Soviet treaty announced. Cuba to receive arms “to resist the imperialist threats.”

Sept. 4 – President's news conference, acknowledges “defensive” ground-to-air missiles in Cuba but says no “offensive” ground-to-ground missiles and “no significant offensive capability.” “Were it to be otherwise, the gravest issues would arise.” Soviet Union protests U-2 overflight, U.S. apologizes.

Sept. 9 – Nationalist Chinese U-2 shot down over Communist China.

Sept. 11 – *Tass* communique: all arms to Cuba “designed exclusively for defensive purposes.” S.U. has no need to shift its weapons “for a retaliatory blow, to any other country, for instance Cuba.” Pledges support for Cuba in case of attack

Sept. 13 – President's news conference, hits “loose talk” on intervention in Cuba, but repeats warning: “if Cuba becomes an offensive military base of significant capacity, then the U.S. will do whatever must be done to protect its security.”

Early September – U-2 reconnaissance flight over San Cristobal, no evidence of missile construction. (Last flight over this area until Oct. 14.)

Early September – Strategic missiles begin arriving in Cuba

Sept. 9 – All U-2's temporarily grounded as a result of the two recent incidents.

Mid-September – Construction begins at some strategic missile sites in Cuba.

Sept. 15 – *Isvestia* says Soviet statement had a “sobering effect” on the U.S.

Sept. 24 – Law to give President authority to call up 150,000 reserves.

Sept 27 – Brezhnev says any move against Cuba would mean war.

Oct. 6 – LBJ: stopping a Russian ship is “an act of war.”

Oct. 13 – President campaigns in Indiana, attacks Sen. Capehart's call for blockade.

Sept. 15 – Ban on U-2 flights lifted

Sept. 17 – U-2 overflight of Cuba.

Sept. 26 and 29 – U-2 overflights of Cuba, Soviet bombers discovered, possibility of MRBM regarded as serious.

Oct. 3 – Decision to overfly San Cristobal again, but weather problems intervene for the time being.

Oct. 5 – U-2 overflight of Cuba.

Oct. 13 – Washington notes cautious international behavior on the part of Cuba.

Oct. 14 – Photographs taken over San Cristobal (16 more overflights of Cuba by Oct 22).

Phase Two

Oct. 15 – Photographs evaluated, missile activity discovered, top officials informed.

Oct. 16 – President informed, NSC Excom constituted, Khrushchev tells Amb. Kohler that Cuban weapons are not significant.

Early October – Construction begins at a majority of strategic missile sites

Oct. 17 – President campaigns in Connecticut, Khrushchev reported coming to U.S. later in year to discuss Berlin.

Oct. 17 – Two more MRBM sites discovered, IRBM activity confirmed.

Oct. 18 – Kennedy-Gromyko meeting, Caribbean naval maneuvers announced.

Oct. 19 – President goes to Midwest to campaign.

Oct. 19 – Basic decisions made, Oct. 22 set as disclosure day, military preparations begin.

Oct. 20 – President has "cold," returns to Washington; Johnson returns from Hawaii; Rusk cancels speech; JCS asked to remain in Washington over the weekend.

Oct. 21 – "Air of crisis" reported in Washington, DOD says it has no information on offensive weapons in Cuba, says U.S. military activity unconnected with Cuba.

Oct. 21 – Secrecy collapsing, final NSC orders made.

Oct. 22 – Noon: speech announced; 7 pm: President's speech

Oct. 22 - Afternoon: allies informed; 5 pm: Congressional leaders informed; Amb. Dobrynin informed by Rusk; friendly ambassadors briefed; 8 pm: neutral ambassadors briefed.

Oct. 22 – Nine missiles sites operational or under construction, eighteen Soviet dry cargo ships en route to Cuba.

Phase Three

October 23 (Tuesday)

OAS meets , unanimously approves all measures “including the use of armed force” to remove missiles.

Blockade proclamation signed.

Low-level reconnaissance of Cuba begins.

Relatively cautious Soviet statement calls U.S. action a “virtual blockade” and an act of “piracy,” in effect denies missiles, calls for removal of all foreign bases.

U.S. submits draft resolution in Security Council implicitly approving quarantine, calling for immediate removal of missile bases and UN inspection.

Soviet Union submits draft resolution in Security Council, condemning U.S. violation of the Charter, calling for revocation of U.S. decision.

DOD announces 25 Soviet merchant ships on way to Cuba, course unchanged.

Military buildup in Florida continues.

October 24 (Wednesday)

10 am: blockade goes into effect. Some Soviet vessels slow down without changing course. This not announced immediately by U.S.

Max Frankel article in *New York Times* hints at a possible Cuba-Turkey tie-in.

Khrushchev letter to Bertrand Russell, says S.U. will try to prevent war but must defend its rights, calls for summit conference.

Ghana and UAR submit draft resolution in Security Council calling on both parties to refrain from further aggravating the situation and calling on U Thant to do what he can to reach a settlement.

U Thant sends identical messages to Kennedy and Khrushchev calling for voluntary suspension both of arms shipments to Cuba and the quarantine.

Khrushchev tells William Knox, U.S. businessman, that missiles are in Cuba and will be used in necessary and that interception of Soviet ships would mean war.

DOD says some Soviet ships may be veering off course, says blockade will remain in effect until objective obtained.

October 25 (Thursday)

First interception, of Soviet tanker Bucharest, is “ascertained” without boarding that it carries only oil, allowed through quarantine.

Khrushchev letter to U Thant, accepting his proposal.

Kennedy letter to U Thant, politely rejecting his proposal.

U Thant sends message to Khrushchev, asking him to instruct ships on their way to Cuba not to challenge the quarantine, and message to Kennedy, asking him to do everything possible to avoid a direct confrontation with Soviet ships.

Kennedy letter to U Thant, accepting his proposal provided Khrushchev accepts his side of the bargain. Notes that certain ships are still heading toward Cuba.

Stevenson-Zorin exchange in the Security Council. Stevenson displays photographic evidence.

Rep. Hale Boggs says U.S. will destroy missile bases if they are not removed quickly.

DOD announces twelve Soviet ships have veered off course.

October 26 (Friday)

Khrushchev letter to U Thant, accepting his proposal. Soviet vessels not yet in the interception area will stay out for the time being.

Soviet charter ship *Marucla* boarded, then allowed through quarantine.

State Department releases statement calling attention to fact that President's speech described only the “initial” actions the U.S. would take.

White House releases statement saying the “development of ballistic missile sites in Cuba continues at a rapid pace,” Soviets apparently seeking “full operational capability as soon as possible .”

DOD authorizes reporters to describe the buildup of Marines in Florida.

Congressmen talk about “pinpoint bombing.”

Evening papers headline possible invasion of Cuba.

Late evening: President receives private letter from Khrushchev, it is rambling but conciliatory, acknowledges missiles, appears to agree to immediate removal of bases in exchange for a U.S. no-invasion pledge and removal of quarantine. (Text of message never released by either government.) Work begin drafting reply that accepts offer.

October 27 (Saturday)

New Khrushchev message, broadcast by Moscow radio before reaching White House. An apparent step back from previous night's position. Proposes removal from Cuba of "those means which you regard as offensive" in exchange for removal from Turkey of U.S.'s "similar means" and reciprocal no-invasion pledges. Does not suggest willingness to halt construction prior to such an agreement. Assures President that missiles in Cuba are in hands of Soviet officers.

U-2 reconnaissance plane shot down over Cuba.

Castro goes on television, says Cuba will shoot down all U.S. planes intruding on Cuban airspace.

DOD announces reconnaissance flights will continue, says U.S. will bomb anti-aircraft missile sites if another plane is shot at and will provide fighter escorts for reconnaissance planes. Calls up 14,000 air reservists.

U-2, on air-sampling mission over Alaska, accidentally overflies Chukotka Peninsula (eastern Siberia), is told to turn back in open language over radio, in violation of normal procedures.

White House statement notes "inconsistent and conflicting proposals" from S.U. in last 24 hours, announces missile base construction continues at a rapid pace. Repeats position; work must stop, missiles be rendered inoperable, further shipments must cease, all under international verification, before consideration of other proposals. Implicitly rejects any proposal involving the security of nations outside the Western Hemisphere.

Kennedy letter to Khrushchev, accepting his proposal of October 26 and ignoring the morning's letter. Letter published as soon as delivered.

October 28 (Sunday)

All MRBM sites in Cuba become operational. (IRBM sites would have become operational about December 15.)

Moscow radio releases new Khrushchev letter to Kennedy. He fully acknowledges missiles in Cuba, says he has given the order for their dismantling and return to S.U. in return for no-invasion pledge. He agrees to verification of removal of missiles, complains about U-2 violation, implicitly asks for end to overflights of Cuba.

President's statement welcomes Khrushchev's "statesmanlike decision." It is released immediately, broadcast to S.U. by Voice of America.

Kennedy letter to Khrushchev (sent before official receipt of Khrushchev's letter), concludes agreement, regrets U-2 incident, ignores matter of Cuban overflights.

III. Analysis

The crisis can best be analyzed in terms of three phases. The first involves communications and the testing of intentions. The problems the United States had in communicating its intent are discussed. If communications at this point had been clearer, the crisis might have been avoided. In the second phase, communications cease and bargaining does not yet begin. The Soviet Union rushes its missile sites toward completion. The United States prepares for a showdown. At this point, the purpose on each side is to enhance bargaining power for the final phase. The third phase is the open crisis, the week of October 22 to October 28.

Phase One

The Soviet Union's objective in placing strategic weapons in Cuba is not clear. Perhaps its leaders were apprehensive about the claims of substantial strategic superiority that the Administration had been making since the previous fall. If so, they may have regarded the forward basing of shorter range missiles as an appropriate "quick fix," much as the United States had regarded the stationing of IRBM's in Europe at the time of apparent Soviet superiority in intercontinental missiles. Like the European bases, however, those in Cuba would have been vulnerable to and even invite surprise attack. A more ominous possibility is that the Cuban operation was part of a broad political strategy regarding Berlin. In July Premier Khrushchev announced that progress toward settling the Berlin problem could be deferred until after the U.S. election, a position reiterated by Foreign Minister Gromyko in his talk with the President. In October, there was considerable speculation that Premier Khrushchev might be coming to the United States later in the fall. By the late fall, of course, the missiles would have become operational. It is possible that Khrushchev was planning to disclose the existence of the missiles to an unsuspecting United States and at the same time suggest that it would now be in order for the United States to revise its Berlin policy. Whatever their military value, the sudden disclosure of the missiles could have had a great psychological impact. If the United States responded not with concessions on Berlin but with military action against the bases in Cuba, the Soviet Union would have a pretext for moves in Berlin. By this time the Western Alliance might be in such disarray as to make an effective response there impossible. Another possibility is that the Soviet Union was putting weapons into Cuba only, or partially, to be able to withdraw them later in return for concessions elsewhere.²

Whatever the motivation, the Soviet operation required both secrecy and haste in order to succeed and, in particular, to preclude the United States from taking action, or threatening to, before the missiles become operational and to permit the Soviet Union to maintain the initiative in any showdown. In establishing some kind of balance between these two partially irreconcilable

² The *New York Times*, October 15, p. 1, reported that a prominent Soviet-bloc official informed several non-Communist delegates at the UN that the Soviet Union would follow a "more moderate" course on Cuba if the United States would ease its position on Berlin. It was thought this referred to refraining from introducing additional weapons into Cuba. Several days later, *Izvestia* specifically, and indignantly, denounced this report. *New York Times*, October 18, p. 4.

requirements, the Soviet Union apparently gave greater emphasis to the latter. The missile components were unloaded from the ships and transported across the Cuban countryside at night, but, at the construction sites, careful camouflage was largely sacrificed for fast action. Since early 1961 the United States had maintained continual surveillance of Cuba, including, prior to late August 1962, twice-monthly, high-altitude U-2 flights around the periphery of the island. Beginning in the latter part of the summer, U.S. intelligence received numerous reports from Cuban refugee sources about missiles being installed in Cuba.³ These refugee groups, however, had a record of exaggeration and irresponsibility. Numerous similar stories had been received previously, all of which proved to be false.⁴ Therefore, intelligence officials had an undoubted and understandable inclination to downgrade these reports. The discovery, when at the end of August direct overflights of Cuba began, of ground-to-air (air defense) missiles led to the conclusion that it was these that the refugees had seen and that these were the only missiles in Cuba. On the other hand, this discovery should have produced speculation as to what these missiles were intended to protect. Further reconnaissance was temporarily interrupted as a result of the Administration's response to the two recent U-2 incidents. It is easy now to say that such deference to other concerns than the surveillance of Cuba was unwise, but this was less evident at the time.

In intelligence work generally, critical signals, easy to pick out in retrospect, are frequently hidden at the time by other “meaningless” events or by the preconceptions of those evaluating the evidence — preconceptions that may be quite understandable, even justifiable, in the given circumstances.

Among the obstacles in evaluating the evidence in this case was the strong predisposition of the Administration to believing that stationing strategic weapons abroad — and particularly running the risk that they might fall into the hands of a highly unstable government — was something Premier Khrushchev would never do.⁵ This conviction was reinforced by Soviet statements, in particular the *Tass* communique of September 11,⁶ which appeared to be a response to the President's news conference statement of September 4, and by personal private assurances from

³ House Appropriations Committee, *DOD Budget for 1964*, Part 1, p. 2.

⁴ These stories were also false, so far as strategic missiles were concerned.

⁵ Senate Armed Services Committee, *Investigation of the Preparedness Program*, Interim Report, May 9, 1963, p. 3; Richard Rovere, “Letter From Washington,” *The New Yorker*, Vol. XXXIX, No.2 (March 2, 1963), p. 126.

⁶ The Soviets perhaps would say that all their weapons are “defensive.” But the communique fairly definitely stated that no strategic, ground-to-ground missiles, capable of hitting the U.S. (whether for “offensive” or “defensive” purposes) were going into Cuba. “The armaments and military equipment sent to Cuba are designed exclusively for defensive purposes and the President of the United States and the American military . . . know what means of defense are. How can these means threaten the United States?”

“The Government of the Soviet Union also authorized *Tass* to state that there is no need for the Soviet Union to shift its weapons for the repulsion of aggression, for a retaliatory blow, to any other country, for instance Cuba. Our nuclear weapons are so powerful in their explosive force and the Soviet Union has rockets so powerful to carry these nuclear warheads that there is no need to search for sites for them beyond the boundaries of the Soviet Union. We have said, and we repeat, that if war is unleashed . . . the Soviet Union has the capability from its own territory to render assistance to any peace-loving state and not only to Cuba.” *New York Times*, September 12, p. 16.

Soviet leaders.⁷ The latter kind of assurance, at least, is taken seriously even in cold war diplomacy.

The Administration's predisposition to believe that the Soviets would not place missiles in Cuba was probably reinforced, rather than weakened, by the incessant criticisms and demands to "do something about Cuba" coming from many Republicans and its other political opponents at home. Senator Keating claimed to have reliable information that Soviet troops and intermediate range missiles were being sent to Cuba,⁸ and he and other Republicans demanded a blockade or other intervention. The Administration, of course, could not act until it had certain evidence, and until then it hardly could admit in public that Senator Keating might be right. Thus it was forced to think up all sorts of good reasons for not becoming especially worried about Cuba and for not intervening. It argued that the weapons in Cuba were "defensive" only and emphasized the risks involved in any military action. This incentive to play down any Cuban danger at least complicated the task of evaluating the intelligence information that was coming in.

Domestic criticisms blurred not only the intelligence signals, however, but another sort of signal as well — the United States signal to the Soviet Union that it would oppose and prevent the installation of strategic weapons in Cuba. On their face, the President's warnings at his news conferences of September 4⁹ and 13¹⁰ look fairly clear. But in fact the clarity of these commitments was considerably reduced by the context. In the face of domestic criticisms, the Administration was on the defensive, emphasizing the risks of intervention and the need for restraint. At his August 29 news conference, the President responded to Senator Capehart's call for a blockade of Cuba by reminding his audience that the United States had to "consider the totality of its obligations."¹¹ On October 6 Vice President Johnson said: "The stopping of a Russian ship is an act of war."¹² On October 13 the President went to campaign in Senator Capehart's homestate of Indiana and attacked those who "want to send someone else's son to war."¹³

The President's news conference statements, therefore, were intended not only to get one message over to Premier Khrushchev but also to get another rather different message over to the American people. He had to talk to two different audiences, for two different purposes, at the same

⁷ Georgy Bolshakov, a press attache at the Soviet Embassy and a popular figure with the Administration, was a frequent intermediary between the White House and the Kremlin. In early October he reported to Robert Kennedy that he had been told by Khrushchev that the weapons going into Cuba were for defensive purposes only and by Mikoyan that they could not reach the U.S. Henry M. Pachter, *Collision Course* (New York, 1963), p. 84; James Daniel and John G. Hubbell, *Strike in the West* (New York, 1963), : pp.43-44.

⁸ His information presumably came from refugee sources.

⁹ If "significant offensive capability" were to exist in Cuba, "the gravest issues would arise." *New York Times*, September 5, p. 2.

¹⁰ "But let me make this clear once again: . . . if Cuba should ever . . . become an offensive military base of significant capacity for the Soviet Union, then this country will do whatever must be done to protect its own security and that of its allies. . . . As President and Commander and Chief I have full authority now to take such action, and I have asked the Congress to authorize me to call up reserve forces should this or any other crisis make it necessary." *New York Times*, September 14, p. 12.

¹¹ *New York Times*, August 30, p. 10.

¹² *New York Times*, October 7, p. 1.

¹³ *New York Times*, October 14, p. 1.

time. This is a common political problem but still a difficult one to solve. On the one hand, he had to tell Khrushchev that the United States would not tolerate strategic weapons in Cuba; on the other hand, he had to tell the American people that as yet there was no solid evidence such weapons were in Cuba and that the existing situation was tolerable. In political practice these two messages were less compatible than they may be in semantic theory.

Much has been made of the distinction the Administration made between “offensive” and “defensive” weapons. The difference between the two is rather subjective and unclear, as a number of critics helpfully pointed out during the week of October 22. But it must be recalled, first, that this differentiation was introduced by the President at his September 4 news conference, nearly two months prior to the open crisis, and, second, that the original purpose of the device was not to explain to the international opposition why the presence of certain weapons in Cuba was intolerable but to explain to the domestic opposition why the presence of certain other weapons was *not* intolerable. Thus on September 4 the President acknowledged the presence of ground-to-air missiles but implicitly “approved” them because they were “defensive”; he then denied the Soviets were taking offensive actions in Cuba. His warning was almost an afterthought.¹⁴ Similarly on September 13 the principal burden of his statement was to deny that the weapons in Cuba constituted a serious threat and to admonish loose talk about intervention.¹⁵

However, the offensive-defensive distinction, because of its lack of clarity, could have provided the Administration with a rationale to accept almost any sort of weapons in Cuba, if it had wanted one. The Soviet Union, coupling the classification of its weapons in Cuba as defensive with the calls for restraint, may have concluded that the Administration was prepared to accept any weapons in Cuba, under the pretext of their being “defensive,” rather than force a showdown. Moreover, at the time of his September 13 news conference some strategic missiles were already in Cuba. Conceivably Premier Khrushchev believed that the United States already knew this and therefore interpreted the President's remarks as a signal that the United States was not prepared to

¹⁴ “Information . . . establishes without doubt that the Soviets have provided the Cuban government with a number of antiaircraft defense missiles with a slant range of 25 miles. . . . Along with these missiles, the Soviets are apparently providing the extensive radar and other electronic equipment which is required for their operation. . . . The number of Soviet military technicians now known to be in Cuba or en route is consistent with assistance in setting up and learning to use this equipment. As I stated last week, we shall continue to make information available as fast as it is obtained and properly verified.

“There is no evidence of any organized combat force in Cuba from any Soviet bloc country; of military bases provided to Russia; of a violation of the 1934 treaty relating to Guantanamo; of the presence of offensive ground-to-ground missiles; or of other significant offensive capability either in Cuban hands or under Soviet direction and guidance. Were it to be otherwise, the gravest issues would arise.”

¹⁵ “But I will repeat the conclusion that I reported last week, that these new shipments do not constitute a serious threat to any other part of this hemisphere. . . . However, unilateral military intervention on the part of the United States cannot currently be either required or justified, and it is regrettable that loose talk about such action in this country might serve to give a thin color of legitimacy to the Communist pretense that such a threat exists. But let me make this clear once again. . . .

“With this in mind, while I recognize that rash talk is cheap, particularly on the part of those who do not have the responsibility, I would hope that the future record will show that the only people talking about a war or an invasion at this time are the Communist spokesmen . . . , and that the American people . . . [will] keep both their nerve and their heads.

object and would acquiesce by denying their existence or their offensive characteristics.¹⁶ If so, he would have been encouraged to be lax about camouflage. Beyond this, the President's warning about offensive capacity was regularly accompanied by the word "significant,"¹⁷ which left an additional loophole for no action.¹⁸

The clarity of the president's warning was probably clouded by the past record as well. In particular, in March, 1961 he had committed the United States to the defense of Laos in a quite dramatic manner, and later he more or less backed out of that commitment. The Bay of Pigs and the Berlin Wall may also have reduced the credibility of the President's implied threats in September, 1962.

Phase Two

Apart from the temporary grounding of all U-2's during the second week of September, surveillance of Cuba continued, as the President promised at his news conferences. By the end of September disturbing but inconclusive evidence was available. On October 14 a U-2 overflew San Cristobal on the western end of the island. By the next afternoon the photographs obtained had been taken to Washington and interpreted — providing solid evidence that strategic missiles were being installed in that area. By that evening a number of top officials had been notified. McGeorge Bundy informed the President the next morning. By the afternoon of October 16, the Executive Committee (Excom) of the National Security Council had established itself and begun its deliberations.¹⁹

Two aspects of the threat had to be evaluated. The first was the pure military and strategic significance of the missiles. By being so close in, they greatly reduced the warning time available to SAC, particularly since the missiles would become operational before the United States would have time to rearrange its warning systems and defenses to best take account of this new factor. Even so, forty-two missiles²⁰ perhaps were not terribly significant. But if the United States had not acted the number would have become still greater. Presumably the Soviet ships that turned back from the blockade were bringing additional missiles; still more could have been installed later.

Generally the Administration was inclined to tie the threat in with the Berlin problem, however. Either it was a diversion or it was designed to strengthen the Soviet position for a showdown. If so, the psychological aspect would be at least as significant as the military.²¹ Besides,

¹⁶ See Henry A. Kissinger, "Reflections on Cuba," *The Reporter*, Vol. 27, No.9 (November 22, 1962), p. 21.

¹⁷ See footnotes 9 and 10.

¹⁸ At his March 23 news conference and on nationwide television, the President, armed with maps showing the development of Communist penetration, pledged the United States to the defense of a free and neutral Laos. He said: "No one should doubt our resolution on this point." *New York Times*, March 24, 1961, p. 4.

¹⁹ E. W. Kenworthy, *et. al.*, Review of the Cuban Crisis, *New York Times*, November 3, 1962, p. 6.

²⁰ The number that were removed.

²¹ "The psychological if not the military threat that these missiles would have posed to our homeland was apparently the trump card which Mr. Khrushchev intended to play in the next round of negotiations on Berlin." Secretary McNamara, House Appropriations Committee, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

this was the most direct and blatant Soviet provocation since the cold war began; if the United States did not resist here, firmly and successfully, its commitments around the world would be called into question by both allies and adversaries.

A quick choice had to be made among three alternatives. The first was to inform the world of the Soviet operation quickly and then somehow persuade them to call a halt. The second was to quickly and privately inform Premier Khrushchev that the United States was aware of what was going on and ask him to stop before the United States took action. The third alternative was to sit tight until incontrovertible evidence had been obtained and a particular plan of action had been decided upon and prepared for. The Soviet operation and the United States response could then be announced simultaneously.

In persuading the Soviet Union to change its course, the United States could both pose risks before it in pursuing its course and reduce the costs to it in changing its course. The advantage of either of the first two alternatives lay in forcing the issue immediately, before the Soviet Union became even more heavily committed. The disadvantage was that the United States could not, without time and preparation, pose an effective and responsible threat before the Soviet Union. In the absence of some decisive action firmly committing the United States to the objective of the removal of the missiles, disclosure by the United States of its information and intentions would virtually compel the Soviet Union to make its own commitment to retain the bases. It would then become more reluctant to back down when the United States made its commitment. Also the precise extent and nature of the Soviet operation had yet to be determined.

For such reasons as these, the Excom quickly made a basic decision that whatever action was taken would follow disclosure immediately or as quickly as possible and that disclosure, therefore, would wait until action was decided upon and prepared. But in the meantime this course required absolute secrecy regarding United States intentions in order to preclude the Soviet Union from making a pre-emptive commitment in anticipation of United States actions. It also required quick decisions and fast action, both because in Washington absolute secrecy is an ephemeral thing and because the Soviets themselves were apparently working as quickly as possible to bring the missiles to operational status. Even if they did not anticipate United States plans, the Soviets might soon announce their operation as an accomplished fact. The side that disclosed its plans first would gain a great advantage in initiative and momentum for the subsequent crisis bargaining. Thus there was in effect a race for first disclosure; and the United States had the great advantage of knowing that it was a race in fact.

A second decision was made simultaneously — that reconnaissance should be continued and stepped up. This was necessary for two reasons. First, it was necessary for planning whatever operations might be decided upon. The continuous flow of photographs furnished by reconnaissance, Secretary McNamara said later, “provided the essential basis for the national decisions taken throughout the crisis.”²² Second, it was necessary to build an incontrovertible case to present to the

²² House Appropriations Committee, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

Soviets when the showdown came and with which to convince the public and other governments²³ of the correctness and necessity of United States action. Furthermore, the United States had to be absolutely sure that its case was correct, as well as convincing.²⁴ Nevertheless, the United States was not free to conduct unrestricted reconnaissance. Low-level flights and other unusual surveillance measures would have certainly risked if not given away the secret. For the time being, the Excom had to depend on continued high-altitude overflights and regular intelligence sources. Low-level photography did not begin until October 23.

The Excom had four alternative courses of action, of varying degrees of intensity, from which to choose. The first was to go to the United Nations and demand the removal of the bases. The second was some sort of blockade or embargo of Cuba. The third was a surprise air attack to destroy the missile sites. The fourth was an invasion.

Since coming to power, the Administration had concentrated on building what Secretary McNamara has called “usable power,” providing a wide range of military options appropriate for different sorts of provocations. Furthermore, it had devoted a great deal of attention to the problem of controlling the use of military force, both nuclear and conventional, by tightening command arrangements and centralizing effective control in the hands of civilian officials. Previously the military choice might have been between extreme alternatives. But now, thanks to these previous decisions, a precisely and deliberately designed military operation that could best guarantee the removal of the missiles at minimum risk was entirely feasible.

The drawback to an invasion was that it went far beyond the requirements for achieving the limited but critically important objective the Excom had set for itself — removal of the missiles. An invasion might have had certain apparent advantages, such as effectively if immoderately disposing of the Castro government once and for all. But such a broadening of the objective would have immediately created many additional problems and dangers and would have increased the likelihood of failing to reach any objective at all. Keeping the objective limited meant keeping it attainable. Harlan Cleveland has written: “In the Cuban missile crisis, then, a limited objective was attained brilliantly — partly, at least, because it was specific, limited, and attainable.”²⁵ Invasion carried other disadvantages with it, the most decisive being that it would take considerable time to mount, during which period the missiles might become operational and thus usable for precisely the purpose for which they were purportedly designed.

At the other extreme, the alternative of going to the United Nations seemed clearly insufficient, since it would invite Soviet counter-demands or develop into the usual time-consuming wrangles of parliamentary diplomacy, during which work on the missiles would continue.

²³ In particular allied governments, which the Administration could anticipate might be a little touchy about the whole affair, as it had already been decided to sacrifice inter-allied consultations for secrecy.

²⁴ “If you were going into Cuba to rip the covers off those missiles, you had to be sure that when you raised the canvas you’d find all you had told the world was there.” Unidentified member of the Excom, quoted in Daniel and Hubbell, *op. cit.*, p.59.

²⁵ “Crisis Diplomacy,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 41, No.4 (July, 1963), p. 240. Cleveland is Assistant Secretary of State for international organization affairs.

Thus the choice soon became that between a blockade and air strike. Each had disadvantages. A surprise air strike would be extremely provocative; it would kill Russian soldiers and technicians at the bases, leaving little room for a graceful and honorable Soviet retreat; it would have carried numerous political penalties. A blockade would also be provocative, though less so, and would offend those allies sensitive on freedom of the seas. Besides, the Administration had spent the previous six weeks educating the American people on the status of a blockade in international law.

The Excom also had to anticipate the Soviet response. Direct military action against Cuba would encourage Soviet countermoves, probably not in Cuba but elsewhere (Berlin), or perhaps comparable actions against Turkey, where the United States (as it was soon to be reminded) had intermediate range missiles “ninety miles” from Soviet territory. Such a Soviet countermove would create a symmetry of crises and lead to worldwide pressure for both sides to call a halt. The missiles might then remain in Cuba. Otherwise the crises might escalate. The United States action had to be designed to minimize the likelihood of such a countermove. Nevertheless every contingency was analyzed and prepared for.²⁶

Despite its drawbacks a blockade had obvious advantages. If successful, it would do just enough to physically prevent additional missiles from being brought into Cuba. If selective, it need do no more. In addition, it would be a startling and dramatic action indicative of United States determination to see the missiles already in Cuba removed. But by not immediately endangering Soviet lives, it would not be excessively provocative. It would be less likely than other military actions to trigger a Soviet countermove, because a closely comparable countermove would be hard to design and it would hardly “justify” a more extreme countermove. It would be sufficiently far down on the scale of violence to permit pressure to be further increased relatively safely and sufficiently far up on the scale of violence to indicate a willingness to do so. A blockade would put a special U. S. military advantage to work — it would be an exercise of sea-power in an American Lake. The blockade could be designed in such a way that one or two days would elapse before any Soviet ships would be intercepted. This would provide a “cooling-off period” during which the Soviet leaders would have time to carefully calculate the relative advantages and disadvantages of becoming involved in naval war with the United States in the Caribbean.²⁷

In its deliberations, the Excom looked with increasing favor on some sort of blockade. This converging consensus reinforced the need for secrecy as the final decisions and preparations were made. At the same time the photographs coming in underscored the need for quick action, as construction was proceeding extremely rapidly. If the Soviet Union were to announce a *fait accompli* before the United States disclosed its plans, the Excom would lose the initiative it was counting upon.

To keep information secret is quite easy unless that information is put to use. The United States could have kept its possession of information secret surely enough simply by not preparing to respond. This naturally would have been self-defeating. The point is that acting on the

²⁶ *New York Times*, October 23, 1962.

²⁷ Soviet submarines were in the area.

information unavoidably endangered the secrecy of its possession. To prepare to act on the basis of the information involved disseminating it among a more or less large number of people, frequent conferences, a lot of coming and going, lights burning late, and the moving about of military equipment and personnel. Thus it was always necessary to strike some balance between the requirements of secrecy and those of effective operation. The sort of balance arrived at in reconnaissance work has already been noted. More generally, deliberate, rather ingenious, and perhaps somewhat costly efforts were made to keep down speculation that a crisis was brewing. Even the very first notification of officials was conducted so as not to attract attention. From then on the information and deliberations were confined to as few people as possible. Officials typed their own working papers; they rode seven and eight to a limousine between the White House and the State Department planning room (where most of the work was done) and made discreet entrances and exits; they continued their normal social lives. The President continued his routine receptions; on October 17 he went off to campaign in Connecticut as previously planned.

Another previously scheduled event was the meeting between Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko and the President on October 18. There was no question of presenting him with the evidence, since the Excom had not yet decided upon its response. So the President went into what must have been a fascinating, though nerve-racking and irritating, conference. The first part was devoted to Berlin. Gromyko reiterated what Premier Khrushchev had said in the summer. When the subject turned to Cuba (the President did not bring it up), Gromyko said "he knew the President appreciated frankness, and therefore he wished to be frank."²⁸ He assured the President that the Soviet activities in Cuba were entirely defensive.²⁹ That Gromyko knew of his government's activities is likely but not certain. Probably he was probing the President to see how much he knew. But the President did not show his hand. He said he could not understand the arms buildup in Cuba and that it had had a profound impact on public opinion, which he had tried to calm. Gromyko again referred to the build-up as defensive and cited the Soviet statement of September 11. The President then quoted some appropriate lines from his news conference remarks and let the subject drop.

The Excom worked throughout the week, analyzing alternative courses of action, the requirement for each, and all possible Soviet responses. Frequently Secretaries McNamara and Rusk, as well as the President, stayed away from the deliberations so that the others³⁰ could think and speak more freely. Bundy, however, made a point of keeping each alternative open for a Presidential decision.³¹

There was a strong inclination toward a selective blockade. The Justice Department went to

²⁸ Max Frankel, *New York Times*, October 27, 1962, p. 8.

²⁹ "The training by Soviet specialists of Cuban nationals in the handling of defensive armaments was by no means offensive, the Foreign Minister said. If it were otherwise, the Soviet Government would never become involved in rendering such assistance, he added." *Ibid.*

³⁰ McGeorge Bundy, General Maxwell Taylor, Lyndon Johnson, Roswell Gilpatric, Douglas Dillon, Robert Kennedy, General Marshall S. Carter (CIA), George Ball, Edwin Martin (Inter-American Affairs), Theodore Sorenson, Alexis Johnson (Deputy Under Secretary of State), John McCone, Robert A. Lovett, Dean Acheson, Llewellyn Thompson.

³¹ Kenworthy, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

work on the details of naval law. Lleyellyn Thompson advised the members that the Soviet Union had a strong feeling for “legality” and it would therefore be worthwhile to find some kind of legal basis.³² A legal rationalization could also assist in winning Latin American and allied support and in paying some deference to neutralist sensibilities. It was decided to call the action a “quarantine”; it sounded less warlike and harked back the President Roosevelt’s anti-Nazi speech.³³ Disclosure was originally set for October 21 but it was decided to move it up one day to allow more time for military preparations.

Great efforts were made to keep the extensive military preparations for the blockade and other contingencies as inconspicuous as possible. The general build-up of power in Florida and the Caribbean was carried out ostensibly under previous orders. Naval maneuvers around Vieques Island off Puerto Rico were announced on October 18. This is an annual event, which fortuitously had previously been scheduled for this time and place, but it does not usually involve 20,000 men, including 6000 Marines.³⁴ The Navy prepared for the blockade and kept close but discreet watch on all Soviet ships crossing the Atlantic. Meanwhile, the Pentagon press officer, in response to a direct question, said the department had “no information indicating the presence of such weapons [medium range missiles] in Cuba.”³⁵

On October 19 the President took off to campaign in the Midwest, where he was greeted by pickets demanding that he “get tough” on Cuba. By the next day however, he had to return to Washington to make the final decisions. It was announced that he had a cold, and he was back at work in the White House by 2:30 that afternoon. Vice President Johnson, campaigning in Hawaii, also returned to Washington, afflicted with a similar ailment. Secretary Rusk cancelled a speech in Virginia because of the “press of business.” The Joint Chiefs of Staff were requested to remain in Washington over the weekend (because of the need to reach difficult decisions on the military budget, the *New York Times* speculated³⁶). By this time, several hundred people were in on the secret; lights burned late that night. On Sunday all decisions were made final and given formal NSC approval. It was decided to postpone the official proclamation of the blockade long enough to allow the Organization of American States to give formal approval to such action. Last minute work as completed; messages to all heads of state were composed; preparations were made to inform, and apologize to, allied governments; Congressional leaders were located.

Meanwhile secrecy was collapsing rapidly. News stories written on Sunday evening reported an “air of crisis” in the capital.³⁷ In fact, at least one newspaper learned “some details” of the situation and of U. S. plans that night, but, at the direct request of the White House, “did not print

³² Robert D. Crane, “The Cuban Crisis,” *Orbis*, Vol. VI, No. 4 (Winter, 1963), p. 541.

³³ *New York Times*, October 24, p. 25.

³⁴ *New York Times*, October 22, pp. 1, 16.

³⁵ Daniel and Hubbell, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

³⁶ *New York Times*, October 21, p. 1.

³⁷ *New York Times*, October 22, p. 1.

[the story] for reasons of public interest.”³⁸ The Excom got one scare when it was announced that Gromyko (still in the United States) was to make an important statement at 3:30 Monday afternoon. It prepared a short statement announcing the blockade, which was to be released if Gromyko disclosed the Soviet operation, in order to recoup the initiative as best as possible. It turned out that the Foreign Minister only wanted to give a farewell speech as he left the country.³⁹

The nature and timing of the disclosure was designed so as to gain a maximum of both impact and support. Special efforts were made to obtain the greatest possible consent from allies and Latin American countries. Dean Acheson was dispatched to Paris to inform President de Gaulle personally. Richard Goodwin went off to the annual Alliance for Progress meeting in Mexico City, where many OAS officials would be Monday evening. At Monday noon Pierre Salinger announced that the President would speak on television at 7 PM on “a subject of the highest national urgency.” Prior to that time the President met with Congressional leaders, disclosing everything. At 6 PM Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin was called into Secretary Rusk's office, informed of everything, and presented with a personal message for Premier Khrushchev. Simultaneously a mass briefing was conducted in the State Department auditorium for diplomats from forty-six allied and friendly nations. At eight neutral diplomats were briefed.⁴⁰

The President read his eighteen minute speech with “grimness unparalleled in recent times.”⁴¹ He immediately revealed the well-kept secret.⁴² He called the Soviet missiles “offensive,” retaining the distinction that he had introduced earlier and could hardly drop now. He directed his speech entirely against the Soviet Union, treating Cuba as a mere pawn in the conflict. He noted Soviet deceptions, specifically the September 11 statement and Gromyko's assurances, each of which he quoted. And of each he said: “That statement was false.” He objected to the Soviet operation primarily because it upset the “precarious *status quo*.” And in demonstrating his determination to resist, he clearly laid American prestige on the line: “But the secret, swift, and extraordinary buildup of Communist missiles . . . is a deliberately provocative and unjustified change in the in the *status quo* which cannot be accepted by this country or our courage and our commitments are ever to be trusted again by either friend or foe.”

He then announced United States actions, clearly indicating that more would follow if necessary.⁴³ “. . . I have directed that the following steps be taken immediately”: (1) “To halt this offensive buildup, a strict quarantine on all offensive military equipment under shipment to Cuba

³⁸ President Kennedy, news conference, November 20, 1962, *New York Times*, November 21, p. 10.

³⁹ Daniel and Hubbell, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

⁴⁰ With worthwhile results. During the week of the crisis, the African nations forbade Soviet planes from landing on their territory. This created a virtual air blockade as well.

⁴¹ *New York Times*, October 23, p. 1.

⁴² “Within the last week unmistakable evidence has established the fact that a series of offensive missile sites is now in preparation on . . . [Cuba]. The purpose of these bases can be none other than to provide a nuclear strike capability against the Western Hemisphere.”

⁴³ “But now further action is required — and it is under way; and these actions may only be the beginning.”

is being initiated. . . . This quarantine will be extended, if needed, to other types of cargo and carriers." (2) Continued and increased close surveillance. At the same point he again suggested that further, more violent, action might follow.⁴⁴ (3) "It shall be the policy of this , nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response on the Soviet Union."⁴⁵ (5) An immediate OAS meeting. (6) An emergency Security Council meeting. (7) "I call upon Chairman Khrushchev to halt and eliminate this clandestine, reckless, and provocative threat to world peace and to stable relations between our two nations."⁴⁶

Phase Three

The quarantine had two purposes, as Secretary McNamara made clear at his news conference later Monday night.⁴⁷ First, it was designed to deter, or if necessary physically prevent the introduction of additional strategic weapons into Cuba. Second and more importantly, it was designed to establish a pattern of irresistible United States momentum and visible willingness to run high risks until the weapons already in Cuba were removed. But it did not involve unnecessary risks. It gave the Soviets time to reconsider their action; it permitted them to comply without having to back down before a specific ultimatum.

The blockade and the entire range of the United States action were tightly, centrally controlled. Complicated precautions were taken so that the President and his associates could control virtually every move, military and diplomatic.

In this most blatant challenge to the United States, the Soviet Union threw away its usual advantage of local military superiority. If open conflict broke out over Cuba, the United States could win at every level of violence.

The Administration followed up its initiative quickly with a diplomatic offensive. Briefings of and consultations with diplomats and foreign governments were continued. In these private meetings, U.S. officials stressed not the missiles themselves nor their "offensive" character but that the Soviet Union had undertaken to upset the status quo by secretly introducing into Cuba weapons never before outside of Soviet territory, despite repeated assurances that this was not necessary.⁴⁸ OAS delegates were persuaded, and without great difficulty, to support a resolution authorizing the quarantine. The State Department made special arrangements so that all delegates could get quick instructions from their governments and so that the Mexican delegates in particular could get in

⁴⁴ "Should these offensive military preparations continue, thus increasing the threat to the hemisphere, further action will be justified. I have directed the Armed Forces to prepare for any eventualities; and I trust that, in the interests of both the Cuban people and the Soviet technicians at the sites, the hazards to all concerned of continuing this threat will be recognized."

⁴⁵ Presumably a "no-cities" strike.

⁴⁶ *New York Times*, October 23, p. 19.

⁴⁷ *U.S. News & World Report*, Vol. LIII, No. 19 (November 5, 1962), p. 46.

⁴⁸ *New York Times*, October 25, p. 20.

touch with their President and Foreign Minister, both of whom were abroad.⁴⁹ On Tuesday the OAS voted unanimously to support the quarantine.

On the same day low-level reconnaissance of Cuba began, providing photographs which not only gave intelligence workers more detailed information but also were comprehensible and persuasive to people other than expert interpreters of aerial photography. They were therefore politically useful.

At noon Monday the Strategic Air Command was alerted; B-47 bombers were dispersed among military and civilian airports; a portion of the B-52 force was put on air-born alert; the alert status of the missile force was “upgraded.”⁵⁰ The buildup of conventional military forces in the Caribbean and southeast United States was continued and now made visible. The buildup, which the Defense Department later called “quite a development of power,”⁵¹ served both to persuade the Soviet Union of the desirability of complying with U.S. demands and to support subsequent actions should that persuasion fail.

The blockade destroyers took up their positions on Monday, although the quarantine did not go into effect officially until Wednesday morning. The blockade ring, originally hundreds of miles from Cuba, was gradually contracted to postpone the first contact. This gave the Soviet leaders plenty of time to contemplate the state of the world and, if they wanted, to get in contact with the captains of their vessels. During Wednesday, some Soviet ships slowed down, but, in order not to force the Soviet Union into truculence, the United States did not publicize this hesitation. Once it appeared that some ships were veering off course, however, a public announcement was made personally by Secretary McNamara. Thereafter, regular announcements were made concerning the progress of Soviet vessels and expected interceptions. The first interception was of a Soviet tanker known by its prior movements not to be carrying quarantined material and chosen for this reason. The intercepting destroyer asked the Russian captain by telegraphic signal to state his cargo, which he did. The tanker was then allowed to proceed without a boarding. The first boarding was of a Lebanese cargo ship under Soviet charter, which obviously was not carrying strategic weapons.⁵² President Kennedy and Secretary McNamara personally directed this naval operation from Washington. By retaining central control, they were able to conduct the operation so as to best support the overall diplomatic offensive and to protect the political effectiveness of the blockade with minimum risk of Soviet retaliation.

On Monday the Soviet government had received an advance copy of the President's speech and a personal letter to Premier Khrushchev. The next day it was sent a copy of the blockade proclamation but this was returned as unacceptable.⁵³ The Soviet government's reaction to the United States initiative was an uncertain one. The first official pronouncement, released by *Tass* on

⁴⁹ Daniel and Hubbell, *op. cit.*, pp. 130-131.

⁵⁰ *New York Times*, October 26, p. 17; November 30, 1962, p. 1; Daniel and Hubbell, *op. cit.*, pp. 115-120.

⁵¹ *New York Times*, October 29, p. 1.

⁵² Pachter, *op. cit.*, pp. 43-44.

⁵³ *New York Times*, October 25, p. 21.

Tuesday and submitted to the Security Council on the same day, was cautious in commitments though not in rhetoric. It was written in the usual belligerent generalizations of Marxism-Leninism.⁵⁴ The statement suggested that the blockade was primarily an act of aggression against Cuba which the Soviet Union was obliged to take account of, rather than a direct challenge.⁵⁵ It in effect denied that the missiles were in Cuba as the United States charged. The only proposal was that old standby — withdrawal of all foreign basis. The statement gave the impression that the Soviet Union had not expected the United States action and had not decided upon a response. Premier Khrushchev's private letter to President Kennedy on Wednesday did nothing to change this impression. Nor did his letter to Bertrand Russell, which called for a summit conference.⁵⁶

Soviet diplomats continued to deny the existence of the missiles. But on Wednesday Premier Khrushchev called William Knox, an American business man who happened to be in Moscow, into his office and more or less acknowledged that they did exist and told him that they would be used if necessary and that interception of a Soviet ship would mean war.⁵⁷ The next day Ambassador Zorin was still denying everything in the Security Council, but, in his letters to President Kennedy, Khrushchev became more and more frank. In his letter of October 28 he was as explicit about the missiles as was politically possible.⁵⁸

The Soviet Union may have been planning to turn the control of the missiles over to the Cubans, or make a pretense of doing so, so as to reduce the rationality of retaliation, or threatened retaliation, by the United States against the Soviet Union if the missiles were fired. But the President, by announcing at the earliest opportunity that such an attack would be regarded as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States,⁵⁹ gave Premier Khrushchev the strongest possible incentive to keep them under his own control.⁶⁰ In his first messages to Washington, particularly in that one transmitted through Knox, Khrushchev apparently sought to give the impression that he might not be able to control things. But as the United States continued on its course and increased its pressure

⁵⁴ "But if the aggressors touch off war, the Soviet Union would strike a most powerful retaliatory blow." "The Soviet government will do everything to thwart the aggressive designs of the imperialist circles of the United States, to safeguard and consolidate peace on earth." *New York Times*, October 24, p. 20.

⁵⁵ The Soviet statement, in any case, was more restrained than the Cuban one. It talked about a "virtual blockade" and "in effect . . . [a] blockade." The Cuban protest used no such qualifications. The Soviet statement talked about an act of "piracy," the Cuban about an "act of war." Letter of the Cuban Ambassador to the UN to the President of the Security Council, October 22, Pachter, *op. cit.* p.200.

⁵⁶ *New York Times*, October 25, p. 22.

⁵⁷ Knox then returned to Washington with his story, as Khrushchev must have wanted. Daniel and Hubbell, *op. cit.*, pp. 137-139.

⁵⁸ Of course Khrushchev never said, "Yes you were right all along and we were lying. We have offensive missiles in Cuba." But he did say this: "I regard with great understanding your concern and the concern of the United States people in connection with the fact that the weapons you describe as offensive are formidable weapons indeed. Both you and I understand what kind of weapons these are." *New York Times*, October 29, p.16.

⁵⁹ See text associated with footnote 45.

⁶⁰ In this "game" the first commitment "wins."

Khrushchev reversed his position and, in his message of October 27, assured the President that he need not fear independent action by the Cubans.⁶¹

The United Nations provided a forum for both consultations and insults. A principal United States objective here was to convince the whole world of the existence of the missiles. Rival Soviet and United States resolutions were submitted to the Security Council on Tuesday but neither was ever voted on. An innocuous neutralist resolution was adopted instead. In his speeches to the Security Council Adlai Stevenson used some of the bluntest words ever uttered in that forum by an American delegate. He indirectly accused Ambassador Zorin of “perfidy” and directly accused his government of “deliberate, cynical deception.” Zorin maintained that the U.S. case was based on “falsified evidence.” This charge led to the famous confrontation between Stevenson and Zorin,⁶² which was followed by Stevenson's presentation of the most recent reconnaissance photographs. Zorin again questioned their authenticity. Stevenson responded by suggesting the issue could best be solved by allowing UN investigators to inspect the Cuba sites. This ended the debate. Stevenson's performance effectively convinced the world of the existence of the missiles, despite, or perhaps with the help of, Zorin protestations — a politically important accomplishment in itself. It also underscored the unswerving determination of the United States to see the missiles removed.

The other point of focus at the UN was Secretary-General U Thant. On Wednesday, going beyond the urgings of the neutralist nations, he sent identical messages to Premier Khrushchev and President Kennedy calling for “the voluntary suspension of all arms shipments to Cuba and also the voluntary suspension of the quarantine measures involving the search of ships bound for Cuba.”⁶³ Premier Khrushchev quickly replied with a letter that apparently accepted his half of the bargain unconditionally and that provided the first clear indication of his desire to find a graceful avenue for retreat. President Kennedy politely but firmly turned down the proposal,⁶⁴ as U.S. policy plainly required. U Thant quickly replied with two more letters, one to each statesman. To Premier Khrushchev he suggested that all Soviet ships already on their way to Cuba stay out of the interception area for the time being. He asked President Kennedy to “do everything possible to avoid

⁶¹ “The means situated in Cuba which you say and have stated are perturbing to you, are in the hands of Soviet officers. Therefore any accidental use of them to the detriment of the United States is excluded.” *New York Times*, October 28, p. 30.

⁶² Stevenson: “Do you, Ambassador Zorin, deny that the U.S.S.R. has placed and is placing medium- and inter-mediate range missiles in sites in Cuba? Yes or no? Don't wait for the translation — yes or no?”

Zorin: “I am not in an American court room, Sir, therefore I do not wish to answer a question that is put to me in the fashion in which a prosecutor puts questions. In due course, Sir, you will have your reply.”

Stevenson: “You are in the courtroom of world opinion right now, and you can answer yes or no. You have denied that they exist, and I want to know whether I have understood you correctly.”

Zorin: “Will you please continue your statement sir? You will have your answer in due course.”

Stevenson: “I am prepared to wait for my answer until hell freezes over, if that is your decision. I am also prepared to present the evidence in this room.” *New York Times*, October 26, p. 26.

⁶³ Pachter, *op. cit.*, p. 210.

⁶⁴ “I deeply appreciate the spirit which prompted your message of yesterday. As we made clear in the Security Council, the existing threat was created by the secret introduction of offensive weapons into Cuba, and the answer lies in the removal of such weapons.” Pachter, *op. cit.*, p212.

direct confrontation with Soviet ships in the next few days in order to minimize the risk of any untoward incident.”⁶⁵ These proposals were hardly symmetrical. Provided the Soviet ships stayed away, the United States could hardly fail to avoid a “direct confrontation” with those ships. Nevertheless, Khrushchev readily accepted and announced Soviet vessels would not challenge the blockade. President Kennedy, in an extremely carefully worded reply, accepted this proposal on the condition that the Soviet Union complied with its half of the bargain. U Thant's initiative probably was an important contribution in avoiding a confrontation at sea. The Secretary-General could do nothing to alter the physical situation but he could change the political climate. Premier Khrushchev was apparently searching for some good excuse to turn his ships around. U Thant's appeal provided a convenient rationale. It was easier to appear to accede to the appeals of the representative of world public opinion than to appear to buckle under to overwhelming pressure from an adversary. Because of the extreme deliberation and caution with which the United States conducted the blockade operations, he could appear to do the former. President Kennedy, for his part, wanted to halt the flow of weapons to Cuba, not to humiliate his opposite number, and was perfectly willing for Khrushchev to be able to execute a dignified retreat, so U Thant's initiative served his purpose as well.

By Thursday evening or Friday morning the blockade had evidently accomplished the first of its purposes — no more strategic weapons were going into Cuba. However, the missiles already in Cuba remained there, and, according to the latest photographs, work was continuing rapidly. And the blockade, having been in effect for several days, would soon lose its shock effect. The United States offensive had to be stepped up or it would peter out, giving the Soviet Union time to recoup its political forces.

Beginning late Thursday, therefore, the United States began to increase pressure on the Soviet Union in a most deliberate fashion. At no time, however, did it move further up the scale of violence or directly threaten to do so. But it created the impression, probably well-founded, that it was willing to do so if the missiles were not quickly removed. The United States did this first, and most effectively, by never once suggesting or hinting that it would ever be willing to give up or compromise its limited and specific objective. Administration officials, from the President on down, in public statements and private meetings, always indicated a readiness for talks and accommodations but only on the condition that construction first cease and the missiles be removed. Never once was this condition omitted and not given emphasis. To quote Harlan Cleveland again: “It was the clarity of our resolve which made our quarantine action, that relatively restrained first response, so extraordinarily effective.”⁶⁶ At the same time, the United States never once gave the impression that, if it did successfully achieve its goal, it would press its offensive further and broaden its objective, by seeking, for example, the elimination of the Castro government or of all Soviet influence in Cuba or the humiliation of the Soviet Union. The Soviet leaders knew exactly what the United States wanted and could be quite confident that “this was our last demand.”

On Friday the United States stepped up pressure on the Soviet Union. The State Department released a statement calling attention to one phrase in the President's speech — “these actions may

⁶⁵ Pachter, *op. cit.*, pp. 212-213.

⁶⁶ *Loc. cit.*, p. 241.

only be the beginning” — and said it had been made with deadly seriousness.⁶⁷ That evening a statement was released directly from the White House which described the latest intelligence information indicating that work at the bases was continuing rapidly.⁶⁸ Neither statement carried an explicit threat, nor did they set a time limit on Soviet compliance, but together they conveyed to the Soviets a sense of urgency.

These high-level communications, moreover, were supplemented by other signals, including lower-level or unofficial communications. At these lower levels more pointed threats could be made without undue provocation and without creating commitments that could reduce flexibility in meeting further developments. Thursday evening, House Democratic Whip Hale Boggs, who had attended the various conferences of Congressional leaders with the President earlier in the week, told his constituents that the missiles could and would be destroyed if they were not quickly dismantled.⁶⁹ The comment was well reported. On Friday a number of knowledgeable Congressmen began to make similar statements. The phrase “pinpoint bombing” was used frequently.⁷⁰ The late evening headlines in at least the more flamboyant newspapers suggested an invasion was just around the corner. To all these rumors the Defense Department would say only “no comment.” In fact, the Excom had made no further decision as yet, but it was quite willing to let stand the impression that it had.⁷¹

At the same time, the military buildup continued. Troops, ships, and planes all were moved about in a more visible fashion. The Defense Department gave reporters express authorization to describe the buildup of Marines at Key West.⁷²

The decisive break in the crisis was the private letter received by President Kennedy from Premier Khrushchev late Friday evening. This letter has never been published, but apparently it was long and rambling, confused but conciliatory, almost panicky in tone. But it appeared to say what the President wanted to hear — the Soviet Union would halt construction and remove the bases in return for a United States pledge not to invade Cuba and to lift the blockade. To avoid embarrassing Moscow, the Administration decided not to publish the letter; work began immediately on a reply.⁷³ But the next morning Moscow Radio broadcast the text of a letter from Khrushchev to the President, and this was a different message, which reached the White House a little later. The letter was long

⁶⁷ *New York Times*, October 21, p. 8.

⁶⁸ “The development of ballistic missile sites in Cuba continues at a rapid pace. The activity at these sites apparently is directed at achieving a full operation capability as soon as possible.” Pachter, *op. cit.*, p. 215.

⁶⁹ “Believe me, if these missile sites in Cuba are not dismantled, the United States has the power to destroy them, and I assure you this will be done.” *New York Times*, October 26, p. 1.

⁷⁰ *New York Times*, October 21, p. 8.

⁷¹ The next move probably would have been a total blockade and would have been made on October 29. Max Frankel, *New York Times*, October 30, p. 1.

⁷² *New York Times*, October 27, p. 8.

⁷³ *New York Times*, October 28, p. 32; Kenworthy, *op. cit.*, p. 7. Daniel and Hubbell, *op. cit.*, pp. 150-151; Pachter, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-51.

and somewhat informal but, unlike the previous one, firm in tone though not truculent. It offered to withdraw the missiles but with a catch — that the United States withdraw its missiles from Turkey.⁷⁴ It indicated no willingness to halt construction prior to such an agreement. This offer confronted the Excom with a dilemma. The possibility of such a deal had been discussed in the press and elsewhere earlier in the week.⁷⁵ The Turkish bases were without significant military value; the President had wanted the missiles dismantled a year earlier but the Turks would not agree.⁷⁶ But the President was extremely reluctant to allow such a tie-in with the Cuban problem; he did not want to win concessions on Cuba by bargaining away the rights of a NATO ally over the head of the government directly involved. He could have persuaded the Turks to agree but this would have involved extended inter-allied consultations. Hence the offer was unacceptable, particularly coming after the message of Friday night. Besides, there was considerable suspicion about Soviet intentions in view of the inconsistency of the messages.⁷⁷

The new letter therefore was a great disappointment. It meant that the crisis situation was still bad. It then appeared to turn worse. Reconnaissance planes over Cuba, which had gone unchallenged all week, were fired upon. One U-2 was shot down. Premier Castro went on television to say all U.S. planes over Cuba would henceforth be shot down. In the hope that the Soviets could regain control of the situation in Cuba, and that they wanted to, the United States did not retaliate immediately. But the Defense Department announced that, if such actions were repeated, the anti-aircraft installations would be destroyed, and it took other precautionary moves. Just at this time, as it appeared the crisis might be escalating, it was learned that all the precautions taken to control events had failed at one point. Due to a navigational error an unarmed U-2 overflew part of the Soviet Union. Fortunately the plane was guided back without incident.⁷⁸

It was decided that the best response to the latest message was simply to ignore it. The White House release a statement noting “inconsistent” and conflicting proposals from the Soviet Union and

⁷⁴ “I therefore make this proposal: We agree to remove from Cuba those means which you regard as offensive means; . . . the United States, on its part . . . will remove its similar means from Turkey.” Pachter, *op. cit.*, p.219.

⁷⁵ Max Frankel, *New York Times*, October 24, p. 1.

⁷⁶ Max Frankel, *New York Times*, October 28, p. 31. The missiles were dismantled in early 1963.

⁷⁷ One theory is that the Friday night message was simply a diversion to postpone U.S. action against Cuba. The superficially equitable Cuba-Turkey deal was then put forward in the hope that the U.S. would be pressured into accepting it. The simplest explanation is that offered by Pachter, that the messages were written in the reverse order from that in which they were received. The Cuba-Turkey letter, he suggests, was written Friday morning and, having been processed in the usual way by the Soviet Foreign Office and transmitted through normal channels, was not broadcast and did not reach the White House for 24 hours. This is plausible because the message begins with a reference to Kennedy’s Thursday letter to U Thant; it does not mention any of Friday’s events. After the United States stepped up the pressure, Khrushchev, on Friday night and perhaps without consulting his colleagues, sent a hurried, personal letter directly to Kennedy, acceding to his demands. Pachter, *op. cit.*, pp. 68-69.

⁷⁸ See Henry Brandon, “An Untold Story of the Cuban Crisis,” *Saturday Review*, Vol. XLVI, No. 10 (March 9, 1963).

reiterating the United States demand.⁷⁹ Then the President sent a letter to Premier Khrushchev acknowledging his Friday night message and accepting it as a basis for agreement. But he twice emphasized that the first requirement was that work cease on the bases and the missiles be “rendered inoperable under effective United Nations arrangements.”⁸⁰ The intervening message was ignored, not rejected. The next morning Radio Moscow broadcast Premier Khrushchev's reply, which accepted everything.⁸¹ Even before formal receipt of the letter, the White House issued a statement welcoming the Soviet decision. A quick reply was drafted to seal the bargain. Thus the open crisis ended with the objective achieved.

IV. Observations

I will not try to summarize what already has been said. It is difficult to summarize bargaining tactics. Nor will I offer any sweeping conclusions. It is a dubious if common practice to generalize from a single instance. But I will offer a couple of observations.

The first is this. The Cuban missile crisis was probably the most direct confrontation there has been in the nuclear age. Yet both participants behaved in a relatively restrained manner. It just did not resemble, let us say, one of Herman Kahn's more imaginative “scenarios.” Nor did either participant really employ any of Thomas Schelling's more flamboyant tactics of committal. The crisis did not confirm the widely held view that in an extreme conflict statesmen will act irrationally. Crises may in some ways encourage rationality. This is not, let me say, an argument in favor of crises. Nor is it intended to suggest that the works of Schelling and others do not provide useful insights. It is to suggest that we should not become so fascinated with the most ingenious and perhaps irresponsible bargaining tactics that we fail to recognize that they are not always directly applied in actual conflict.

I can elaborate on this by making the second observation. It has been indicated, I think, that most actions have a duality of either purpose or consequence, between which some balance must be struck. Such duality exists generally as well. Bargaining power can be increased by increasing one's costs in backing down. But it also can be increased by reducing one's costs in pressing forwards or the adversary's cost in retreating. The former alternative is especially “interesting,” but the latter may be more common in practice. There are advantages, in terms of pure bargaining power, in impetuous, “automated,” or irresponsible behavior; but there are also advantages, in terms of safety, in cautious and restrained behavior. The United States held the initiative throughout the crisis. Yet the President neither seized nor maintained it by suggesting that he might be unable to control events

⁷⁹ *New York Times*, October 28, p. 30.

⁸⁰ Pachter, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

⁸¹ “. . . [I]n addition to earlier instructions on the discontinuation of further work on weapons construction sites, [the Soviet government] has given a new order to dismantle the arms which you described as offensive, and to crate them and return them to the Soviet Union. . . . I regard with respect and trust the statement you made in your message of October 27, 1962, that there would be no attack, no invasion of Cuba. Then the motives which induced us to render assistance of such a kind to Cuba disappear. . . . We are prepared to reach agreement to enable representatives to verify the dismantling of these means.” *New York Times*, October 29, p. 16.

or that he was limiting his freedom of choice in determining further moves. Elaborate precautions were taken to see that quite the reverse was the case. The entire operation was characterized by the notion of "pause." It was a exercise of cautious coercion.

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