

"You've seen the actual missiles?"

THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

October 16–27, 1962
Washington, D.C.

MINUTES OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE; NIKITA KHRUSHCHEV

In the four decades after World War II, American foreign policy focused on the Cold War against communism. The Soviet Union was considered the primary threat, because of its military strength and its control of eastern Europe. As Russia and America built more nuclear missiles, with ever-greater ranges, the tension grew. When Cuban communists led by Fidel Castro overthrew the pro-American government of Fulgencio Batista in 1959, aligning Cuba with the USSR, the Soviet threat suddenly appeared just ninety miles from the Florida Keys.

Shortly after taking office, President John F. Kennedy authorized an invasion of Cuba that had been planned, very poorly, by the previous administration of Dwight D. Eisenhower. The invasion, by a force of about fifteen hundred Cuban exiles, was a fiasco. (In one planning session, the "best and the brightest," as reporter David Halberstam called them in his book of that name, were asked if they knew the size of Cuba. The questioner was a Marine Corps general who had survived the 1943 invasion of Tarawa, a Pacific atoll less than three miles long, which had been won only at the cost of almost one thousand marines and sailors. No one could tell him for certain—an alarming sign—but they guessed it was the size of Long Island, about 120 miles. Cuba is actually 750 miles long. It would stretch from New York City to Chicago.)

In early October 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis began when U.S. spy planes revealed that the Soviets were building missile and bomber bases in Cuba. On October 22, President Kennedy addressed the nation on television, and Americans waited to see if the crisis would turn into the Armageddon that nuclear doomsayers had predicted. Certainly nuclear war had never been closer. In those days, before satellites linked phones all over the world, President

Kennedy and his advisers had to read between the lines of USSR chairman Nikita Khrushchev's public announcements to find a diplomatic solution.

The crisis ended shortly after the turning point of October 27 described in the transcripts below, when Khrushchev agreed to remove the missiles. As Secretary of State Dean Rusk said, "We're eyeball to eyeball, and I think the other fellow just blinked."

Afterward, the White House and the Kremlin installed the "hot line"—a direct teletype communication link—to be used in case of future emergencies.

OCTOBER 16, A.M. MEETING

ARTHUR LUNDAHL [DIRECTOR, NATIONAL PHOTOGRAPHIC INTERPRETATION CENTER]: This is a result of the photography taken Sunday, sir.

JFK: Yeah.

LUNDAHL: There's a medium-range ballistic missile launch site and two new military encampments on the southern edge of Sierra del Rosario in west-central Cuba.

JFK: . . . How do you know this is a medium-range ballistic missile?

LUNDAHL: The length, sir.

JFK: The length?

LUNDAHL: The length of it, yes.

JFK: Is it ready to be fired?

SIDNEY GRAYBEAL [CHIEF, GUIDED MISSILE DIVISION, OFFICE OF SCIENTIFIC INTELLIGENCE, CIA]: No, sir.

JFK: How long before it can be fired?

GRAYBEAL: That depends. . . .

ROBERT MCNAMARA [SECRETARY OF DEFENSE]: . . . The question is one of readiness of . . . to fire and—and this is highly critical in forming our plans—that the time between today and the time when the readiness to fire capability develops is a very important thing.

OCTOBER 16, P.M. MEETING

JFK [TO MARSHALL CARTER, DEPUTY DIRECTOR, CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY]: Uh, General, how long would you

say we had, uh, before these—at least to the best of your ability for the ones we know—will be ready to fire?

CARTER: Well, our people estimate that these could be fully operational within two weeks. Uh, this would be the total complex. If they're the oxygen type, uh, we have no—it would be considerably longer since we don't have any indication of, uh, oxygen refueling there nor any radars . . . one of 'em, uh, one of them could be operational much sooner. Our people feel that this has been, being put in since early September. We have had two visits of a Soviet ship that has an eight-foot-hold capacity sideways. And this is the only delivery vehicle that we would have any suspicion that they came in on. And that came in late August, and one in early September. . . .

JFK: There isn't any question in your mind however, uh, that it is an intermediate-range missile?

CARTER: No, there's no question in our minds at all. . . .

DEAN RUSK [SECRETARY OF STATE]: You've seen actual missiles themselves and not just the boxes have you?

CARTER: . . . In the picture there is an actual missile. . . . There's no question in our minds.

PRIVATE NOTE, DATED OCTOBER 26, FROM
CHAIRMAN KHRUSHCHEV TO PRESIDENT KENNEDY

All the the weapons [in Cuba]—and I assure you of this—are of a defensive nature. . . . Mr. President, let us show good sense. I assure you that the ships bound for Cuba are carrying no armaments at all. The armaments needed for the defense of Cuba are already there. I do not mean to say that there have been no shipments of arms at all. No, there were such shipments. But now Cuba has already obtained the necessary weapons for defense. . . .

Let us therefore display statesmanlike wisdom. I propose: we, for our part will declare that our ships bound for Cuba are not carrying any armaments. You will declare that the United States will not invade Cuba with its troops and will not support any other forces which might intend to invade Cuba. Then the necessity for the presence of our military specialists in Cuba will be obviated.

PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT MADE OCTOBER 27

BY CHAIRMAN KHRUSHCHEV

. . . How are we, the Soviet Union, our Government, to assess your actions which are expressed in the fact that you have surrounded the Soviet Union with military bases; surrounded our allies with military bases; placed military bases literally around our country; and stationed your missile armaments there? . . . Your missiles are located in Britain, are located in Italy and are aimed against us. Your missiles are located in Turkey.

You are disturbed over Cuba. You say this disturbs you because it [Cuba] is 90 miles by sea from the coast of the United States of America. But Turkey adjoins us.

OCTOBER 27 MEETING

[This meeting was held before Kennedy officially received the second Khrushchev statement.]

JFK [READING A NEWS STORY]: "Premier Khrushchev told President Kennedy yesterday he would withdraw offensive missiles from Cuba if the United States withdrew its rockets from Turkey."

[UNKNOWN SPEAKER]: He didn't really say that, did he?

JFK: That may not be—he may be putting out another letter. . . . That wasn't the letter we received, was it?

[UNKNOWN SPEAKER]: No.

JFK: Is he supposed to be putting out a letter he's written me or putting out a statement?

PIERRE SALINGER [PRESIDENTIAL PRESS SECRETARY]: Putting out a letter he wrote you.

RUSK: Well, I think we better get—uh—(words unclear). Will you check and be sure that the letter that's coming in on the ticker is the letter that we were seeing last night. . . .

MCGEORGE BUNDY [SPECIAL ASSISTANT TO THE PRESIDENT]: . . . This would be an extremely unsettling business.

JFK: Well this is unsettling now, George, because he's got us

in a pretty good spot here, because most people will regard this as not an unreasonable proposal, I'll just tell you that. In fact, in many ways—

BUNDY: But what most people, Mr. President?

JFK: I think you're going to find it very difficult to explain why we are going to take hostile military action in Cuba, against these sites—what we've been thinking about—the thing that he's saying is, if you'll get yours out of Turkey, we'll get ours out of Cuba. I think we've got a very tough one here.

BUNDY: I don't see why we pick that track when he's offered us another track, within the last twenty-four hours. You think the public one's serious? (words unclear)

JFK: Yeah, I think you have to assume that this is their new and latest position and it's a public one.

RUSK: What would you think of releasing the letter of yesterday?

(Pause)

BUNDY: I think it has a great deal of virtue.

JFK: Yes, but I think we have to be now thinking about what our position's going to be on this one, because this is the one that's before us, and before the world.

(Short pause)

THEODORE SORENSEN [PRESIDENTIAL COUNSEL]: As between the two I think it clear that practically everyone here would favor the private proposal. . . .

ROBERT F. KENNEDY [ATTORNEY GENERAL]: How are you doing, Bob?

MCNAMARA: Well, hard to tell. You have any doubts?

RFK: Well, I think we're doing the only thing we can do and well, you know.

MCNAMARA: I think the one thing, Bobby, we ought to seriously (words unclear) we need to have two things ready, a government for Cuba, because we're going to need one (words unclear) and secondly, plans for how to respond to the Soviet Union in Europe, because sure as hell they're going to do something there.

(Mixed voices)

[UNKNOWN SPEAKER]: Suppose we make Bobby mayor of Havana.

(Mixed voices, tape ends)