

The Crisis and Its Resolution

I'm not a czarist officer who has to kill myself if I fart at a masked ball. It's better to back down than to go to war.

—*Nikita S. Khrushchev*¹

The Cuban missile crisis reminds me of two boys fighting in the schoolyard over who has the bigger stick.

—*Mikhail S. Gorbachev*²

THE OUTCOME of the missile crisis has traditionally been regarded as a triumph of American coercive diplomacy.³ John F. Kennedy exploited his country's nuclear superiority and conventional superiority in the Caribbean to impose a limited blockade of Cuba. He also prepared to mount an aerial offensive and invasion of Cuba. Confronted with superior force and resolve and offered the face-saving concession of a pledge not to invade Cuba, Khrushchev reluctantly agreed to remove the Soviet missiles. This explanation of Khrushchev's retreat captures only a small part of the much more complex calculus of both leaders.

The Cuban missile crisis is like the proverbial onion whose layers need to be peeled away one by one. In this chapter we begin by exposing the first and most visible layer: threats of force and their impact on both leaders. We argue that Kennedy's blockade and implicit threat of direct military action against Cuba had important consequences. By generating strong *mutual* fears of war, they prompted major concessions by *both* sides.

Khrushchev agreed to remove the missiles in return for a public pledge from Kennedy not to invade Cuba and a private promise to remove the American Jupiter missiles from Turkey sometime after the crisis. The outcome was a compromise. If Khrushchev had "hung tough" for a while longer, Kennedy would probably have agreed to a public exchange of missiles. To the public, who knew nothing of Kennedy's secret concession, the crisis was an unalloyed American triumph.

The second layer of the onion is domestic politics. Khrushchev and Kennedy worried deeply that concessions would undercut their political authority. As the crisis intensified, both leaders devoted considerable effort to finding ways of insulating themselves from the domestic costs of concession. It is no exaggeration to say that they became coconspirators; they cooper-

ated to find ways of making concessions while conveying the appearance of resolve.

The third and deepest layer of the onion is mutual learning and reassurance. Each leader viewed the other's behavior as extraordinarily threatening because it appeared to be directed toward purely aggressive ends. They were both reluctant to make concessions for fear they would be interpreted as signs of weakness and encourage further challenges.

The missile crisis and the palpable threat of war it raised, helped both sides to break through some of the barriers of mistrust that divided them. Through letters and back-channel contacts, Kennedy and Khrushchev developed some insight into the interests, insecurities, and constraints that shaped one another's policies. Each leader succeeded to some extent in reassuring the other about the defensive nature of his motives. This significantly reduced the perceived cost of concession. This process and its broader implications are the subject of chapter 12.

THE ONSET OF THE CRISIS

For the United States, the crisis began on 16 October, when President Kennedy was informed of the discovery of missile sites in Cuba. The night before, the CIA had notified several high-ranking administration officials about the missiles, but National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy decided not to tell the president until the following morning. He wanted to protect the secret and was concerned that late-night telephone calls or meetings would alert the press. Bundy also reasoned that his boss would profit from an undisturbed night of sleep.⁴

During the week the Ex Comm debated and prepared the administration's response to the missiles, Khrushchev assumed that all was going according to plan.⁵ On Thursday, 18 October, Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, in the country for the opening of the United Nation's General Assembly, came to the White House to talk about Berlin and Cuba. Gromyko assured Kennedy that the Soviet Union would do nothing in Berlin before the congressional elections; afterwards, there would have to be some dialogue. He complained about the American threat to Cuba, and justified the Soviet decision to send soldiers and technicians to the island as a defensive and precautionary measure.⁶

From his rocking chair, Kennedy disavowed any intention to invade Cuba and told Gromyko that the Soviet arms shipments had seriously aroused American opinion. He was under pressure to take firmer measures against Castro. He read aloud his 4 September statement warning that the introduction of offensive weapons into Cuba would have the gravest consequences for Soviet-American relations. Gromyko repeated the assurances that his government had already given the administration. The Soviet foreign minister left the White House in a jovial mood and told reporters that his discussion with the president had been "useful, very useful."⁷

Kennedy was not so buoyant. He told Dean Rusk and Llewellyn Thompson that perhaps he had made a mistake by not telling Gromyko that he knew about the Soviet missiles in Cuba. Both men assured him that he had acted wisely by keeping the knowledge to himself. Moscow should be told nothing until the president had decided on an appropriate response; premature disclosure would give Soviet leaders a tactical advantage. That evening, Dean Rusk hosted a dinner for Gromyko at the State Department and steered the conversation away from Cuba. He and his guest became embroiled in arguments over Berlin and about who had started the Cold War.⁸

Gromyko later claimed that he felt extremely uncomfortable about repeating Khrushchev's assurances because the Soviet deception was likely to provoke a serious crisis. His conversation with Kennedy "was perhaps the most difficult I have had with any of the nine presidents with whom I had dealings in my forty-nine years of service."⁹ Khrushchev had no such misgivings; he was delighted with Gromyko's performance. The Soviet foreign minister, he boasted, had "answered like a gypsy who was caught stealing a horse. 'It's not me and it's not my horse. I don't know anything.'"¹⁰

Gromyko's cables to the Presidium tell a different story. They did not emphasize the administration's concerns but rather downplayed them. Soviet "boldness" in Cuba, he advised, had compelled Washington to rethink its plans for invading Cuba. The anti-Cuba campaign had been scaled down in its intensity, and the press was now in an uproar about Berlin. "The purpose of this change in American propaganda was to divert attention from Cuba, not without the White House doing its share."¹¹ Gromyko told Ambassador Anatoliy F. Dobrynin that he was pleased with the results of his meetings with Kennedy and Rusk. Dobrynin, who had no inkling that Soviet missiles were being deployed in Cuba, was surprised that Kennedy had not pressed Gromyko harder on this question given the administration's obvious concern. In retrospect, he thinks this was a great mistake on Kennedy's part.¹²

Gromyko's attempt, as Dobrynin put it, "to play down" Kennedy's opposition to Soviet missiles in Cuba helped to lull Khrushchev into believing that all was well. Gromyko's colleagues maintain that his cable was very much in character. As one of them put it, "he stayed in power for so long because he told his superiors only what they wanted to hear." Gromyko's willingness to pander to Khrushchev had a chilling effect on his subordinates. They often felt constrained from reporting the truth as they understood it for fear that it would offend and embarrass Gromyko.¹³

The View from Moscow

On Monday, 22 October, Soviet officials learned that something extraordinary was afoot in Washington. That morning's *New York Times*, which was on the newsstands the evening before, reported a crisis atmosphere in Washington, a major military buildup in the Caribbean, and the expectation that the president would address the nation on television.¹⁴ At 6:00 P.M., one

hour before the president was to go on the air, Dean Rusk briefed Ambassador Dobrynin about the contents of his speech. Dobrynin refused to believe that his country had sent missiles to Cuba. When Rusk showed him the U-2 photographs, “he aged ten years before my eyes.” Dobrynin left the meeting “badly shaken.”¹⁵

In Moscow, Khrushchev scheduled a late-night meeting of the Presidium. It was held in a large hall in the Kremlin, two rooms away from Khrushchev’s study. In attendance were all the Presidium members in Moscow, alternate members, Central Committee Secretaries, and many top officials from the foreign and defense ministries. About a hour before Kennedy spoke, at 2 A.M. Moscow time, the text of his speech was transmitted to the foreign ministry by the American embassy. It was relayed by telephone to Oleg Troyanovsky at the Kremlin, who provided an on-the-spot translation of relevant passages for the Presidium.¹⁶

Kennedy’s announcement of the “quarantine” was seen to leave room for political maneuver, “the more so because the President called the blockade a ‘quarantine’ which created an illusion of still greater vagueness.” Because it contained no ultimatum or direct invasion threat, the speech encouraged the illusion that Kennedy might yet accommodate himself to the presence of the missiles.¹⁷

Following a lengthy discussion, Khrushchev decided on the broad outlines of a reply and instructed Deputy Foreign Minister Vasiliy V. Kuznetsov to have his staff submit a final draft the next day.¹⁸ Khrushchev recommended to everyone present that they spend the night in the Kremlin so that foreign correspondents would not get the impression that Soviet leaders were anxious or frightened.¹⁹ This was a futile ruse. Ambassador Foy Kohler cabled Washington that “the remarks of almost every Soviet official” made it clear that the Soviet leadership was really “shaken.”²⁰

Khrushchev subsequently acknowledged that the entire Soviet leadership was under great stress.

I remember a period of six or seven days when the danger was particularly acute. Seeking to take the heat off the situation somehow, I suggested to the other members of the government: Comrades, let’s go to the Bolshoi Theater this evening. Our own people as well as foreign eyes will notice, and perhaps it will calm them down. They’ll say to themselves, ‘If Khrushchev and our other leaders are able to go to the opera at a time like this, then at least tonight we can sleep peacefully.’ We were trying to disguise our own anxiety, which was intense.²¹

Another indication of stress was Khrushchev’s inability at first to come to grips with the gravity of the situation. Soviet officials report that it took two or three days for him to confront the reality that if he did not remove the missile the Americans almost certainly would.²² Vasiliy Kuznetsov dismissed Khrushchev’s blistering messages to Kennedy on 23 and 24 October as attempts to conceal his confusion. Without any guidance from the Kremlin, the foreign ministry was unable to act. This put Ambassador Dobrynin in a

particularly difficult position. He received no response to his cable describing his talk with Robert Kennedy in the Soviet embassy on the evening of 23 October. In the absence of instructions, Dobrynin could not acknowledge Kennedy's assertion that there were Soviet missiles in Cuba. He nevertheless hastened to inform Moscow of the gravity of the situation and of the possibility that the United States would attack Cuba.²³

Soviet Policymaking

Crisis policy was made by Khrushchev in consultation with a group of top officials. They included President of the Supreme Soviet Leonid I. Brezhnev, Prime Minister Aleksei N. Kosygin, First Deputy Prime Minister Anastas I. Mikoyan, First Deputy Foreign Minister Vasiliiy Kuznetsov, Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko, Secretary of the Central Committee Leonid F. Ilychev, Chairman of the Committee on State Security (KGB) Aleksandr N. Shelepin, Minister of Defense Marshal Rodion Ya. Malinovsky, Commander of the Strategic Rocket Forces Marshal Sergei S. Biryuzov, Director of the Central Committee's Department for Relations with Socialist Countries Yuri Andropov, Khrushchev foreign-policy aide Oleg Troyanovsky, Presidium members Petr N. Demichev, Frol R. Kozlov, Boris N. Ponomarev, Dimitri S. Polyansky, and Mikhail A. Suslov. Pavel Satyukov and Aleksei Adzhubei—editors-in-chief, respectively, of *Pravda* and *Izvestiya*—and various officials from the Central Committee and foreign ministry were also invited to some of the meetings at which the crisis was discussed.

Khrushchev conferred with these men individually, in small groups, and in full Presidium sessions. These meetings generally took place in his Kremlin office, but sometimes at his home or the suburban government mansion in Novo-Ogarevo.²⁴ He also consulted with allied leaders. He corresponded almost daily with Fidel Castro but did not inform him of his negotiations with President Kennedy.²⁵ Critical decisions and letters to Kennedy were approved by the Presidium but in every case reflected Khrushchev's will.²⁶

Khrushchev had two working groups assisting him. The first, in the Central Committee, was led by Andropov. The second, in the foreign office, reported to Gromyko. It was composed of Andrei M. Alexandrov-Argentov, Felix N. Kovaliev, Lev I. Mendelevich, Mikhail N. Smirnovsky, and Leonid M. Zamyatin, with Oleg Grinevsky as its secretary. Both groups saw Khrushchev's correspondence with Kennedy and Castro and relevant embassy cables. Alexandrov was, inter alia, responsible for liaison between the KGB and foreign ministry, and did his best to ensure that relevant information collected by the KGB was made available to both groups.²⁷

There was no firm division of labor, although of the two groups the one in the Central Committee was the senior. Andropov and Gromyko kept in close touch. Gromyko often passed on memorandums and drafts from the foreign-ministry to the Central Committee group. But sometimes he submitted them directly to Khrushchev. The foreign-ministry group reworked and

polished drafts of Khrushchev's letters to Kennedy. Unlike other Soviet leaders, Khrushchev drafted much of his own correspondence. During the missile crisis, he dictated letters to Kennedy. Some of them were ten pages and "long-winded and rambling." The foreign office group worked hard to transform them into coherent and succinct letters for his approval.²⁸

Neither working group staffed options the way the Ex Comm did; this was simply not done in the Soviet Union. Officials waited for their superiors to choose a policy line and only then responded with more detailed studies or plans for implementation. "The game in the Soviet foreign ministry," according to Ambassador Grinevsky, "was to guess the policy choices that would be made and be ready to respond." Most of the staff papers analyzed American policy and intentions; this was a much safer enterprise.²⁹

In their meetings, members of both groups did not hesitate to discuss the key questions of the crisis. What was the risk? How should the Soviet Union respond to the blockade? How could war be avoided? How can Khrushchev retreat and save face? The foreign-ministry group had lengthy private discussions about what would happen if the United States attacked the missiles or invaded Cuba, possibilities considered very likely. By Thursday, the third day of the crisis, there was a consensus within the group that the missiles would have to be withdrawn. There were significant disagreements about how to respond to an American attack against the missiles or Cuba. Some officials maintained that the Soviet Union should do nothing, that the loss of Cuba, galling as it would be, was still preferable to World War III. Others believed that the Soviet Union should take military reprisals of some kind.³⁰

The Soviet Dilemma

Khrushchev was in a thoroughly unenviable position. The missiles in Cuba were vulnerable to American attack, as was the Castro regime. If Kennedy used force—and his public commitment to remove the missiles and extensive military preparations made that a real possibility—Khrushchev knew that he could protect neither the missiles nor the Cuban government.³¹ Prudence dictated accommodation. But to withdraw the missiles in response to American threats would entail serious political and foreign-policy costs.

If he pulled the missiles out, Khrushchev would appear weak and indecisive at home and abroad. His domestic political opponents would brand him as the author of an impractical and provocative scheme. Militants would accuse him of losing his nerve. Sergei Khrushchev says his father "did *not* want to run the blockade, but the Soviet Union would have experienced a national humiliation if he had failed to challenge it." Khrushchev reluctantly ordered a ship to proceed to Cuba, fully expecting the Americans to fire on it. "He was surprised by Kennedy's restraint and wisdom when the navy did not sink it. Kennedy rose in his esteem. Nikita Sergeevich thought that this was one of the most dangerous moments of the crisis."³²

Khrushchev also faced a delicate situation with Castro, whom Khrushchev thought “a young and hotheaded man.” When Khrushchev announced that he would withdraw the missiles in return for an American promise not to invade Cuba, Castro was adamantly opposed.³³ “You don’t know Americans,” he told Alekseev and Mikoyan. “Any agreement with them is just paper. . . . They only understand the language of force.”³⁴ Khrushchev had to consider the possibility that Castro would refuse to cooperate with a decision to withdraw the missiles and seriously complicate his relations with the United States.

Even if Castro did not block withdrawal of the missiles, he might still excoriate Khrushchev for cowardice in the face of American threats. Cuban disenchantment with Khrushchev would be exploited by China, intent as it was on convincing other communist parties that the Soviet Union was a “paper tiger.” Cuban and Chinese criticism would greatly intensify Khrushchev’s political embarrassment at home.

Collectively, the expected costs of retreat provided a strong incentive for Khrushchev to stand firm and deny the dangers that lay ahead. To Khrushchev’s credit, he did not succumb to wishful thinking a second time. He had persevered with the missile deployment in the face of warnings from his foreign-policy advisors and President Kennedy. The American blockade and the mounting preparations for an invasion of Cuba soon brought him back to reality. Aleksei Adzhubei reports that his father-in-law slowly came to the realization that “he had put himself out on a limb that Kennedy would saw off unless he climbed down.” Once Khrushchev overcame his anger, he sought to end the crisis peacefully “with the maximum possible result for us.”³⁵ His biggest worry “was that the American military would force Kennedy into attacking Cuba before some kind of acceptable accommodation could be found.”³⁶

Khrushchev’s Strategy

As much by default as by design, Khrushchev pursued a two-pronged strategy. By appearing tough and uncompromising, he tried to extract concessions from Kennedy in return for withdrawing the missiles. At home, he sought to convince his Presidium colleagues that failure to remove the missiles would provoke an American invasion of Cuba.

Khrushchev implemented his strategy with considerable skill. To keep the pressure on Kennedy, Soviet work crews stepped up the pace of construction at the Cuban missile sites.³⁷ In Europe, Soviet and Warsaw Pact Armed forces announced an alert.³⁸ The Ministry of Defense canceled all leaves and deferred the impending release of troops in the Strategic Rocket Forces, Air Defense Forces, and submarine fleet.³⁹ In Hiroshima, the head of the Soviet news agency TASS announced that American ships would be sunk if they attacked Soviet ships.⁴⁰ Khrushchev’s public statements and messages to Kennedy were equally uncompromising. He rejected the president’s demand

that the Soviet missiles be withdrawn as “arbitrary,” and denounced the Cuban blockade as an illegal “act of aggression” that was “pushing mankind toward the abyss of a world missile nuclear war.” He warned that Soviet ship captains had orders not to tolerate “piratical actions of American ships on the high seas” and would defend themselves if necessary.⁴¹ By Wednesday morning, 24 October, *Gagarin* and *Komiles*, two Soviet merchantmen, were only a few miles from the blockade line.⁴²

Khrushchev was all bluster in his interview with William Knox, President of Westinghouse International. In Moscow on business, Knox was summoned to the Kremlin on Wednesday and subjected to a three-hour harangue. Khrushchev told him that Soviet ships would challenge the blockade and Soviet submarines would sink American destroyers if they interfered with Soviet shipping. He warned Knox that he would not be the first to fire a nuclear weapon but “if the U.S. insists on war, we’ll all meet together in hell.”⁴³ Dobrynin gave the same message to Robert Kennedy on 23 October. He told the attorney general that “our captains had an order to continue their course to Cuba, for the action[s] of President Kennedy were unlawful.” His answer “made Kennedy a bit nervous.”⁴⁴ In retrospect, Dobrynin considered this to have been the tensest moment of the crisis. He watched on television as the first ship reached the blockade line and remembered breathing “an enormous sigh of relief” when it was allowed to pass through.⁴⁵

Despite his threats, Khrushchev was careful not to provoke a military clash. Within hours of learning about the blockade, he ordered Soviet ships en route to Cuba to stop and the sixteen carrying arms to return to the Soviet Union. Soviet admirals advised him that there was no chance of running the blockade or of opposing the Americans at sea. The Soviet navy had few surface ships in the Atlantic and only the submarines normally on station. The Americans, Khrushchev was told, had mustered overwhelming naval and air forces at short notice.⁴⁶

All sixteen vessels with military cargoes, including five carrying missiles and one suspected of transporting nuclear warheads, turned back after the quarantine was announced and before it went into effect.⁴⁷ Two of the ships that turned back, *Poltava* and *Kimovsk*, had been the prime targets for boarding. *Kimovsk* was a large-hatch ship that had previously delivered military equipment to Cuba. *Poltava*, designated by the American navy as its “first target,” was thought to be carrying nuclear weapons.⁴⁸ The ships that halted, tankers and freighters with nonmilitary cargoes, stood dead in the water, some of them for two days, and then resumed their journey toward Cuba. No Soviet ship reached the quarantine line until Thursday, 25 October.

Khrushchev’s strategy was risky. In the hope of extracting concessions from the Americans, he rejected their demand and raised the threat of war. He assumed that Kennedy was as anxious to avoid a military clash as he was. If the president wanted to exploit the missile deployment as a pretext to invade Cuba, Khrushchev’s truculence would backfire. So could the round-

the-clock work on the missile sites. Khrushchev may have hoped that fully operational missiles would deter an American attack. Some of his advisors worried that stepped-up efforts to ready the missiles could provoke an attack from an administration anxious to prevent the United States from becoming more vulnerable to nuclear attack.⁴⁹

Even if Khrushchev's judgment of Kennedy was correct, it was not clear how far the president could be pushed before he would feel compelled to attack either the missiles or Cuba. Military action by either side could set in motion an unstoppable spiral of escalation. In his messages to the president, Khrushchev repeatedly warned of this danger. Timing was everything. Khrushchev had to remain uncompromising long enough for Kennedy to soften his terms, but not so long that he despaired of negotiating an acceptable settlement and succumbed to the mounting pressures to order an air strike or invasion.

THE VIEW FROM WASHINGTON

On Monday evening, 22 October, President Kennedy proclaimed a "naval quarantine" to prevent the further shipment of offensive weapons to Cuba. To enforce what was in effect a partial blockade, the U.S. navy put 183 ships into the Caribbean and Atlantic sea lanes. Naval aircraft flew hundreds of sorties to spot, identify, and plot the course of every vessel approaching Cuba from the mid-Atlantic. The army and air force prepared for military action against Cuba. The assembled invasion force included five Army and one Marine divisions—more than 140,000 troops—supported by 579 ground- and carrier-based combat aircraft. American strategic forces were also brought up to an unprecedented state of readiness, Defense Condition (DEFCON) II. Many more nuclear armed B-52 bombers went airborne and as many ICBM missile silos as was possible were raised to full-alert status.⁵⁰

The President's Dilemma

By Saturday, 27 October, the prospect of war weighed heavily on Kennedy's mind. The blockade had done nothing to stop construction at the missile sites; American intelligence reported that Soviet construction crews were working around the clock to make the sites fully operational. Khrushchev appeared interested in resolving the crisis, but in return for withdrawing the Soviet missiles in Cuba, he insisted that the United States give a formal pledge not to invade Cuba and remove its Jupiter missiles from Turkey. When the Ex Comm adjourned that afternoon, the president passed out sealed envelopes to all the participants. Inside were instructions for them and their families if they and other top officials should have to evacuate

Washington in the next day or two for an unspecified wartime command center.⁵¹ Kennedy estimated that the odds of the Soviets starting a war were “somewhere between one out of three and even.”⁵²

Kennedy had chosen the blockade over the air strike because he regarded it as less risky. A vocal minority in the Ex Comm had favored an air strike and pressed for it now that the blockade seemed to have failed. Paul Nitze, John McCone, Douglas Dillon, and Maxwell Taylor all urged an air strike on the grounds that the blockade had done nothing to stop construction at the missile sites. McNamara remembers that “Taylor was *absolutely convinced* that we had to attack Cuba.”⁵³ Some advocates of the air strike thought it should be limited to the Soviet missiles and their bases. Others wanted to go after a wide range of military and economic targets as well. All were convinced that Khrushchev would not dare respond to an air strike with military action of his own.⁵⁴

The air force steadfastly opposed a limited or so-called “surgical” air strike, and demanded an attack of some 500 sorties against the missiles preceded by a “softening up” strike of 1,190 sorties against related military targets. This was to be followed by six more days of massive strikes. The bombing was expected to prepare the way for the invasion the joint chiefs insisted would have to follow a day or two later. The chiefs advised Defense Secretary McNamara that the invasion would lead to “a bloody battle” in which the Cuban and Soviet forces would sustain “heavy casualties.” All the preparations for the air strike and invasion were ordered to be in place by Monday, 29 October.⁵⁵

The Ex Comm transcript for 27 October indicates that not everyone was as sanguine as the hawks. Some officials voiced concern that even a limited air strike would provoke some kind of Soviet reprisal, most probably against Berlin or the Jupiter missile bases in Turkey. McNamara was absolutely convinced of this and said so three times during the course of the day’s deliberations.⁵⁶ He subsequently reaffirmed his belief “that if we initiated military action, *something* would follow. There would have been a Soviet response *somewhere*—and that was simply unforeseeable. I didn’t expect a strategic exchange, but I just didn’t know where things would go.”⁵⁷ Dean Rusk thought that Khrushchev would have “serious problems controlling his own Politburo [sic].”⁵⁸ Llewellyn Thompson worried that Khrushchev was sufficiently impulsive to order some kind of military retaliation that “would result eventually, if not immediately, in nuclear war.” Thompson, whose judgment on Soviet matters carried great weight with the president, had warned earlier that the prestige and honor of the Red Army would require retaliation if the United States killed Soviet military personnel in Cuba.⁵⁹

McNamara described the most likely scenario of tit-for-tat escalation. The United States would strike Cuba and have to follow with an invasion. The Soviet Union would respond by attacking the Jupiter missiles in Turkey.

That would compel American retaliation against Soviet air and naval bases in and around the Black Sea. “That was the *minimum* response we would consider, and I would say that it is *darned dangerous*.”⁶⁰ The president agreed. The consequence of an air strike, he warned “is going to be very grave [words unclear], and very bloody.”⁶¹

The Search for a Compromise

Early accounts of the crisis portray Kennedy as prepared to order an air strike if the blockade failed to achieve its purpose.⁶² Fortunately, it did not prove necessary; on Sunday, Khrushchev agreed to remove his missiles in return for a pledge not to invade Cuba. Khrushchev’s “capitulation” is generally attributed to Kennedy’s resolve and his willingness to make a “face-saving” concession on Cuba.

Aleksandr Fomin, KGB station chief in Washington, had suggested a non-invasion pledge as a possible means of resolving the crisis. Khrushchev had also asked for such a pledge in his Friday letter to the president. These communications set the stage for Robert Kennedy’s meeting with Soviet Ambassador Anatoliy Dobrynin on Saturday evening, 27 October. At this meeting, Kennedy presented Dobrynin with a de facto ultimatum. As one Kennedy confidant put it: “He told the Ambassador that we would remove the missiles from Cuba if we did not hear by the following day that the Russians were willing to remove them.”⁶³ Kennedy also carried a conciliatory message from the president: a letter offering an American pledge not to invade Cuba in return for withdrawal of the Soviet missiles in Cuba. Students of the crisis have generally regarded the Kennedy-Dobrynin meeting as the catalyst for Khrushchev’s decision, made the following day, to accept Kennedy’s terms for ending the crisis.

Robert Kennedy’s memoir sheds some light on his Saturday night meeting with Dobrynin. That morning, the White House had received a message from Khrushchev demanding the removal of the American missiles in Turkey as a quid pro quo for withdrawal of the Soviet missiles in Cuba.⁶⁴ The president instructed his brother to tell Dobrynin that he would not withdraw the Jupiter missiles under Soviet pressure but “had ordered their removal some time ago, and it was our judgment that, within a short time after this crisis was over, those missiles would be gone.”⁶⁵ The attorney general brandished a stick as well as holding out a carrot. He told Dobrynin that pressure was mounting within the government for military action to remove the missiles and that his brother could not hold out much longer. The ambassador “should understand that if they did not remove those bases, we would remove them.”⁶⁶

The president had not in fact decided what to do if Khrushchev spurned his offer. He was very reluctant to attack Cuba and was contemplating further concessions if they were necessary to end the crisis. On 24 October, Dean Rusk, acting on presidential instructions, cabled Raymond Hare, the

American ambassador in Turkey, that the administration was considering removal of the Jupiter missiles. Hare was asked to evaluate the political consequences for Turkey of several different scenarios, including “outright removal” of the Jupiters.⁶⁷ He reported back on 26 October that Turkey would “deeply resent” any sacrifice of its interests “to appease an enemy,” and advised that if the administration decided to remove the Jupiters, it do so on a “strictly secret basis with the Soviets.”⁶⁸

From the very outset of the crisis the Kennedy brothers had recognized the need for compromise. On Sunday evening, 21 October, a day before the quarantine speech, Robert Kennedy confided to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. that “We will have to make a deal in the end.”⁶⁹ That morning, the president expressed the same opinion to British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan.⁷⁰ The most salient bargain was an exchange of missiles: Soviet missiles in Cuba for American missiles in Turkey.

The Ex Comm discussed the possibility of an exchange of missiles almost from the beginning of their deliberations; on Wednesday morning, 19 October, the president had posed the question of removing the Jupiters.⁷¹ Robert McNamara and Assistant Secretary of State Harlan Cleveland had argued that some kind of trade would be necessary to get the missiles out of Cuba. McNamara had suggested “that we might have to withdraw our missiles both in Italy and Turkey.” He even conceded that the United States might ultimately have to abandon Guantanamo.⁷² United Nations Ambassador Adlai E. Stevenson had urged the president to consider such a deal when he was first informed about the discovery of Soviet missile bases.⁷³ Averell Harriman also favored a missile trade as a face-saving way out of the crisis for Khrushchev. On Wednesday, 22 October, he advised the president that it might help Khrushchev to overcome military opposition to withdrawal of the missiles and facilitate a “swing” toward improved relations with the United States. He wrote a second memorandum on Friday.⁷⁴

On Saturday morning, the president weighed the pros and cons of an exchange of missiles before the Ex Comm. He worried that Khrushchev’s insistence on a missile trade would be very difficult to oppose. “We’re going to be in an insupportable position, if this becomes his proposal.”⁷⁵ Kennedy also became increasingly open about his disenchantment with military action as the day wore on. He was troubled by the likely domestic and foreign-policy repercussions of an air strike that led to an invasion of Cuba, as the joint chiefs insisted it must. He told the Ex Comm: “We can’t very well invade Cuba with all its toil, and long as it’s going to be, when we could have gotten them [the missiles] out by making a deal on the same missiles in Turkey. If that’s part of the record I don’t see that we’ll have a very good war.”⁷⁶ “When the blood starts to flow,” he warned, public opinion at home and in Europe would turn against a president who had gone to war for the sake of “obsolescent missiles.” How could he convince the American people that a missile trade was a sensible action *before* the fighting began? It would be seen as a sellout to the Soviet Union.⁷⁷ “If we take no action or if we take

action,” the president opined, “they’re all going to be saying we should have done the reverse.”⁷⁸

The “hawks” were horrified by the prospect of a missile trade, but other key members of the Ex Comm, in continuous session that afternoon, expressed guarded support. Dean Rusk and George Ball thought that a trade could successfully be explained to the Europeans. Theodore Sorensen had submitted a memorandum to the president making the same argument.⁷⁹ Robert Kennedy spoke in favor of a trade. As he and Rusk were almost always on opposite sides, the fact that they now advocated the same course of action was significant. Rusk and Bundy believe that the president was strongly influenced by their concurrence.⁸⁰

The Ex Comm adjourned after agreeing on a reply to Khrushchev, the famous Trollope ploy.⁸¹ Kennedy would ignore Khrushchev’s morning message demanding withdrawal of the Jupiter missiles and respond instead to his message of the previous evening, proposing withdrawal of the Soviet missiles in Cuba in return for an American pledge not to invade Cuba.⁸² The president’s letter, drafted by Sorensen and Robert Kennedy, insisted on “appropriate United Nations observation and supervision” of the withdrawal of the missiles. It made no mention of the Jupiters.⁸³

The Secret Deal

After the Ex Comm meeting, the president and eight Ex Comm members (Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara, Robert Kennedy, McGeorge Bundy, Theodore Sorensen, George Ball, Roswell Gilpatric, and Llewellyn Thompson) reconvened in the Oval Office to discuss the contents of an oral message that Robert Kennedy would convey that evening to Ambassador Dobrynin. The attorney general was tapped for this task on the advice of Llewellyn Thompson, who thought the use of such an unusual channel for the president’s message would give it special salience in Moscow. “The Russians having a conspirational tone of mind,” Dean Rusk explained, “we thought they would pay more attention to what Bobby was saying more than anyone else short of the President himself.”⁸⁴

McGeorge Bundy recalls that the first part of the message “was simple, stern, and quickly decided—that the time had come to agree on the basis set out in the president’s new letter: no Soviet missiles in Cuba, and no U.S. invasion. Otherwise future American action was unavoidable.”⁸⁵ Rusk proposed that Kennedy should tell Dobrynin that the administration would not enter into an explicit arrangement about the Jupiters, but that the president was determined to remove them after the Soviet missiles came out of Cuba. His suggestion was quickly accepted by the group and approved by the president with the caveat that no one outside the assembled group be told anything about this part of the message. Robert Kennedy was to stress the need for secrecy to Dobrynin; the Jupiters would not be withdrawn if Moscow made any mention of the president’s promise.⁸⁶

The meeting in the Oval Office lasted only about twenty minutes. Bundy believes that it was significant that Rusk had authored the proposal regarding the Jupiters. Everyone thought of him as “NATO’s representative” on the Ex Comm. When Rusk made it clear that he regarded the Jupiters as “a phony issue” and did not believe their removal would cause a serious problem for Turkey or the European allies if it was put properly, it “made it easier for the rest of us to support it.”⁸⁷

Rusk returned to his office at the State Department. From there he telephoned Robert Kennedy to emphasize again that he convey the impression that the United States would not enter into an agreement concerning the Jupiters. The president’s intention to remove them was “a piece of information” that was being passed on to the Soviets. Kennedy told Rusk that he had just talked to Dobrynin who, when told that the missiles in Turkey were coming out, exclaimed: “This is a very important piece of information.”⁸⁸ The air force had been working hard to deploy the Jupiters, and the first missile had become operational on the day Kennedy announced the quarantine. As far as we know, the Soviet Union had no evidence that the administration had previously tried to halt or slow the deployment and any claim to this effect by Robert Kennedy would have been regarded as a rather transparent attempt to save face. From Moscow’s perspective, a promise to remove the Jupiters was a concession, and an important one.

Protecting the President

When the Jupiters came out of Turkey six months later, there was speculation that there had been a secret understanding with Moscow. The administration was publicly outraged. In January 1963, Dean Rusk assured the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that no “deal” or “trade” had directly or indirectly been made with regard to the Jupiter missiles.⁸⁹ McNamara told the same thing to the House Appropriations Committee.⁹⁰

“We misled our colleagues, our countrymen, our successors, and our allies,” McGeorge Bundy admitted many years later. “We denied in every forum that there was any deal, because the few who knew about it at the time were in unanimous agreement that any other course would have had explosive and destructive effects on the security of the U.S. and its allies.”⁹¹ In a jointly authored *Time* magazine article in 1982, McNamara, Rusk, Ball, Gilpatric, Sorensen, and Bundy argued that any disclosure of the full contents of Kennedy’s discussion with Dobrynin would have been “misread” as a “concession granted in fear at the expense of an ally.”⁹² McNamara insisted that even a secret trade would have set a dangerous precedent. “If they [the Soviets] could get away with that, what else would they do? We saw in Berlin the previous years that they would go just as far as they thought they could. There was a slicing of the salami; slice by slice they were moving ahead, or trying to.” Kennedy and his principal advisors believed that “it was absolutely essential” that “we not convey to the

Soviets the impression that we either were weak or would behave in a weak fashion.”⁹³

The Kennedy inner circle was so worried about the consequences of publicity that they rewrote history. In their public accounts of the crisis, administration officials and journalists to whom they confided reported that the president had ordered the Jupiters out of Turkey *before* the crisis.⁹⁴ Roger Hilsman, head of State Department intelligence, described an August National Security Action Memorandum that allegedly had ordered the missiles removed.⁹⁵ In his best-selling book, newsman Elie Abel described how Kennedy told Under Secretary of State George Ball in August 1962 to “press the matter” with Turkey even at “some political cost to the United States.”⁹⁶ The president, Abel contended, assumed that the missiles had been withdrawn and was furious to learn from Khrushchev that they were still there.⁹⁷

The State Department was made the scapegoat. According to Robert Kennedy’s memoir, Dean Rusk failed to persuade the Turkish government to agree to the removal of the missiles. The president then ordered them out, but the State Department failed to push the matter in the face of vigorous objections from Turkey. Kennedy described his brother as the unwitting victim of State’s duplicity. “The president believed he was president and that, his wishes having been made clear, they would be followed and the missiles removed. He therefore dismissed the matter from his mind. Now, he learned that the failure to follow up on this matter had permitted the same obsolete Turkish missiles to become hostages of the Soviet Union.”⁹⁸ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. repeated the story in his 1978 biography of Robert Kennedy.⁹⁹

These accounts are inaccurate and misleading. In chapter 2 we described how Kennedy had persevered with the deployment of the Jupiter missiles in spite of the misgivings of former President Eisenhower and many senior national security officials.¹⁰⁰ Kennedy did *not* order the missiles withdrawn prior to the crisis, although he had expressed interest in finding some way of halting the deployment. The National Security Action Memorandum to which Hilsman refers merely instructed the Defense Department to look into the question of “what action can be taken to get [the] Jupiter missiles out of Turkey?”¹⁰¹

Kennedy’s surprise and anger at learning that the missiles had not been removed is a myth. A National Security Action Memorandum drafted less than a month before the crisis reveals that he knew that the missiles were still in the process of being deployed in Turkey.¹⁰² Dean Rusk and George Ball confirm that Kennedy knew about the missiles; Rusk had briefed him about Turkish opposition to their removal, and he had accepted the need for delay. Rusk denies that the president expressed any anger toward him then or later in the crisis.¹⁰³

McGeorge Bundy, author of the August National Security Action Memorandum, tells the same story. His memorandum, sent out on 23 August, had asked what could be done to get the missiles out of Turkey, but no decision had been taken before the crisis. “For a year and a half,” Bundy remem-

bered, Kennedy knew that “the Turkish missiles could be removed only over the resistance of both the Turks and Washington’s custodians of NATO solidarity (of whom, in one mood, he was the foremost). He had not pressed the matter home.” The president later regretted his failure to act and was extremely annoyed during the crisis when the Jupiters appeared to stand in the way of a settlement. “In his anger he once or twice expressed himself as if he had given orders that had not been obeyed. But it was not so.”¹⁰⁴

The “disinformation” campaign served its purpose; it allowed the president to make a critical concession beyond the glare of publicity. On 29 October, McNamara ordered the Jupiters in Turkey dismantled. The following March, the State Department reluctantly confirmed press reports that the missiles were being removed.¹⁰⁵ Seven years after the crisis, the State Department story helped to defuse the revelation in Robert Kennedy’s posthumous memoir that the president had indeed made a concession on the Jupiters to the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁶

A More Secret Deal

Khrushchev subsequently acknowledged the “deal” he had struck with Kennedy over the Jupiters: “President Kennedy told us through his brother that in exchange he would remove missiles from Turkey. He said: ‘If this leaks into the press, I will deny it. I give my word I will do this, but this promise should not be made public.’ He also said that he would remove the missiles from Italy and he did that.”¹⁰⁷

Anatoliy Dobrynin confirms Khrushchev’s account. Robert Kennedy never told him, as alleged in his memoir, that the Americans had been planning all along to remove the missiles. The president committed himself to their removal when Dobrynin and Robert Kennedy agreed that a concession on the Jupiters might help resolve the crisis. On Monday, 29 October, Dobrynin handed Kennedy a confidential letter from Khrushchev to the president summarizing his understanding of the arrangement. The attorney general read the letter and Dobrynin said: “‘Yes, we agree to remove our missiles in exchange for a firm pledge not to attack Cuba, and also with [the] full understanding that the American missiles would be removed from Turkey.’” Kennedy explained to Dobrynin “that it would be very hard for them to accept this promise publicly.” Implementation would also take time; the Jupiters had been authorized by NATO, and NATO would have to approve their withdrawal. “He would require time for that. But he would give his word, on behalf of the president, that they would guarantee to remove them within some 3, 4, or 5 months.”¹⁰⁸

Ambassador Dobrynin’s recollections elicited a startling admission from Theodore Sorensen. Kennedy’s memoir, he explained, was “very explicit that this [the withdrawal of the Jupiters] was part of the deal; but at that time it was still a secret even on the American side.” Kennedy was assassinated before his manuscript was published, and Sorensen was asked by the

publisher to review it for accuracy. “I took it upon myself to edit that out of his diaries, and that is why the ambassador is somewhat justified in saying that the diaries are not as explicit as his conversation.”¹⁰⁹ Kennedy’s disingenuous description of the State Department’s duplicity may have been another example of Sorensen’s “creative editing.”

Sorensen insisted that the administration had refused to sign a letter drafted by Dobrynin describing the president’s promise to withdraw the Jupiters as part of the arrangement reached by the two governments. The eight members of the Ex Comm who had met in the Oval Office to give Robert Kennedy his instructions were reconvened by the president and collectively “decided not to accept that letter but to return it to the Soviets as though it had never been opened.”¹¹⁰

Ambassador Dobrynin revealed that he had had three secret meetings with Robert Kennedy during the acute phase of the crisis. The first meeting was at the Soviet embassy on Tuesday, 23 October, the day after the president had proclaimed his quarantine. The two men met alternatively at the Soviet embassy and the Justice Department “in the small hours of the night” or occasionally in the morning. The conversations were “animated” and “tough.” “Robert Kennedy was . . . emotional; it was not so easy to conduct a discussion with him. But, all the same, within reasonable limits, we conducted these conversations.”¹¹¹

According to Dobrynin, the critical meeting took place on Saturday evening, 27 October, at the Justice Department. Kennedy spoke at length about the threat to American security represented by the Soviet missiles in Cuba. Dobrynin emphasized Cuba’s legitimate concern for its security and how it was threatened by the United States. Acting on his own initiative—he had no relevant instructions from Moscow and did not even have the text of the message that Khrushchev had sent that morning to the president—he raised the question of the Jupiters in Turkey and the danger they posed to the Soviet Union. “You installed these weapons near our borders. So how come you raise such a racket about missiles in Cuba?” Kennedy replied:

If that was the only obstacle to the settlement . . . the President saw no insurmountable difficulties that could stand in the way. The main difficulty for the President was public discussion of the question concerning Turkey. The siting of missile bases in Turkey was a result of a formal decision adopted by the NATO Council. For the President to announce now by unilateral decision the withdrawal of the missile bases . . . would mean dealing a blow to the whole structure of NATO and the position of the United States as the Organization’s leader at a time when it was already wrestling with many decisive issues, as the Soviet government undoubtedly knew.

Nevertheless, President Kennedy was ready to come to terms with Khrushchev on this issue as well. It would probably take four or five months for the United States to withdraw its missiles from Turkey. This was the minimum time which the U.S. administration would require with due regard to the proce-

ture existing within NATO. The exchange of opinion of the whole Turkish aspect of the problem could be continued through himself, Robert Kennedy, and the Soviet Ambassador. Right now, however, there was nothing the President could say publicly about Turkey in that context. Robert Kennedy warned that what he was telling me about Turkey was strictly confidential and was known in Washington to just another two or three people besides his brother and himself.¹¹²

Dean Rusk's Revelation

For many years, Dean Rusk protected an equally explosive secret about the events of Saturday night. After Robert Kennedy had left the Oval Office for his meeting with Ambassador Dobrynin, discussion turned to the question of how the administration could mask the withdrawal of the Jupiters. When the other officials departed, Rusk stayed behind for a private talk with the president. Kennedy wondered what he would do if Khrushchev failed to accept the terms outlined in his letter and his brother's conversation with Ambassador Dobrynin. Kennedy again voiced concern that an attack on Cuba would rapidly escalate into a Soviet-American war. To forestall this, he was willing to consider ending the crisis on Khrushchev's terms: a pledge not to invade Cuba and a public missile trade. "It was clear to me," Rusk recalled, "that President Kennedy would not let the Jupiters in Turkey become an obstacle to the removal of the missiles sites in Cuba because the Jupiters were coming out in any case."¹¹³

Rusk suggested a face-saving way for Kennedy to agree to Khrushchev's demand for a public missile exchange. Rather than replying directly to Khrushchev, he should agree to a proposal embodying Khrushchev's conditions that United Nations' Secretary General U Thant would be asked to put forward in his own name. Andrew Cordier of Columbia University could be used to approach U Thant; he had only recently left the United Nations and had a close relationship with the secretary general. Kennedy agreed, and dictated a short draft proposal calling on the superpowers to withdraw their missiles in Turkey and Cuba. Rusk was to assure Cordier that Kennedy would respond affirmatively to the proposal, but Cordier was not to put it in the hands of U Thant until he received a further signal from Rusk. The signal never came because the next day Khrushchev indicated his willingness to settle on the basis of the terms Robert Kennedy had discussed with Dobrynin.¹¹⁴

It is possible that the Rusk-Cordier initiative was only an option being explored by the president. It cannot be considered conclusive proof that he had rejected an air strike in favor of an exchange of missiles. However, it certainly suggests that he was leaning in this direction. It is significant that Kennedy instructed Rusk to give Cordier a copy of the proposed statement for U Thant. This entailed some risk of a leak, a risk the president presumably would only have assumed if he was serious about the stratagem. Other-

wise, Rusk could have contacted Cordier, but not have given the president's proposal to him.

Another indication that Kennedy was unwilling to attack Cuba is his response to the downing of Major Rudolf Anderson, Jr.'s U-2 by a Soviet SAM on the morning of 27 October. Kennedy decided against a retaliatory strike despite his apparent support for such an attack on Tuesday and the "almost unanimous agreement" in the Ex Comm that an attack should be launched the next morning.¹¹⁵ Reluctance to use force was also apparent in his failure to order preparations for the larger air strike against Cuba the joint chiefs were demanding. McNamara insists that "if President Kennedy were going to strike on Monday or Tuesday, then he would have told *me* about it so that we could make the necessary preparations. He hadn't told me, so I don't think he *was* going to strike."¹¹⁶

Dillon, Sorensen, and Bundy also think it very unlikely that Kennedy would have ordered an air strike. His initial response to a negative reply from Khrushchev, Bundy and McNamara argue, would have been to extend the blockade to petroleum products and other items vital to the Cuban military and civilian economy. McNamara and Bundy favored this option, and Bundy believes that the "turn of the screw" would have won out in the end.¹¹⁷ Dean Rusk disagrees; he thinks that Kennedy would have activated the Cordier channel before Tuesday, the day American forces were expected to be ready to invade Cuba.¹¹⁸

What would have happened if Kennedy had gone ahead with the United Nations initiative? Early in the crisis he had voiced the opinion that a deal on the Jupiters "could break up the [NATO] Alliance by confirming European suspicions that we would sacrifice their security to protect our interests in an area of no concern to them."¹¹⁹ This was an extreme prediction, but not a surprising one; the president offered it as a justification for why he should *not* agree to a missile trade. NATO would have survived, but American prestige assuredly would have suffered.

The president's other foreign-policy concern, that a concession would encourage more aggressive Soviet efforts to communize Latin America, was also exaggerated. It rested on two false assumptions: that a major purpose of the missiles was to provide a strategic shield behind which Soviet and Cuban agents could spread revolution in the Western hemisphere, and that Khrushchev had risked the deployment because he doubted Kennedy's resolve. For the president and the Ex Comm, this was the most serious cost, given their understanding of Khrushchev and the Soviet Union.

The domestic repercussions of a public missile exchange would also have been serious. It would have provoked a bitter schism in the Ex Comm. This is certainly one reason why Kennedy chose to keep his plan secret from the hawks. He also kept it secret from the six officials with whom he had discussed his brother's meeting with Dobrynin—and all of them favored removal of the Jupiters. Rusk was something of an outsider in the Ex Comm; he had not participated in many of its deliberations because of his need to represent the government at previously arranged state functions where his

absence would have been noticed. He also had a well-deserved reputation for probity.

There was substantial opposition to Kennedy's policy. Dean Acheson had left the Ex Comm in protest against Kennedy's choice of a blockade over an air strike. The four remaining hawks, Paul Nitze, Douglas Dillon, John McCone, and Maxwell Taylor, had agreed to the blockade in return for what they considered a promise by the president to use force if necessary to remove the missiles. They pressed vigorously for an air strike when the blockade appeared to have failed. So did the joint chiefs—this is why Kennedy had excluded them from the Ex Comm.¹²⁰ The hawks felt betrayed when they learned after the event that Robert Kennedy had promised Dobrynin that the Jupiters would be withdrawn.¹²¹

Acheson later voiced public criticism of Kennedy. The hawks and the chiefs kept their disappointment to themselves.¹²² They might not have remained silent if Kennedy had agreed to an eleventh-hour deal, brokered by the United Nations, to trade the American missiles in Turkey for their Soviet counterparts in Cuba. A quarter-century after the event, the revelation that the president had contemplated such a trade stunned veterans of the Ex Comm. Douglas Dillon was “really shocked.” “I had no idea,” he exclaimed, “that the President was considering such a thing. If we had actually followed through on it, and publicly traded missiles, it would have been a terrible and totally unnecessary mistake.”¹²³ McGeorge Bundy, a belated convert to the blockade, was “profoundly depressed” by the news.¹²⁴

If the exchange had been public, the Ex Comm hawks and the chiefs would have been encouraged to voice their opposition by Republican senators, like Kenneth Keating of New York. Journalists and congressmen, disappointed that Kennedy had not used the crisis as a pretext to overthrow Castro, would also have attacked the administration. An alliance of governmental and congressional critics could have been politically devastating to the president. Kennedy's political advisors had warned him earlier that a trade was out of the question. Kennedy's apparent willingness to consider an exchange despite its expected foreign and domestic costs reflected his belief that an air strike would lead to a costly conventional conflict with Cuba, and quite possibly to an even more costly war with the Soviet Union. In justifying his decision not to authorize an air strike in retaliation for the downing of the U-2, Kennedy told the Ex Comm: “It isn't the first step that concerns me, but both sides escalating to the fourth and fifth step—and we don't go to the sixth because there is no one around to do so.”¹²⁵

More Protection

Kennedy did not live long enough to write his memoir of the crisis. Had he survived, it is possible that he would have agreed with the analysis offered many years later by his secretary of defense. According to McNamara, everything “added up to one unequivocal conclusion: We had to get the missiles out of Cuba, but we had to do so in a way that avoided both the politi-

cal consequences of appearing weak—as we would appear if we publicly traded missiles—and also avoided unacceptable risk of military escalation. In other words, we had to force the missiles out of Cuba, without forcing the Soviets to respond in a way that could have led us all into disaster. And let me tell you, that was no easy task.”¹²⁶

Kennedy’s solution to this problem was to disaggregate interest from appearance.¹²⁷ His interest and his country’s were best served by withdrawing the Jupiters in return for the Soviet missiles in Cuba. Knowledge of the trade had to be kept from the allies and the American people, and, as McNamara indicated, from most of the Ex Comm and the military. Kennedy was careful to limit the discussion of what his brother would tell Dobrynin about the Jupiters to the “rump” Ex Comm that met secretly in the Oval Office. This group also prepared a cover story to explain and justify the subsequent dismantling of the missiles.

Saturday night’s Oval Office meeting contained an element of deception. The president led Rusk and the other officials present who would have opposed an explicit missile trade to believe that this would not occur. Robert Kennedy was instructed to tell Dobrynin that the missiles were coming out and that he was merely passing on this “piece of information” to the ambassador. Dean Rusk, who was most insistent that there be no appearance of giving in to Soviet blackmail, telephoned the attorney general afterward to make sure that he put the matter to Dobrynin in accordance with his instructions.¹²⁸

When the meeting in the Oval Office finished, Kennedy did not know that Khrushchev was as anxious as he was to end the crisis. His only communication from Khrushchev had been his tough, unyielding message, received that morning. The day’s events had made the president increasingly pessimistic about finding a peaceful solution to the crisis. Unsure of what was happening in Moscow, he considered making a further concession. With Dean Rusk, he searched for a way to make that concession possible by minimizing its adverse political consequences.

THE VIEW FROM MOSCOW

The first sign of Soviet interest in an accommodation came on Thursday, 25 October. Soviet diplomats, who had been silent since the proclamation of the blockade, hinted that Moscow might be prepared to accept some kind of compromise settlement to end the crisis.¹²⁹ The next day Aleksandr Fomin, a Soviet embassy official known to head KGB operations in the United States, telephoned John Scali, ABC’s State Department correspondent, to request an urgent meeting. Over lunch, Fomin suggested that his country might be willing to dismantle and remove its missiles under United Nations’ supervision and pledge never to reintroduce them in return for a public American guarantee not to invade Cuba. Scali rushed to the State Depart-

ment where Dean Rusk instructed him to tell Fomin that the administration saw “real possibilities” in the proposal but that “time is very urgent.” Fomin assured Scali that his message would be rushed “to the very highest levels” of the Kremlin.¹³⁰

The Fomin-Scali exchange was followed by a long letter from Khrushchev that proposed a settlement similar to the one worked out by Fomin and Scali. He proposed that “we, for our part, will declare that our ships, bound for Cuba, will not carry any kind of armaments. You would declare that the United States will not invade Cuba with its forces and will not support any sort of forces which might intend to carry out an invasion of Cuba. Then the necessity for the presence of our military specialists in Cuba would disappear.” This message was received at the State Department on Friday evening and greeted with a great sense of relief. For the first time, Robert Kennedy noted, the president expressed some optimism about the outcome of the confrontation.¹³¹

The American press was given only excerpts from the Khrushchev letter. Taking their cue from the White House, they portrayed the message as extremely emotional in tone. In his biography of Kennedy, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. described the Friday message as “hysterical.”¹³² For Theodore Sorensen, it was “long, meandering [and] full of polemics.”¹³³ Elie Abel called it “the nightmare outcry of a frightened man.”¹³⁴ Dean Rusk says that “its distraught and emotional tone bothered us, because it seemed that the old fellow might be losing his cool in the Kremlin.”¹³⁵

These accounts are misleading. The message, only fully declassified in 1973, struck a very personal tone. Khrushchev did not address the particulars of the crisis as much as he discussed his reasons for sending missiles to Cuba. The letter also warns of the danger of war and the difficulty both leaders would have in controlling events if there was a violent encounter along the blockade line.¹³⁶ It is possible that some administration officials misread Khrushchev’s sensible fear of runaway escalation as the overly emotional response of a frightened man.

The Friday Message

Ex Comm officials and historians agree that this message was a critical turning point. It was the first sign that Khrushchev was prepared to consider the removal of the Soviet missiles. Soviet evidence indicates Khrushchev moved toward a settlement in two stages.

On Wednesday, 24 October, Khrushchev had sent another letter full of bravado to Kennedy. He accused the United States of “banditry” and warned again that Soviet ship captains would not recognize the blockade.¹³⁷ The following day he received a short and firm reply in which the president referred to the Soviet leader’s earlier assurances that no offensive weapons would be sent to Cuba and insisted that the Soviet government take steps to permit a “restoration of the earlier situation.”¹³⁸ Khrushchev understood

that the missiles would have to be withdrawn. He ordered a new letter drafted that linked the possibility of a withdrawal of missiles in Cuba to an American pledge to refrain from military action against Cuba and to withdraw its missiles in Turkey.¹³⁹

A draft letter was prepared by the foreign-ministry working group and presented to Khrushchev on Thursday evening. In the meantime, intelligence reports arrived indicating that an American invasion of Cuba was imminent. Soviet and Cuban intelligence had been monitoring the American military buildup in and around the Caribbean and warned that an attack could come within the next ten hours.¹⁴⁰ The Soviet embassy in Washington had reached the same conclusion. They had also received a direct warning from an American journalist, who alleged that he had been invited to go to Florida that night to join the invasion force.¹⁴¹ Khrushchev did not put much trust in intelligence reports, but he could not afford to ignore them.¹⁴²

Khrushchev's overriding concern was to prevent an invasion of Cuba. He worried that fighting in Cuba would quickly lead to a Soviet-American war. In light of the threatening information he had received, he dictated a new letter that made no mention of the Jupiter missiles and insisted only on a pledge not to invade Cuba. In return, he advised Kennedy, Soviet ships would not carry any armaments to Cuba. He told his colleagues that "we could come back to the issue of the Turkish missiles at another time, but for the moment, the most important thing was to stop the invasion."¹⁴³

Khrushchev's Friday letter spoke eloquently of the danger of war and of the impossibility of stopping it once it began. He warned that an attempt by the American navy to stop a Soviet ship could be the catalyst for a super-power war. The letter went on to point out that the threat of armed attack "has constantly hung, and continues to hang" over Cuba. Khrushchev's fear of war was real but diffuse.¹⁴⁴

The Saturday Message

Before he had received any reply to his Friday letter, Khrushchev sent another message to Washington. This letter, drafted on Saturday morning, upped the ante: in addition to a pledge not to invade Cuba, the United States would also have to remove its missiles from Turkey.¹⁴⁵

Khrushchev's Saturday message and its relationship to Friday's message and the Fomin probe has been one of the great mysteries of the crisis. The Ex Comm was disturbed by the Saturday message because it appeared to disavow the Friday proposal. Ex Comm officials speculated that there had been a failure in communication or, more alarming, that Khrushchev had been overruled by hard-liners in the Presidium.¹⁴⁶

One piece of the puzzle is now clear. Aleksandr Fomin was acting on his own initiative. He had no instructions from senior officials in the KGB to make contact with the administration or to explore the possibility of a com-

promise settlement. His report on his conversations with John Scali was not received in Moscow in time to influence Khrushchev's Friday message. Kennedy and the Ex Comm were wrong to read that message as a proposal based on the Fomin "feeler."¹⁴⁷

There is no evidence the Saturday cable was a response to pressure from Soviet militants to stand firm in the face of American blackmail.¹⁴⁸ Marshal Malinovsky had been a lukewarm supporter of the missile deployment but nevertheless opposed withdrawal of the missiles for the first few days of the crisis. He was concerned about the consequences of American strategic superiority and reluctant to give up weapons that would partly redress this imbalance. He also opposed retreat in the face of American threats. By Thursday, he, too, had come to the conclusion that the missiles would have to be withdrawn to save Cuba. He spoke in support of Khrushchev's proposed letter to Kennedy offering to withdraw the missiles in return for a pledge not to invade Cuba. Malinovsky's views were important to other officials because so many of their arguments on both sides of the issue hinged on military calculations or scenarios.¹⁴⁹

One important reason for Saturday's cable was concern in Moscow that Friday's cable had been insufficient. It had proposed that Soviet ships would not carry any kind of armaments to Cuba in return for a promise from the United States not to invade Cuba. It had not contained a promise to remove the missiles already in Cuba, and Khrushchev and his advisors felt the need to specify their willingness to do this.¹⁵⁰ A second reason was Khrushchev's belief that Kennedy was prepared to remove the American missiles in Turkey.

Walter Lippmann, arguably the best-connected journalist in Washington, proposed in the *Washington Post* on Wednesday, 25 October, that the administration make a "face-saving" concession to Khrushchev. The United States should agree to dismantle the Jupiter missiles in Turkey in return for Soviet withdrawal of their missiles in Cuba. Turkey was comparable to Cuba because it "is the only place where there are strategic weapons right on the frontier of the Soviet Union." Lippmann did not believe that either deployment was of much military value; they "could be dismantled without altering the world balance of power."¹⁵¹

Lippmann was not the first journalist to suggest a trade; similar proposals had been made in European and American newspapers. It had also gained attention at the United Nations where a number of nonaligned countries had cosponsored a resolution calling for a mutual withdrawal of missiles from Cuba and Turkey.¹⁵² On Wednesday, 24 October, Max Frankel of the *New York Times* reported that the administration did not believe that the two deployments were equivalent but was "mindful of the appeal of the argument." On Thursday, Frankel wrote that there was considerable "unofficial" interest in a trade in the Ex Comm. The Frankel story had an air of authenticity because his column on Wednesday had described in consider-

able detail the course of the Ex Comm's deliberations in the week leading up to the blockade decision. This information could only have been obtained from an inside source.¹⁵³

Georgiy Shakhnazarov contends that a missile trade appealed to Soviet leaders as a face-saving way to end the crisis. They also saw an exchange as symbolic recognition by the United States of the right of socialist countries "to equal security."¹⁵⁴ Impressed by Lippmann's reputation and stature, officials in the Washington embassy read his column as a trial balloon inspired by the White House. They cabled their analysis to Moscow, and a second message was hurriedly drafted for Khrushchev's approval by the foreign ministry. Saturday's message was intended to flesh out Friday's offer and to extract another concession that would make an accord more beneficial to the Soviet Union and easier to justify for Khrushchev.¹⁵⁵

Khrushchev seems to have sent his Saturday message in ignorance of the consternation it would cause in Washington.¹⁵⁶ He also failed to realize how it would anger Fidel Castro, who concluded that Moscow was bargaining away Cuba's security. Sergo Mikoyan called the message "a big mistake."¹⁵⁷

One problem with this explanation is timing. The Lippmann column appeared on Thursday morning, and a cable summarizing its content and significance would have reached Moscow that evening. If the foreign ministry considered the cable so important, it would have been on Khrushchev's desk by Friday morning at the latest. Khrushchev would thus have read the cable, or at least have been apprised of its contents, before he wrote his message on Friday. That message made no mention of a missile trade.¹⁵⁸

It is possible that it took a day for Soviet diplomats in Washington to reason through the implications of the Lippmann column. At a gathering of Eastern European diplomats on Friday, 26 October, Dobrynin brought up Lippmann's proposal for a missile swap and asked his colleagues if it "should be regarded as an indirect suggestion on the part of the White House."¹⁵⁹ Even if Khrushchev had a timely report, he may have been overwhelmingly preoccupied with the prospect of an invasion of Cuba. On Thursday and Friday, Moscow received numerous indications that an American attack against Cuba was imminent. Khrushchev was desperate to prevent an invasion and may have been unwilling to complicate the prospect of an agreement by asking the United States for an exchange of missiles as well as a promise not to invade Cuba.

Ambassador Georgiy Kornienko believes that the timing of Khrushchev's message can be explained by information he received on Saturday indicating that President Kennedy would not attack Cuba for another few days. Kornienko says that he was the source of this intelligence. He had lunch on Thursday with William Rogers, the journalist who had earlier warned of the impending invasion. Rogers had not flown to Florida. The military was ready to go, he insisted, but the president felt the need to convince the world that he had no choice but to invade. Kennedy would make another attempt

to negotiate a settlement. Kornienko immediately cabled a report to Moscow, but the cable was delayed in transmission and subsequently held by Gromyko and Kuznetsov. It finally reached Khrushchev on Thursday evening, along with other information indicating that an invasion was at least forty-eight hours away. Khrushchev felt a sense of relief and told his colleagues: "Let's go back to the letter that also included Turkey."¹⁶⁰

Kornienko's explanation requires Khrushchev to have changed his estimate of American military intentions three times in as many days. On Friday, he was supposedly alarmed about the prospect of invasion, on Saturday, to have decided that his concern was exaggerated, and on Sunday, when he rushed to accept Kennedy's proposal for ending the crisis, to have once again become convinced that an attack was imminent.

It seems unlikely that Soviet intelligence estimates would have been so unequivocal about American intentions *and* have changed so rapidly and repeatedly. The administration's intentions were unknown to Moscow—they were also unknown in Washington because Kennedy had made no decision. The best Soviet and Cuban intelligence could do was to try to infer American intentions from the nature and readiness of American military preparations. These preparations indicated a steady buildup of ground, naval, and air forces; nothing about the buildup or movement of American forces suggested that a decision to invade had yet been made, or that it had been made and postponed. According to Gen. Anatoliy Gribkov, military intelligence on 26 October indicated that American forces were likely to invade Cuba the following night.¹⁶¹ Oleg Grinevsky confirms that Khrushchev and the Presidium "expected an attack against the missiles." "Their fear was constant, and did not diminish on Saturday or Sunday."¹⁶² Oleg Troyanovsky maintains that on Saturday Moscow was *more* worried about the possibility of invasion and regarded it as imperative to table a proposal acceptable to the Americans.¹⁶³

It is also hard to believe that Khrushchev changed his mind about something so important on the basis of a story from an American journalist. And all the more so when previous intelligence from that source had been so obviously wrong. Rogers had not gone to Florida the night before as he said he would, there had been no invasion on Thursday, and at lunch that day, without identifying his source, he told Kornienko a new story.

A Missed Opportunity

It took a minimum of eight to ten hours to communicate between Washington and Moscow. All cables needed to be encoded; this was a time-consuming procedure if the cables were as long as Dobrynin's report of his conversation on Friday night with Robert Kennedy. Western Union was the only telegraph service available to the Soviet embassy in Washington. In Moscow, an incoming cable would be sent to the foreign ministry where it was decoded by hand, typed, and brought to Gromyko or his assistants. In

special cases, handwritten drafts would be rushed to Gromyko's office and read aloud to him. "All of this took a very long time," Georgiy Kornienko remembered.¹⁶⁴

Dobrynin reported that the embassy regularly made frantic telephone calls to Western Union when they had priority cables. The telegraph agency would send an old man on a bicycle. "We gave him the cables. And he, at such speed—and we tried to urge him on—rode back to Western Union where the cable was sent to Moscow." From today's vantage point, Dobrynin mused, "it all seems rather colorful, but at the time it was no joke. This was a nerve-racking experience, we sat there, wondering if he would be fast enough to deliver the important communication."¹⁶⁵

Messages between Khrushchev and Kennedy were also subject to long delays, in part because of the need to translate them. Impressed by the urgency of the situation, and disturbed by the twelve-hour delay in the transmission of his Friday message, Khrushchev took the extraordinary step of having his Saturday message broadcast by Radio Moscow. Picked up by the wire service, it came across the White House ticker at 10:17 A.M. Saturday morning, which was 5:17 P.M. Moscow time.

Because of the twelve hours it took to translate and transmit Khrushchev's Friday message, it reached the White House too late for the president and Ex Comm to prepare a response that day.¹⁶⁶ McGeorge Bundy believes that if Khrushchev's letter "had reached us even a few hours earlier, we would have been able to reply on Friday."¹⁶⁷ The American response would have been in Khrushchev's hands on Saturday morning.

Unfortunately, Khrushchev's Friday message was delayed, and his message on Saturday caused consternation in Washington. Khrushchev's apparent about-face confused the Ex Comm and contributed to the heightened sense of threat its members felt that morning. It delayed the American reply to the Soviet leader's Friday message because the president and his advisors spent much of Saturday trying to make sense of the two communications and work out an appropriate response.

Why the Settlement on Sunday?

Western students of the crisis argue that the threat of an American attack against Cuba convinced Khrushchev that he had no choice but to withdraw the missiles. Khrushchev's messages on Friday and Saturday indicate that he was prepared to remove the missiles. Soviet fear of war explains the substance of Khrushchev's Sunday message but not its timing.

The climactic day of the crisis, Saturday, 27 October in Washington, was Saturday evening and Sunday morning in Moscow. On Saturday morning, Khrushchev and 23 officials left the Kremlin for the governmental mansion in Novo-Ogarevo, not far from Khrushchev's suburban dacha. Among the 23 were Presidium members, associate members, and some of their principal deputies.¹⁶⁸

Throughout the day, Khrushchev conferred with senior officials while their deputies waited in an ante room with military and intelligence officials. From time to time, Presidium members would come out of the inner room to relieve the tension or draw a glass of tea from the samovar. Khrushchev and his colleagues were desperately trying to guess American intentions. Would the United States attack the missile sites, invade Cuba, or possibly launch a nuclear strike against the Soviet Union? There was a strong feeling that they should do nothing to provoke any kind of American attack.¹⁶⁹

Until Saturday, the Presidium was divided between those who favored accommodation and those who wanted Khrushchev to stand firm. There were sharp disagreements about how the Soviet Union should respond to any attack against Cuba. Several scenarios were discussed, including an attack against West Berlin and an air strike against the American missiles in Turkey. By Saturday, Presidium members recognized that the military options were limited and likely to provoke further escalation. However, the consensus on a political accommodation did not congeal until that afternoon. By the end of the day, Soviet officials focused their attention on defusing the crisis.¹⁷⁰

At 3:00 A.M. Sunday, Khrushchev summoned key officials to his dacha for a meeting that began at about 4:00 A.M. Over glasses of tea, Gromyko, Ilychev, Troyanovsky, Kuznetsov, and Malinovsky discussed the need to end the crisis.¹⁷¹ The tension was “phenomenal.” Many members of the Presidium considered it possible, even likely, that Kennedy would attack the Soviet Union as well as Cuba. They reasoned that the Americans, recognizing that an attack on Cuba would provoke a Soviet-American war, would attempt to destroy the Soviet Union at the outset.¹⁷²

This somber mood was attributable in the first instance to word of Dobrynin’s conversation with Robert Kennedy on Saturday evening. Khrushchev and his colleagues also had reports of well-advanced American preparations for an air and ground assault against Cuba, and cables from Washington and Havana warning of imminent military action.¹⁷³

Robert Kennedy had met Dobrynin at the Justice Department at 7:45 P.M. Saturday. The attorney general told the ambassador that “the Cuban crisis was fast going from bad to worse.” An unarmed American reconnaissance aircraft had been shot down over Cuba and the military was demanding retaliation. “But to answer fire with fire would mean provoking a chain reaction that would be very difficult to stop.” The president needed to continue surveillance flights as they were the only way to obtain timely information about the state of readiness of the missile sites.¹⁷⁴

Kennedy impressed upon Dobrynin the mounting danger of war. Soviet missiles in Cuba were unacceptable to the United States; they would be attacked if they were not withdrawn. “Hot heads” in the government were clamoring for an immediate assault, and the destruction of the U-2 had made it more difficult to ignore their demands. The president would have no choice but to retaliate if another aircraft were shot down. Dobrynin insists

that Kennedy gave him no ultimatum, but “stressed the importance of receiving an answer on Sunday. So I conveyed this to Moscow.”¹⁷⁵

The two men also discussed the Jupiters. The attorney general “confirmed the agreement with the president to remove the missiles from Turkey.” Dobrynin was told that he could convey this assurance to his government along with the president’s insistence that “it cannot be made part of a package and publicized.” The missiles would have to be withdrawn according to “standard NATO procedures.” Kennedy gave the ambassador a telephone number to reach him at the White House if he had any news to report from Moscow. “He was very nervous throughout our meeting,” Dobrynin remembered. “It was the first time I had seen him in such a state.”¹⁷⁶

Dobrynin returned to the Soviet embassy and asked Georgiy Kornienko to help him draft a cable to Moscow. Robert Kennedy had said that the president was prepared “to make an arrangement.” Kornienko pulled out a copy of Webster’s and the two men read through the several meanings of “arrangement.” The first one was agreement, which could be translated as *soglasheniye*. They agreed that this might be misunderstood in Moscow because it implied a formal understanding. Another possibility was mutual understanding, best conveyed by the Russian *vzaimoponimaniye*. This they judged a bit weak. They finally agreed on *dogovorionnost’*, which meant that the two sides agreed. Dobrynin and Kornienko thought the president’s concession very helpful, but had no idea how Moscow would respond.¹⁷⁷

Dobrynin’s cable arrived at the foreign ministry early Sunday morning. Vladimir Suslov, one of Gromyko’s assistants, read it over the telephone to Oleg Troyanovsky at the Khrushchev dacha, who took extensive notes that he read to the Presidium. According to Troyanovsky, the import of Dobrynin’s cable was clear. “Although strictly speaking, the words of [the] younger Kennedy could not be described as an ultimatum, he made it clear that the U.S. government was resolved to get rid of the missile bases even by bombing them if it came to that.” Everybody understood “that the answer to the Kennedy message had to come in less than 24 hours, that we should not delay, and that we should give a very precise answer.”¹⁷⁸

Khrushchev had also received disturbing messages from Havana.¹⁷⁹ On Friday, Ambassador Alekseev had described Castro as “very optimistic, exuding optimism. He knew for sure nothing would happen.” That night, he was “wavering” and worrying about an American attack, “He even asked me to take him down to the bunker, to the bomb shelter, fearful as he was of a bombing strike.” There, between 2:00 and 6:00 A.M., Alekseev helped Castro draft a letter to Khrushchev.¹⁸⁰ In it Castro warned that some kind of attack against Cuba “is almost imminent within the next 24 or 72 hours.” The most likely possibility was an air strike against the Soviet missiles “with the limited objective of destroying them.” An invasion was “less probable although possible.”¹⁸¹

Alekseev cabled Castro’s letter to Moscow along with his own analysis of the situation. The contents of both cables were described to Khrushchev and

later to the Presidium. Troyanovsky, read the Castro cable to Khrushchev over the telephone, who interrupted several times and asked Troyanovsky to repeat the most important passages. Troyanovsky felt that Khrushchev was less troubled by Castro's plea for a nuclear strike if Cuba was attacked than he was by the Cuban leader's belief that an air raid against the missiles "was practically imminent."¹⁸² Castro's warning was reinforced by "snowballing" reports from Soviet intelligence warning that bombing raids were set for 29 or 30 October unless some accommodation was reached with the president.¹⁸³ For Khrushchev and other Soviet leaders, these reports encouraged the most ominous interpretation of Robert Kennedy's demand that the United States receive an answer to the president's Saturday message within 24 hours.¹⁸⁴

Another report of imminent invasion came from Aleksandr Fomin. It described his meeting with John Scali on Saturday afternoon.¹⁸⁵ Earlier that day, Dean Rusk had summoned Scali to his office to tell him about Khrushchev's Saturday morning message. Rusk asked him to go back to Fomin and ask what had happened. Scali was furious because he thought he had been used to carry a purposely misleading message to the administration. He accused Fomin of "a stinking double cross" and told him that a missile exchange was totally unacceptable. Scali exceeded the instructions he had received from Rusk. He told the KGB boss that the administration was "absolutely determined to get those missiles out of there." "An invasion of Cuba," he asserted, "is only a matter of hours away." The two men met again on Sunday after Khrushchev had announced his decision to withdraw the missiles. Fomin reported that he had been instructed to thank Scali "and to tell you that the information you supplied was very valuable to Khrushchev in helping make up his mind quickly." He added with a smile, "And that includes your 'explosion' of Saturday."¹⁸⁶

The "state of alarm" created by the cables from Dobrynin, Castro, and Fomin was compounded by a false report. At Novo-Ogarevo, where Khrushchev and his entourage had moved sometime that morning, Army Gen. Semyon Ivanov, Secretary of the Defense Council, was called to the telephone and told that a message had been received that Kennedy would give another nationally televised address at 5:00 P.M. Moscow time. "Everyone agreed that Kennedy intended to declare war, to launch an attack." A telegram was immediately sent to the Washington embassy for verification. "We had the feeling then that there was very little time to unravel what was taking place."¹⁸⁷

Khrushchev's anxiety was further aroused by two events that took place on Saturday morning. At 10:30 A.M., a U-2 operated by SAC overflew the Chukotski Peninsula in eastern Siberia. The pilot radioed for assistance and fighter aircraft were sent to help. Soviet MiGs scrambled from a base near Wrangel Island, but the U-2 was escorted home without any shots being fired.¹⁸⁸ Soviet generals advised Khrushchev that the plane could have been on a last-minute intelligence mission in preparation for an Ameri-

can nuclear attack.¹⁸⁹ At almost the same time, Major Anderson's U-2 was shot down over Cuba by a SAM missile. Khrushchev was horrified. He initially assumed—incorrectly—that the Cubans were responsible and that his trigger-happy ally had given the “militarists at the Pentagon” the pretext they needed to push Kennedy into a Cuban invasion. He wrote to Castro and pleaded with him to “show patience, firmness and even more firmness.”¹⁹⁰

By all accounts, Khrushchev hastened to accept Kennedy's terms to forestall an American attack against Cuba—and perhaps against the Soviet Union as well.¹⁹¹ His extreme anxiety was apparent in a telephone call to First Deputy Foreign Minister Vasily V. Kuznetsov, made shortly after being apprised of the two U-2 incidents. Kuznetsov and his deputy Mendeleovich had left Novo-Ogarevo earlier that morning for New York and the United Nations. Khrushchev reached them at Vnukovo-2, Moscow's main military airport, before they boarded their plane. When Kuznetsov hung up the phone, he “looked extremely distressed, the color drained from his face, and he left without saying a word to anyone.” Khrushchev had told him: “The situation is very bad. I'm not sure you will be able to land safely in the United States.”¹⁹² That evening, an agreement with Kennedy in hand, a much relieved Khrushchev told the Presidium that “The world [had] hung on a thread.”¹⁹³

Khrushchev was willing to settle on Sunday for positive reasons as well. Kennedy was prepared to issue a pledge not to invade Cuba in return for withdrawal of the Soviet missiles under United Nations' supervision. Dobrynin's cable made it apparent that he would also remove the Jupiter missiles from Turkey sometime after the crisis so it would not look like part of a “package deal.” Khrushchev and his inner circle were convinced that this was the president's “last concession.” They agreed that they should send Kennedy an affirmative reply.¹⁹⁴

Kennedy's concessions were very important to Khrushchev. He considered them an important victory for the Soviet Union and one that enabled him to withdraw with honor. The Kennedy administration may have regarded the pledge not to invade Cuba as a low-cost concession; Khrushchev and his colleagues did not. They believed that the United States was preparing a second invasion to avenge the Bay of Pigs and that it had been prevented by the missile deployment. As late as 1987, high-ranking and well-informed Soviet officials were still convinced that the United States had been planning an invasion, and greeted with disbelief the assertions of Robert McNamara and McGeorge Bundy that the administration had rejected pleas for another invasion.¹⁹⁵

For Khrushchev, the withdrawal of missiles from Cuba in exchange for the removal of the Jupiters from Turkey was “extremely welcome.”¹⁹⁶ One of his most important reasons for sending missiles to Cuba was to change the political context in Washington by exposing the United States to the

same kind of close-range nuclear threat faced by the Soviet Union. Khrushchev hoped that the missiles would make the Kennedy administration more respectful of legitimate Soviet security concerns and more willing to reach a political accommodation. This in turn would free scarce resources and manpower for domestic development. By forcing the Americans to accept the link between the Jupiter missiles in Turkey and the missiles in Cuba, Khrushchev thought that he had taken a great step toward “psychological equality” with the United States. He hoped that after the crisis, he and Kennedy could go forward on a variety of fronts to restructure super-power relations.

American concessions were also important to justify the withdrawal of the Soviet missiles to the Cubans and Soviet militants. Khrushchev had the authority to withdraw the missiles without their consent, but to preserve that authority in the long term he needed to isolate the hard-liners and convince his remaining colleagues that he had made the right decision. It was particularly important that he appear to have made the right decision because he had committed the Soviet Union to the missile deployment. The ensuing crisis with the United States and the need to withdraw the missiles under the threat of war were *his* policy failures.

Khrushchev later told Norman Cousins, the editor of *Saturday Review*, that the last holdout to a compromise was the Soviet military.¹⁹⁷ “When I asked the military advisors if they could assure me that holding fast would not result in the death of five hundred million human beings, they looked at me as though I was out of my mind, or, what was worse, a traitor. . . . So I said to myself: ‘To hell with these maniacs. If I can get the United States to assure me that it will not attempt to overthrow the Cuban government, I will remove the missiles.’”¹⁹⁸ Khrushchev accentuated the positive side of the agreement to its critics. “I told my comrades, ‘We achieved our goal. Maybe the Americans have learned their lesson. Now they have the time to think it over and weigh the consequences.’”¹⁹⁹

Sunday's Radio Message

At 10:00 A.M. on Sunday, Khrushchev created two working groups to prepare a positive reply to Kennedy's letter. The first, headed by Andropov and Gromyko, drafted a message to be delivered to the American embassy. The second, headed by Leonid Ilychev, was to write a message for immediate broadcast over Radio Moscow. Khrushchev took this extraordinary step because he was anxious to respond as quickly as possible, before Kennedy was supposed to go on television that night. He worried that a message sent through official channels might not arrive before what he took to be Robert Kennedy's 9:00 A.M. Monday (Washington time) deadline.²⁰⁰

To observe proper protocol, the “official” message had to be delivered first. Mikhail Smirnovsky, chief of the foreign ministry's Department of

United States Affairs, went by limousine to the American embassy a half-hour before his colleagues bound for Radio Moscow. The embassy was almost unapproachable. It was surrounded by hundreds of demonstrators—all mobilized by the KGB—and chanting “hands off Cuba.” By the time the police cleared a path for Smirnovsky’s limousine, the Radio Moscow broadcast had already been monitored by embassy officials. Smirnovsky was embarrassed to have to present a message that had already been broadcast to the world.²⁰¹

The delegation sent with Ilychev to Radio Moscow also ran into difficulty. The elevator was held open pending their arrival, and they were whisked inside and up to the broadcast studio. There was no announcer to be found. One finally arrived when Leonid Zamyatin was on the verge of reading the message himself. The announcer wanted to study the text “so he could read it with the right emphasis.” Ilychev cut him short and ordered him to read it right away. “‘Time is of the essence,’ he said. ‘If you make a mistake, just read it again.’”²⁰²

The dispatch of the two delegations did little to relieve the tension at Novo-Ogarevo. Soviet officials were confused, uncertain, and fearful. The only Presidium member who appeared calm was Leonid Brezhnev. At the height of the discussion, he came out of the inner sanctum to check on the fortune of his favorite soccer team, CSK. He was annoyed that the deputies were discussing the crisis and not listening to the match on the radio.²⁰³

While they were waiting for Kennedy’s reply to the radio message, a cable arrived from the KGB in Washington. From the time Kennedy had announced the quarantine of Cuba, the KGB had put him under intensive surveillance. They now reported that he had gone to church. Khrushchev and his colleagues argued about the significance of the report. Some Presidium members feared that it was a prelude to a nuclear attack; the president had gone to church to pray before giving the order to destroy the Soviet Union. Mikoyan thought that Kennedy was probably as confused as they were and was praying for divine guidance. Some suggested that the church visit was disinformation, a deliberate attempt by the Americans to mislead Soviet leaders. Mikoyan observed that this made no sense: how could the Americans plant the story about Kennedy’s visit to church as a deliberate deception, when they could not know how it would be interpreted? One or two others challenged the validity of the report on different grounds. “The KGB has been wrong about everything else,” they insisted. “Why should we believe them now when they tell us the president has gone to church?”²⁰⁴

Khrushchev’s message announcing that the Soviet Union would withdraw its missiles from Cuba was rebroadcast over American radio at 9:00 A.M. Washington time.²⁰⁵ McGeorge Bundy telephoned the good news to the president. Kennedy prepared to go to 10:00 mass at St. Stephen’s Church. Bundy waited for him at the door of the residential quarters of the White House to give him the text of the message as he left for church. When Ken-

nedly returned, Mrs. Bundy had arrived with their children, and Robert Kennedy, in an ebullient mood, passed out chocolates.²⁰⁶ In Moscow, the tension finally eased when Kennedy's positive response to Khrushchev's message was picked up on the radio. They celebrated with vodka, not chocolate.²⁰⁷

Keeping the Agreement Secret

Sometime late on Sunday, Khrushchev sent a confidential letter to Ambassador Dobrynin in Washington summarizing their agreement on the Jupiters. In it, he deferred to the president's insistence that the matter be handled confidentially by the attorney general and Soviet ambassador. Dobrynin was unable to present the message to Robert Kennedy until he returned from New York on Monday evening. Dobrynin pointed out that Khrushchev had written the letter on Sunday agreeing to withdraw the missiles from Cuba "with the prior arrangement about Turkey in mind." Kennedy agreed that this was also his understanding. The ambassador gave Kennedy a copy of the letter. Kennedy "accepted it without comment." The following day he returned and said, "No, we would rather not keep this; we are giving it back to you." He repeated that the administration was committed to their arrangement, but declined to accept the letter. "Kennedy did not want any paper to that effect in his files."²⁰⁸

Khrushchev accepted this informal pledge. By then he, too, had considered it preferable to a public American commitment to withdraw the Jupiters. Fidel Castro was vehemently opposed to an exchange of missiles because it made Cuba look like a Soviet pawn. He reacted very strongly to Khrushchev's letter of the twenty-seventh asking Kennedy to withdraw the missiles from Turkey. Khrushchev began to appreciate that Kennedy had done him a favor by insisting on a secret "arrangement."²⁰⁹

FROM ADVERSARIES TO ALLIES

Our analysis indicates striking parallels between Kennedy and Khrushchev. Both adopted rigid positions at the outset of the crisis and gradually became more moderate and ready to compromise. Their emphasis shifted from winning to resolving the crisis in a way that would not undermine their authority at home or abroad. Khrushchev's threatening rhetoric on Wednesday and Thursday was intended to impress the United States and his Soviet colleagues with his resolve; it probably also reflected his anger and frustration. On Friday and Saturday, Khrushchev, like Kennedy, became more Machiavellian in dealing with his colleagues. He too wanted to build and hold together a coalition to support the concessions necessary to end the crisis.

The two leaders moved toward compromise for essentially the same reason. Kennedy feared that escalation would set in motion a chain of events

that could lead to nuclear war. Khrushchev's concession makes it apparent that he was also committed to keeping the peace. Khrushchev subsequently paid a heavy political price for his Cuban policy; Soviet officials agree that his decision to send missiles to Cuba which then had to be withdrawn contributed to his removal from power in October 1964.²¹⁰

Most Americans believe that the crisis was resolved because the Soviet Union backed down. Dean Rusk's famous quip, "we're eyeball to eyeball, and I think that the other side just blinked," is often quoted as a pithy illustration of this supposed truth.²¹¹ However, the revelations by Sorensen and Rusk about the concession Kennedy made on the Jupiters and the further concession he contemplated, make it apparent that when Kennedy and Khrushchev were "eyeball to eyeball," both leaders blinked.²¹² They did so out of a wholly commendable fear of war and its consequences.

The resolution of the missile crisis stands in sharp contrast to its origins. The confrontation occurred because of the inability of either superpower to empathize with its adversary and to predict its likely response to their actions. In Moscow, lack of empathy was compounded by overconfidence. Khrushchev made no serious effort to ascertain how the United States was likely to respond to the missile deployment. He neither solicited nor listened to the views of his best-informed foreign-policy experts. Khrushchev ignored Clausewitz's dictum that leaders should consider carefully the last step before taking the first.

The crisis was resolved because both leaders rejected any course of action they suspected would lead to an unstoppable spiral of military escalation. Their mutual commitment to settle the crisis peacefully, even at the price of major concessions, grew in intensity as the crisis deepened. Khrushchev and Kennedy became progressively less interested in winning and more committed to resolving the crisis. They devised a public-private arrangement designed to protect each of them against political reprisal from allies and domestic adversaries.

Diplomacy triumphed over force because of mutual learning. Three reinforcing factors were responsible. Most importantly, leaders had time to learn. Kennedy and his advisors had time to cool their anger and formulate policy in terms of a broader conception of the national interest. Khrushchev was able to overcome his initial shock and approach the crisis with a sense of sober realism. He gradually came to appreciate how isolated the Soviet Union was and how vulnerable he was politically. He was apparently surprised by the uneasiness of many of his Eastern European allies; Janos Kadar of Hungary was outspoken in his concern about the consequences of escalation.²¹³ Fedor Burlatsky believes that Khrushchev was also influenced by Soviet public opinion. The Soviet people were "very afraid of the dangers of war" and Khrushchev knew that "Society did not support in their hearts [his] adventurous actions."²¹⁴

Learning was also facilitated by the information each leader received during the crisis. Kennedy's correspondence with Khrushchev prompted him to

revise his conception of the Soviet leader and his objectives. Kennedy developed a new understanding of Khrushchev as a leader who had bungled into the crisis and was desperately searching for a way to retreat without losing face. This understanding made it much easier for Kennedy to make the concessions necessary to end the crisis. He no longer thought that Khrushchev would interpret a concession as weakness and respond by becoming more aggressive. Instead, he expected Khrushchev to see his concessions as proof of his commitment to avoid war and to reciprocate with concessions of his own. Kennedy was also able to develop a more accurate estimate of domestic and allied opinion and concluded that a compromise would be acceptable to NATO.

Khrushchev also rethought his understanding of Kennedy. The president's success in restraining the American military impressed him. "After the crisis," Sergei Khrushchev remembers, his father "was very interested in cooperating with Kennedy. He had been burned by his experience with Eisenhower. Khrushchev believed that Kennedy could control the hard-liners who would try to sabotage a new *détente*."²¹⁵ What impressed Khrushchev even more, Aleksei Adzhubei explained, was Kennedy's commitment to restraint. "He had us by the balls and didn't squeeze."²¹⁶ After Cuba, Khrushchev's attitude toward the West and Kennedy changed markedly. Some of his former associates believe that if Kennedy had not been assassinated in November 1963 and Khrushchev not removed from office in October 1964, the Cold War might have ended much sooner than it did.²¹⁷

A third stimulus to learning was the threat of war. By Saturday night, war was no longer an abstract concept but a real fear. McNamara recalls that when the Ex Comm meeting ended on Saturday evening, he returned to the Pentagon and watched a spectacular sunset over the Potomac. He wondered how many more sunsets he was destined to enjoy.²¹⁸ Soviet accounts reveal that Khrushchev and his advisors suffered from similar angst. There is an old saying that nothing so concentrates the mind as the thought of execution. In this instance, it inspired a creative search for accommodation as the would-be victims sought desperately to cheat the hangman.