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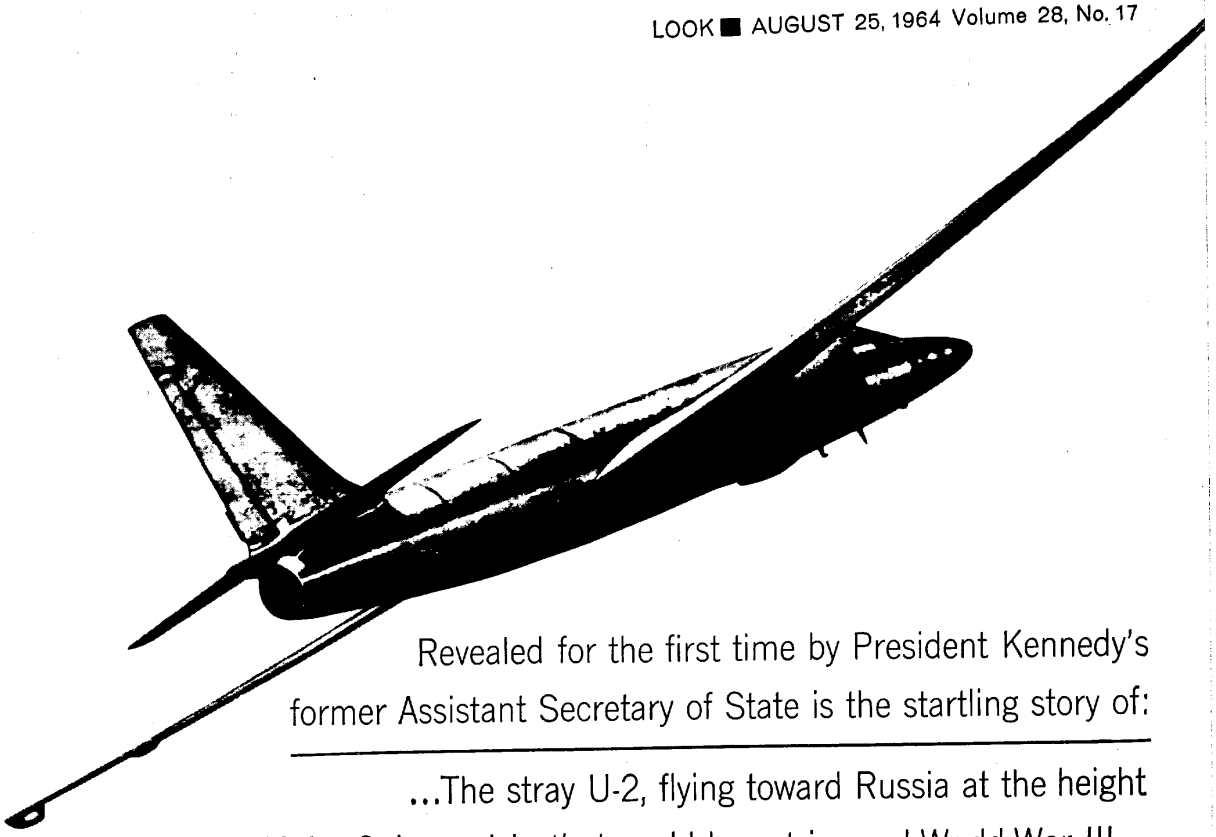

Revealed for the first time by President Kennedy's former Assistant Secretary of State is the startling story of:

...The stray U-2, flying toward Russia at the height of the Cuban crisis, that could have triggered World War III

...The hurried secret meetings between unofficial U.S. and Russian representatives that stopped the drift toward war

...How much Senator Keating actually knew when he warned of a Soviet missile buildup in Cuba

BY ROGER HILSMAN

The Cuban crisis: how close we were to war

THE BLACKEST HOUR of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis came on Saturday, October 27. Early that morning, Nikita Khrushchev suddenly pulled back from proposals pointing toward a solution. Worse news quickly followed. Soviet antiaircraft missiles in Cuba had shot down an American U-2.

Early that afternoon, Secretary of State Dean Rusk asked me to take a draft of a reply to Khrushchev over to the White House for President John F. Kennedy's approval. I delivered it to McGeorge Bundy, Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, in the President's outer office and, a few moments later, started to return to the State Department.

As I passed the guard at the West Executive Entrance, he grabbed my arm and told me that my office was calling me—urgently. I took the call, and learned of a crisis within the crisis that has never before been reported in detail. An American U-2, on a routine air-sampling mission between Alaska and the North Pole, had picked the wrong star for its return flight, and was at that moment over the Soviet Union. Soviet fighter planes had scrambled. The U-2 pilot had gone on the air—in the clear—to call for help. American fighters in Alaska had also scrambled and were attempting to rendezvous with the U-2 to escort it home.

I ran upstairs and found the President, Bundy and several others in Mrs. Evelyn Lincoln's office. The President knew at a glance that something was terribly wrong. Shaky from lack of sleep, I told my story.

The implications were obvious and horrendous: The Soviets might well regard this U-2 flight as a last-minute intelligence reconnaissance in preparation for nuclear war. "One of your planes," Khrushchev himself later wrote, "violates our frontier during this anxious time we are both experiencing, when everything has been put into combat readiness. Is it not a fact that an intruding American plane could be easily taken for a nuclear bomber, which might push us to a fateful step . . .?"

Ernest Hemingway once described true courage as "grace under pressure." President Kennedy gave a short laugh that broke the tension. "There is always some so-and-so," he said, "who doesn't get the word."

That critical afternoon of Saturday, October

continued

27, marked the climax of a series of fateful events that began the previous July, when the first shipment of Soviet arms reached Cuba. It was not until October 14 that U.S. intelligence learned that the shipments included long-range nuclear missiles. Yet, four days before that discovery was made, Sen. Kenneth B. Keating of New York made a speech alleging that six intermediate-range-missile bases were under construction in Cuba.

Much later, in an interview on the NBC program *Monitor*, Saturday, November 3, and again in an interview published in *U.S. News and World Report* on November 19, Keating—fearful of the charge that he was more interested in personal publicity than in giving his country information vital to its security—insisted that he had gotten or verified the information from "official" sources.

With which official Senator Keating "verified" that information is a mystery. No one has ever been able to discover whom he talked to. Further, since no one in the intelligence community knew that there were intermediate- or medium-range missiles or missile sites in Cuba until after October 14, it is hard to see how the Senator could have "verified" his information. In actuality, as soon as Senator Keating's speech began to come over the tickers, Thomas L. Hughes, Deputy Director of Intelligence and Research in the Department of State, personally telephoned the chief of every intelligence agency in Washington, or one of his deputies, to ask if they had any reports to which Keating might be referring. The answers were uniformly negative, and the State Department so informed the press.

How accurate was Keating?

The second mystery—which also still remains—is just what information Keating had, and where he got it. He said there were six intermediate-range-missile sites being built in Cuba, but he did not say where they were—which would have been most vital information. In fact, the Soviets intended to build *four* intermediate-range sites and six *medium*-range sites, but we now know that at the time Keating spoke, construction was not far enough along on some of the sites for a refugee or anyone else to recognize them as missile installations.

Conceivably, Keating could have gotten some refugee reports before official Washington did. But there seem to have been, in fact, only two such reports of any significance, neither of which corresponded to Keating's allegations.

The charge that Keating was more interested in personal publicity than in his country's welfare may be extreme. But until the Senator comes forward with a better explanation than he has so far supplied, one of two possible conclusions is inescapable: Either Senator Keating was peddling someone's rumors for some purpose of his own, despite the highly dangerous international situation; or, alternatively, he had information the United States Government did not have that could have guided a U-2 to the missile sites before October 14, and at less risk to the pilot.

While the argument over the Keating speech raged on, the ubiquitous U-2 was about to lift the curtain. A flight over western Cuba was proposed on October 4, approved at a special meeting on October 9 and readied on the 10th. The aircraft stood by, waiting for good weather, on the 11th, the 12th and the 13th. On Sunday the 14th, the flight was made as planned and without incident. Routinely, the package of films was flown to the processing laboratories that night. Routinely, the processed film was flown to the interpretation center Monday morning. Routinely, the interpreters began going over the pictures, frame by frame. Then, suddenly, late Monday afternoon, routine stopped. The photographs clearly showed the telltale four-slash "signature" of Soviet offensive ballistic missiles at San Cristóbal, in western Cuba.

Could the missiles have been discovered any earlier than they were? U-2 flights on August 29 and September 5 had shown nothing at San Cristóbal, Remedios or Sagua la Grande, and only some unidentifiable scratchings at Guanajay. But the October 14 flight and others in the days immediately following showed sites recognizable as ballistic-missile installations in all four areas.

The Russians must have done their survey work for the MRBM and IRBM sites in July and August. Construction apparently started on the Guanajay IRBM site in early September; on the San Cristóbal and Remedios sites between September 15 and 20; and on the Sagua la Grande site between September 25 and 30.

From the time the Russians made their decision to send ballistic missiles to Cuba in June until September 8, when they arrived, classic methods of intelligence—i.e., old-fashioned espionage—might have provided information about Soviet intentions. In the second stage—from September 8, when the missiles reached Cuban ports, until the time they were installed at the sites—old-fashioned spying might even have revealed their presence in the guarded warehouses or under the canvas concealing them in truck convoys.

But classic espionage is extraordinarily difficult, time-consuming and risky. Inability to get information by such means should not necessarily be counted a failure. Also, to take the action the U.S. did in fact take requires "harder" information than agent reports, and this kind of information could only be acquired in the third stage—after missiles and supporting equipment had arrived at the sites, and the installations were recognizable in aerial photographs.

We now know that the first ballistic missiles and related equipment probably arrived in Cuba on September 8. They were then moved out to the sites by night convoys, probably between September 9 and 14. We also know that the second Russian shipment probably arrived on September 15, again with the truck convoys moving out over the next several days.

It could reasonably be argued that the U-2 flight of October 14 found the missiles at just about the earliest possible moment. But it could also be argued that if the intelligence community had gotten suspicious of the western end of the island in late September and dispatched a U-2 to the right spot on, say, October 2 or 3, the plane might well have come back with photographic proof. The question is whether it is reasonable to conclude that intelligence suspicions about the western end of the island might have been aroused sooner than they actually were.

In a postmortem on the reports available before October 14, only four seem significant—even with all the benefits of hindsight:

- A subagent in Cuba reported that in the middle of the night of September 12, he saw a truck convoy heading west from one of the heavily guarded port areas near Havana. He said the convoy included trailers 20 meters (60 feet) long, whose contents were hidden by canvas stretched over what appeared to be a wooden frame. The report reached Washington on September 21, and Central Intelligence Agency headquarters distributed it with a comment that the subagent had probably seen a trailer carrying a short-range, anti-aircraft Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM), which is only 30 feet long.
- In late September, a report came that Fidel Castro's private pilot had boasted Cuba had long-range missiles and no longer feared the United States. It was distributed without comment.
- On October 3, another report told of "unusual activity, probably connected with missiles," in Pinar del Río, at the western end of Cuba.
- On October 4—after the decision to fly over western Cuba had already been made—a second report of a long-trailer convoy arrived. This convoy had been spotted on September 17 and, like the one seen on the night of September 12, was rolling toward the west.

There was no hint of location in the braggings of Castro's private pilot. Still, it could be argued that the report of the convoy with exceptionally long trailers, received in Washington on September 21, might have had a greater impact. But skepticism about one man's estimate of the length of a trailer seen at night under difficult and probably nerve-racking circumstances is not unreasonable, particularly against the background of a mass of reports that had been proved false.

A clue that was overlooked

Something else that was overlooked at the time now seems even more significant. Two of the Soviet cargo ships diverted from their normal tasks to run arms to Cuba—the *Omsk* and the *Poltava*—had exceptionally large hatches. Looking back, the intelligence experts feel that it was these large-hatch ships that secretly brought in the 60-foot missiles. It is by the arrival of these two vessels in Cuba on September 8 and 15, in fact, that the missile shipments are dated. But word that two of the Soviet freighters had exceptionally large hatches was not brought to the attention of the policy makers—or even the higher-ups in the intelligence agencies—until after the missiles themselves had been discovered in Cuba.

This, too, turns out to be understandable. There was nothing new or startling about the two ships. One, the *Omsk*, had been built in Japan, and both had been specially designed for the Soviet lumbering industry, which normally requires extra-large hatches. Also, we knew that the Soviets had had some trouble finding the ships they needed to send their aid to Cuba, and our shipping intelligence experts presumably deduced that lumbering ships could be more easily spared than others.

On balance, then, the evidence does not show that, as a practical matter, the missiles could have been discovered sooner than they were. After all, the decision to look again at the western end of the island actually came on October 4; the following delay was to make sure that the flight plan avoided unnecessary risk to the pilot and the U-2, our most valuable source of information.

Given all these difficulties, it is something of a miracle that the missiles were discovered as early as they were. Cuba, 1962, was an intelligence victory, and a victory of a very high order.

If a criticism must be made, it would be that even though American intelligence won a victory, it was also—in one sense at least—a little lazy.

As the scientific instruments of information gathering have become ever more marvelous, the intelligence community, with the normal American love of technological gadgetry, has neglected the time-consuming, tedious but still essential ways of classic espionage. Recruiting, training and planting an agent may take years, and it may be still more years before he reports anything of significance. It's so much easier to send a U-2 or use some other scientific gadget. But there are some matters on which we need information that a U-2 camera cannot pick up. And in the case of ballistic missiles in Cuba, a U-2 might have been dispatched

sooner, guided more directly to suspected sites, and routed on a safer track, had there been in Cuba a better network of traditional agents.

In the end, the Soviets were caught, as Sen. Hubert Humphrey has said, "with their rockets down and their missiles showing"—and caught in time for the U.S. to take effective action.

The morning after the discovery, McGeorge Bundy briefed the President in his bedroom. Kennedy, still in bathrobe and slippers, instructed Bundy to arrange for a meeting at 11:45 that morning of the group that became known as the ExCom, the Executive Committee of the National Security Council.

The ExCom met in the Cabinet Room of the White House and decided immediately to put Cuba under virtually constant air surveillance.

At first, there was some sentiment for an air strike or a *coup de main* by parachute forces to wipe out the missile bases in a surprise attack. The risks would have been high. No military commander would guarantee 100 percent success; and it was always possible that some local Soviet commander would panic, assume that the big war was on, with the Soviet Union itself under attack, and take matters into his own hands.

Just as important, an attack without warning was both morally reprehensible and in violation of American traditions and ideals. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy argued most persuasively against a surprise assault and reminded the group of Pearl Harbor. "For the United States to attack a small country without warning," he said, "would irreparably hurt our reputation in the world—and our own conscience." He added that he did not want John F. Kennedy to go down in history as the American Tojo.

By Thursday, October 18, a consensus began to develop in the ExCom for a blockade against offensive weapons as a first step. On Friday, the President indicated that a blockade was also his preference and set Monday evening, October 22, as the time of disclosure.

There was much to do. Resolutions for the UN and the Organization of American States had to be drafted. Special arrangements had to be made to brief our major allies. Presidential letters had to be drafted for 43 heads of government, and messages had to be sent to our posts overseas, explaining our action. Leaders of Congress had to be informed. The Pentagon had to alert the Strategic Air Command, assemble the blockade forces and ready the troops needed for an invasion, if one should become necessary. U. Alexis Johnson, Deputy Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs, was chosen to coordinate the scenario—a schedule of who was to do what and when, all keyed to seven o'clock Monday evening, when the President would speak to the world. With the machinery geared and in motion, we could only wait—and hope nothing leaked that would give the Soviets a chance to take the initiative away from us.

Miraculously, the secret held—but barely. Washington was taut with the sense of crisis. Too many high officials canceled social engagements or were called away from them. Too many people were at the office too early and stayed too late. Reporters prowled the corridors of the State Department and the Pentagon, looking for a lead.

At five p.m. on Monday, October 22, the President briefed Congressional leaders. Sen. Richard B. Russell of Georgia urged an immediate invasion. Surprisingly, Sen. J. William Fulbright of Arkansas supported him. He felt that intercepting Soviet ships at sea was just as risky as taking out the bases themselves.

At six p.m., Russian Ambassador Anatoly F. Dobrynin was ushered into the office of Secretary of State Rusk. He looked relaxed. Twenty-five minutes later, he came out—tense and, it seemed to reporters, shaken, clutching a copy of the President's speech in his hand. "Ask the Secretary," was the only reply he would give to questions.

At seven, the President spoke to the nation and the world from his office. After describing the surveillance by the United States and what it had discovered, he told of the "strict quarantine on all offensive military equipment under shipment to Cuba" and other steps he had ordered. He also warned Khrushchev: "It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union."

President Kennedy's sensitivity to the precedents that would be set in this first nuclear crisis the world had faced was matched by a determination so to pace events as to give the Soviet leaders time to think out the consequences of each move. His purpose was to avoid putting them in a position where their only response could be, in the President's own words, a "spasm reaction."

Thus, on Monday, the President announced only his intention to impose a quarantine. He waited until Tuesday to issue the actual proclamation. And the proclamation provided still another pause by making the quarantine effective the next day, Wednesday, October 24, at 10 a.m.

Even then, the President ordered the Navy screen not to intercept a Soviet ship until absolutely necessary—and had the order transmitted in the clear. The first contact with a Soviet ship therefore did not come until Thursday at 8 a.m.—when the oil tanker *Bucharest* was hailed but not boarded. The first boarding did not occur until 24 hours later, on Friday, October 26.

CUBAN CRISIS

A threat from Khrushchev

On Wednesday morning, the Soviet Government officially rejected the United States proclamation of quarantine.

Khrushchev apparently wanted to accompany this rejection with a threat, one that would be public but not official. He needed a foil, and what he seems to have done was to scan the list of private American citizens visiting Moscow for a name that would suit his purpose. William Knox, president of Westinghouse International, who was in Moscow on business, suddenly got a call to the Kremlin. Khrushchev admitted to Knox that Soviet missiles were present in Cuba, and went on to say that the Soviet Union would use them if necessary. Attacking the Kennedy quarantine proclamation, Khrushchev added that if the United States stopped Soviet ships, Soviet submarines would be forced to sink a U.S. ship—a series of events, he warned, that would very likely bring on World War III.

Late Wednesday came the first hint of a break. Some of the Soviet ships heading toward Cuba altered course, and the rest stopped dead in the water—where they wallowed for several days.

This was a sign that the Soviet Union realized what President Kennedy had been stressing all along to the ExCom—that in a nuclear confrontation, neither side could afford precipitate action. A scribbled sign posted in a State Department briefing room made the same point in a wry attempt at humor. "In a Nuclear Age," it read, "nations must make war as porcupines make love—*carefully*."

Intelligence reports on Friday the 26th showed that work on all sites was going forward at full speed. The only ship so far boarded and inspected was a Lebanese freighter under Soviet charter, but a direct confrontation between American and Soviet vessels could not long be delayed.

There are several channels of communication between the Soviet and American governments. Some are very formal and official, and some are entirely unofficial.

A special officer with a nominal title or a Tass correspondent with unusual connections, for example, might be used to push a line or convey a threat. Occasionally, the Russians might resort to this irregular channel to try out a proposal or test a reaction in advance and thus avoid committing themselves prematurely. In the Cuban crisis, two of the channels were probably decisive—the very formal letters shuttling between Kennedy and Khrushchev and a set of communications through a very informal and unofficial channel.

At 1:30 Friday afternoon, John Scali, State Department correspondent for ABC and a man known to be trusted at the highest levels of the U.S. Government, received an urgent telephone call from a senior Soviet official asking for an immediate appointment. Most Washington correspondents maintain a contact in the Soviet Embassy, and Scali had lunched with Mr. X on several previous occasions, although never on such short, peremptory notice. What made this call so significant to Scali was not only its urgency, but that he knew Mr. X was the head of Soviet intelligence in the United States—a man with his own direct channels of communication to the Kremlin.

They met at the Occidental Restaurant, and Mr. X went straight to the point—and an extraordinary point it was too. He asked Scali to find out immediately from his "high-level friends in the State Department" whether the United States would be interested in a solution to the crisis along the following lines: (1) The Soviet Union would agree to dismantle and remove the offensive missiles in Cuba; (2) it would allow United Nations inspectors to supervise and verify the

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removal; (3) it would pledge not to reintroduce ballistic missiles, ever, to Cuba; and (4), in return, the United States would pledge publicly not to invade Cuba. Mr. X added that if Ambassador Adlai E. Stevenson pursued this approach at the United Nations, where U Thant was attempting to mediate, Soviet delegate Valerian Zorin would be interested. And, after giving Scali his home phone number with instructions to call at any hour day or night, he emphasized that the matter was "of the greatest urgency."

Scali came directly to me, as State Department Director of Intelligence and Research, and typed out the gist of his conversation with Mr. X. After Scali left, there was some debate among the "sovietologists" about how seriously to take this highly unorthodox approach. In the end, its very unusualness argued for at least putting it up to the ExCom for consideration.

But it was Secretary Rusk who saw the full possibilities in an entirely unofficial exchange of views with the Soviet Union and who seized the opportunity the X approach seemed to present. After a short discussion with other members of the ExCom, Rusk asked me to bring Scali up in the private elevator to see him.

Rusk told Scali that the approach made of Cuban bases, he said, why shouldn't there also be inspection of American bases in Florida from which an invasion of Cuba might originate?

This was a new element, Scali pointed out, and he had no information on how the United States Government might react. But speaking as a reporter, he went on, he felt that this new element would raise a terrible complication. Since there were no American missiles pointed at Cuba, the situations were entirely different, and he felt President Kennedy would reject any such proposal. Scali stressed again the urgency. If time were spent haggling over some such condition like Mr. X's new proposal, there might be a disaster for Cuba, for the Soviet Union and for the world.

Mr. X thanked Scali, repeated with emphasis that Scali's information would be communicated immediately to the very highest levels in the Kremlin and to Zorin at the United Nations. He left in obvious haste.

Scali reported back to me, and we went again to see Secretary Rusk. In the meantime, Khrushchev's four-part cable letter to President Kennedy had begun to come in. This message has not been made public, but the key elements have been described in several magazine and newspaper articles. Long and discursive, it bore the unmistakproposals, they should be taken seriously.

On close examination, it seemed clear that Mr. X's approach and the Khrushchev cable were indeed linked. X's assignment apparently was to stimulate U.S. interest in Khrushchev's imprecise formulations by adding specifics—especially on the question of inspection, which the Soviet Union knew was central for the United States.

The Soviets had backed off from direct confrontation with the United States, had opened the way for talks and had at least postponed a direct U.S. effort to remove the missiles. From all the evidence, it seemed to us that Khrushchev had faced the prospect of an escalating confrontation, that he was horrified at what he saw and that he was sincerely searching for a way out. But it could also be argued that he was only playing for time until the missiles were operational, which would be in about two or three weeks. We therefore also recommended that a precondition for further negotiations be that the Soviets stop work on the new missile sites.

On Saturday morning, the ExCom met with somewhat brighter spirits—only to have them quickly dashed by Khrushchev's broadcast note reneging on the messages of the night before and by the shooting down of a U-2 over Cuba.

through him was our first direct word that the Soviets might be thinking of a deal and that it fitted in with some hints that had been dropped that afternoon at the UN. The Secretary asked Scali to go back to the Soviet official and tell him the United States was interested, but that time was very, very short—no more than two days. Rusk had written what Scali was to say on a piece of yellow paper in his own handwriting:

"I have reason to believe that the USG [United States Government] sees real possibilities and supposes that the representatives of the two governments in New York could work this matter out with U Thant and with each other. My impression is, however, that time is very urgent."

Rusk authorized Scali to tell the Soviet official that the statement came from the "highest levels in the government of the United States."

Scali then phoned Mr. X at the Soviet Embassy and arranged to meet with him 15 minutes later, at 7:35 p.m., in the coffee shop of the Statler Hilton Hotel, which is just a block away from the Soviet Embassy.

Over coffee, Scali relayed his news. The one thing Mr. X wanted to be certain of was that it actually represented the views of the United States Government. Several times, he asked if Scali's information on the American reaction came from high sources, and Scali replied that it came from *very* high sources.

Satisfied on this point, Mr. X tried to do some dickering. Since there was to be inspection

able stamp of Khrushchev himself. It contained no specific proposal or conditions, but showed throughout an appreciation of the risk of nuclear war and the need for reaching an agreement. One key passage, for example, likened the crisis to a rope with a knot in the middle, with President Kennedy pulling on one end and Khrushchev pulling on the other. The more they both pulled, the more the knot would tighten, until finally it could be cut only with a sword. But if they both stopped pulling, the knot could be untied.

This cable must have been drafted at about the same time as the instructions to Mr. X. For the two communications were clearly related: The cable indicated a willingness to negotiate, and Mr. X's unofficial approach suggested a formula for the negotiations.

"John," Rusk told Scali, "you have served your country well. Remember when you report this—that, eyeball to eyeball, they blinked first."

Analyzing the Russian moves

At the Secretary's request, a group of us in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research spent the rest of the night preparing an analysis of the Khrushchev cable and the X approach—"to include any hookers in it"—that would be ready for the members of the ExCom before the next morning's meeting.

Our judgment was that the Russians had indeed blinked and that even though there were some possible hookers to be guarded against in the

At 10:17 a.m., the news tickers cleared the first bulletin of the new note from Khrushchev, being broadcast by Radio Moscow. As the details came in, it was clear that the Russians had reversed their position. They now offered to trade their missiles in Cuba for American missiles in Turkey. This was the blackest hour of the crisis. There was some speculation that the hard-liners in the Kremlin, possibly backed by the military, might be taking over. The Russians must know, the reasoning went, that shooting down U-2's would force us to take direct action against the antiaircraft SAM's. What they had done, therefore, seemed to mean that they were bent on a showdown. If so, it would not be possible any longer to control and pace events. Everything would inevitably be foreshortened, and an actual American invasion of Cuba might be no later than 48 hours away.

Then it was our turn to make a slip—the crossing of the Soviet border by our stray U-2. Eventually, the U-2 made it back to base safely, and later Kennedy was able to explain the circumstances. But in the meantime, some way had to be found to get back to the more promising proposals put forward on Friday—and quickly. Rusk called Scali to his office later that afternoon and suggested he see Mr. X again and ask what had happened. Had the whole operation been a trap to divert attention while the Soviets planned a double cross? What was going on at the Kremlin?

Scali and Mr. X met at 4:15 p.m. in a

deserted banquet hall off the mezzanine of the Statler Hilton. Mr. X was puzzled and unhappy. Responding to Scali's challenge, he sought to explain the morning's message linking Cuba to Turkey and reneging on his formula of the night before as the result of bad communications—that the cable had been drafted before his report on the favorable American reaction reached Moscow. Scali exploded. He said he couldn't believe Mr. X's explanation. In his opinion, Scali said, it was all a "stinking double cross." And if this were so, Scali went on, it amounted to one of the most colossal misjudgements in history. The United States was absolutely determined to get the missiles out of Cuba, as the President had said. Time was now running out. A U-2 had been shot down over Cuba, and the United States had to conclude that the Soviet military people there had gotten new and more dangerous instructions.

A Russian feeler is rejected

As for Mr. X's claim that there was no double cross, Scali wanted him to know that an exchange of Soviet missile bases for U.S. missile bases was completely, totally and perpetually unacceptable. It had been unacceptable in the past, it was unacceptable today, and it would be unacceptable tomorrow and ad infinitum. If the Russians wanted to talk about American missile bases in Europe, they should talk about the problem within the framework of general disarmament and not seek to inject it into the Cuban crisis.

They parted—Mr. X assuring Scali that a reply would surely come soon, and Scali repeating how critically short the time was.

Scali went to the State Department to report and was whisked to the White House to stand by while the ExCom members read the report of his conversation he had dictated.

Then, with all the evidence on the table, the ExCom considered what to do next. It was Robert Kennedy who conceived a brilliant diplomatic maneuver. Later dubbed the "Trollope ploy," after the recurrent scene in Anthony Trollope's novels in which the girl interprets a squeeze of her hand as a proposal of marriage, Robert Kennedy's suggestion was to deal with Friday's package of signals—Khrushchev's cable and the approach through Scali—as if the conflicting message on Saturday linking Cuba and Turkey simply did not exist. That message, in fact, had already been rejected in a public announcement. The thing to do now was to answer the Friday approaches and make the answer public. Khrushchev's Friday-night cable had not mentioned inspection, but inspection had been a key element of the proposal put forward by Mr. X. With certain items selected from the cable and others from the Scali-Mr. X exchange, a reply was drafted for the President's signature and released:

"I have read your letter of October 26th with great care and welcome the statement of your desire to seek a prompt solution to the problem. The first thing that needs to be done, however, is for work to cease on offensive missile bases in Cuba. . . . Assuming this is done promptly, I have given my representatives in New York instructions that will permit them to work out this weekend—in cooperation with the Acting Secretary General and your representative—an arrangement for the permanent solution to the Cuban problem. . . . As I read your letter, the key elements of your proposals—which seem generally acceptable as I understand them—are as follows: (1) You would agree to remove these weapons systems from Cuba under appropriate United Nations observation and supervision; and undertake, with suitable safeguards, to halt the further introduction of such weapons systems into Cuba. (2) We, on our part, would agree—upon the establishment of adequate arrangements through the United Nations to ensure the carrying out and continuation of these commitments—(a) to remove promptly the quarantine measures now in effect and (b) to give assurances against an invasion of Cuba."

Another channel was then used to make clear once again the sense of urgency and seriousness felt in Washington. Again, there was nothing to do but wait. As the meeting broke up, President Kennedy remarked that it could "go either way."

Just before nine o'clock Sunday morning, October 28, Moscow radio announced that it would have an important statement to broadcast at nine sharp. It was a letter from Chairman Khrushchev: "In order to eliminate as rapidly as possible the conflict which endangers the cause of peace. . . . the Soviet Government . . . has given a new order to dismantle the arms which you described as offensive, and to crate and return them to the Soviet Union."

Sunday night, Scali had his last meeting with Mr. X. "I have been instructed," Mr. X said in the classic language of diplomacy, "to thank you and to tell you that the information you supplied was very valuable to the Chairman in helping him make up his mind quickly. And," he added with a smile, "that includes your 'explosion' Saturday."

Why did the Soviet Union back down in Cuba? What are the lessons of the crisis? And what is its meaning for the future? Was it, indeed, a turning point in history?

The risks to both sides in the Cuban missile confrontation were very real, very direct and very high. As Dean Rusk has said, a misstep might have meant the "incineration" of the entire Northern Hemisphere. Even so, it is not possible to say that a nuclear threat as such caused the Soviet Union to back down. The Soviet leaders probably had considerable confidence in the judgment and sense of responsibility of the American leaders, and they undoubtedly assumed that the U.S. response would begin with conventional means and would continue to be confined to conventional means, unless the Soviets themselves did something that raised the ante. However, it is also not possible to say that the Soviet leaders backed down solely in the face of a threat to invade Cuba with conventional, nonnuclear forces, even though they knew that the troops they had in Cuba could not stand up to such an invasion.

On balance, the best judgment seems to be that the Soviets retreated when confronted by a threat of combined conventional and nuclear power. Cuba is far from the sources of Soviet strength. With vastly shorter lines of communication, the United States could apply overwhelmingly preponderant conventional power at the point of contact—Cuba—and do so under an umbrella of nuclear power that foreclosed any possibility of the Soviets trying to use nuclear weapons to redress the imbalance at that contact point. It was this combination of overwhelming conventional power on the spot and adequate nuclear power overall that proved irresistible.

Thus the first and most obvious lesson of the Cuban missile crisis is that of power. The United States decided to accept the Soviet challenge, and U.S. strength and determination were sufficient to meet the challenge.

But it would be a mistake to conclude that this same formula of will and power can be translated into success in every kind of confrontation—that it would necessarily work in Laos, for example, or Vietnam. The arena in the Cuban case was close to the sources of American power, as we have said, and distant from the sources of Soviet power. But, more important, there was no doubt at all about the stakes: The threat from Cuba in October, 1962, was nuclear, and it was directed at the American heartland.

It would also be a mistake to think that the formula of will and power is appropriate to all political objectives. The issue here is the relationship of means to ends—the appropriateness and acceptability both to world opinion and to the American conscience of using military force to accomplish particular objectives. It is acceptable and fitting that the United States use the full panoply of its military power to remove a threat to its survival. But at some point as one moves down the scale from national survival to progressively lesser objectives, the political costs of using raw military force begin to exceed the potential gains. Reasonable men may quarrel with President Kennedy's choice of when to make this shift from military power in the Cuban missile crisis—which was just after the removal of the missiles and bombers, but before the withdrawal of Soviet advisers and the elimination of the Castro regime—but they would not question the principle itself.

The keynote of the United States response was flexibility and self-disciplined restraint—a graduated effort that avoided trying to achieve too much and stopped short of confronting an adversary with stark and imperative choices. Out of the basic policy flowed precedents: restraint in the use of power; flexibility in developing a solution; the pacing of events to give the other side time to think and to obviate "spasm reactions"; the making of a "little international law" outlawing the secret and rapid development of nuclear weapons; the deliberate regard for precedent and the effect of present action on the longer future; and, finally, the relevance to that longer future of moral integrity—a point on which both the President and the Attorney General so strongly and steadily insisted.

Khrushchev's choice after Cuba

Following the crisis, the Soviets had only two alternatives. One was a crash intercontinental-ballistic-missile program to redress the strategic balance. This would mean austerity at home and a return to the coldest kind of cold war abroad. And as a most unpalatable corollary, it would necessitate an immediate healing of the Sino-Soviet dispute—on Chinese terms.

The other alternative was the one actually chosen—easing the tensions of the cold war, with the Test Ban Treaty as the first concrete step. The Soviet ICBM program could be stretched out, and the burdens lightened of competing so aggressively in the underdeveloped regions of the world. This course of action also had a corollary for the Sino-Soviet dispute—a sharpening of the tension, perhaps even an open break.

The Soviets have gazed down the gun barrel of nuclear war, as have we; they have probed its awesome dimensions, and they have turned away. This experience has not caused them to cease being Communists nor to give up their goal of world domination. But for the moment, at least, they seem to recognize that, on so small a planet as ours, nuclear war is one means that would jeopardize their ends rather than serve them.

The threat of nuclear war has not been eliminated from the world, nor is there yet a reconciliation between East and West. But if either of these objectives ever is attained, historians will probably mark the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 as the beginning.

END