

Behind the Scenes... the 'Crisis Cabinet'

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The Cuban crisis has brought to public view the "inner group" that for many months has been acting as President Kennedy's foreign policy and national security team.

Behind the scenes at the White House for the past three weeks, this "crisis cabinet" has been meeting daily to advise the President. The three members who have been closest to the Chief Executive during the crisis are his brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara and McGeorge Bundy, the President's special assistant for national security.

On Tuesday, Oct. 23, the White House announced that the President had formed a 12-man "executive committee" of the National Security Council to meet with him daily during the crisis. Since the NSC by law consists of only five men, the "executive committee" is larger than the council itself and in fact was a device to give formal status to the inner group

that has been working with the President for months.

Physically, the "executive committee" meets daily in the Cabinet Room in the west wing of the White House. It has dealt hour by hour with the fast-breaking crisis and its uncertain aftermath.

Below the President's office in the basement of the White House is the "situation room," a euphemism for "war room," which is the nerve center of the White House in any crisis. It is manned around the clock.

All communications, including cables from embassies and military reports, flow into this basement room. During the Cuban crisis it has been manned by Bromley Smith, executive secretary of the NSC, Mr. Bundy, his deputy Carl Kaysen, and Maj. Gen. Chester V. Clifton, the President's military aid.

Important dispatches are brought upstairs to the President's office or to the Cabinet Room if the NSC committee is meeting. The time lag from the situation room to the upstairs offices is only about a minute.

In addition, Mr. Kennedy has kept abreast of hourly developments by watch-

ing the commercial news tickers in the White House, the Signal Corps teletype ticker and, like other people, on occasion his television set. He watched Adlai E. Stevenson, United States Ambassador to the United Nations, on TV during the Security Council debate last week.

The President's brother, who always has been his closest friend and adviser, has attended the NSC committee meetings. He was also at the President's side during the six days from Oct. 16 when the U. S. response to the fact that Soviet offensive missiles had been placed in Cuba was being debated in tight secrecy by the President and his advisers.

Besides Robert Kennedy, Mr. Bundy and Mr. McNamara, the members of the executive committee are Vice-President Johnson, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Treasury Secretary Douglas Dillon, Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; John A. McCone, director of the Central Intelligence Agency; Under Secretary of State George W. Ball, Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell L. Gilpatric, Llewellyn E. Thompson, ambassador at large and Soviet expert, and Theodore C. Sorensen, special counsel to the President.

This inner group really emerged after the disaster at the Bay of Pigs, when Cuban exiles armed and trained by the CIA failed in an attempt to invade their homeland. President Kennedy took responsibility for the failure. But in the months that followed he welded the national security team that appeared to function with remarkable smoothness during the Cuban crisis of 1962.

"The Bay of Pigs," said one high official, "caused the coming together of this kind of a group, that was able to deal with the Cuban crisis when it developed."

Considering its size, the group was able to move rapidly. On Saturday morning, for example, Soviet Premier Khrushchev's message urging a swap of missile bases in Turkey and Cuba came in over the Signal Corps wire. The President and his advisers decided it called for an immediate reply, even though the message, which had been broadcast by the Moscow radio, had not yet reached the White House through diplomatic channels.

A reply, rejecting any negotiations until the bases were dismantled, was drafted on the spot by Mr. Bundy and released to reporters shortly after noon.