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RFK Says The Joint Chiefs Were Itching for War Over Cuba

This Was The Moment That Was

The gravest moments of the Cuban missile crisis came when a confrontation nearly occurred between a Soviet submarine and a U.S. aircraft carrier, according to newly published memoirs of the late Sen. Robert F. Kennedy.

The memoirs, published from the Kennedy estate for more than \$1 million and published yesterday in McCall's Magazine, added new details to the historical record of the showdown between the United States and Russia in October, 1962.

At the height of the crisis on Wednesday, Oct. 24, Sen. Kennedy reported, two Soviet cargo ships approached the U.S. Navy "quarantine" barrier set up across the Atlantic approaches to Cuba. A Russian sub was sailing submerged between the two ships.

SIGNAL

The U.S. Aircraft Carrier Essex was to signal the submarine by sound equipment to surface and identify itself, Sen. Kennedy said. He said that if it refused, the Essex was to drop depth charges with "a small explosive" to force compliance.

Robert Kennedy described the appearance and thoughts of his brother President John F. Kennedy, at this moment:

"Was the world on the brink of a holocaust? Was it our error? A mistake? Was there something further that should have been done? Or not done? His hand went up to his face and covered his mouth. He opened and closed his fist. His face seemed drawn, his eyes pained, almost gray."

Robert Kennedy quoted the President as saying: "Isn't there some way we can avoid having our first exchange with a Russian submarine — almost anything but that?"

Minutes later, a message came that some of the Soviet ships headed toward Cuba had stopped. President Kennedy ordered the Essex to do nothing but give the Russian vessels an opportunity to turn back. One stage of the crisis was over.

EMOTIONAL EXCHANGE

The memoirs also reveal some new glimpses into the unpublished correspondence between President Kennedy and then Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev. In one letter, President Kennedy told the Soviet leader: "I have not assumed that you or any other sane man would, in this nuclear age, deliberately plunge the world into war which it is crystal clear no country could win . . ."

In an emotional letter to the President Oct. 26, parts of which have appeared in print previously, Khrushchev said: "If people do not show wisdom, then in the final analysis they will come to a clash, like blind moles, and then reciprocal extermination will begin."

Robert Kennedy also reported that at one point in the crisis President Kennedy ordered U.S. missiles with atomic warheads in Turkey defused, so that if the Russians attacked Turkey in response to the Cuban crisis, the President personally would have to give permission before they could be used.

The article also told of a poignant moment when the two brothers, both later assassinated, were alone after the crisis had ended.

The President, recalling Abraham Lincoln's death after the Civil War, wryly commented: "This is the night I should go to the theater."

"If you do, I want to go with you," Robert Kennedy replied.

MILITARY ANXIOUS

Robert Kennedy's account details how close the Cuban crisis came to actual war in several ways — how military advisers pressed for an attack against Cuba; how advance preparations for such an attack were made; and how, as the climax approached, the chances for miscalculation by both countries grew.

From the beginning, he said, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were unanimous in advocating immediate military action.

Sen. Kennedy wrote that Gen. Curtis LeMay, then Air Force Chief of Staff and now George Wallace's vice presidential candidate, argued strongly with the President that military attack was "essential."

When the President asked the likely response of the Russians, Robert Kennedy wrote, Gen. LeMay insisted there would be none. The President was skeptical and told Gen. LeMay the Russians could not "do nothing" about a U.S. attack on Cuba — that they would reply either in Cuba or Berlin.

Sen. Kennedy said his brother was distressed that, with the exception of Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, his military advisers "seemed to give so little consideration to the implications of the steps they suggested."

He said the experience emphasized the need for "civilian direction and control" and for raising "probing questions" to military recommendations.

Then Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara was an early advocate of the "blockade" tactic finally used, Sen. Kennedy reported.

ADVANCE STATISTICS

He described how other preparations were far advanced for an attack against Cuba should the blockade fail. Mr. McNamara, for example, already had figured that 250,000 men would be required for an invasion, including 90,000 Marines and airborne forces, and 2000 air sorties against Cuban targets.

As the crisis unfolded, Robert Kennedy reported, his brother "was not sanguine about the results . . . Each hour the situation grew steadily more serious. The feeling grew that this cup was no going to pass and that a direct military confrontation between the two great nuclear powers was inevitable."

He recalled that when a U2 reconnaissance plane was shot

down over Cuba, "at first there was almost unanimous agreement that we had to attack early the next morning with bombers and fighters and destroy the Sam (surface air missile) sites."

Robert Kennedy said the first days of strategy meetings were dominated by consideration of the "morw question" of whether, despite what had happened, the United States could attack a small nation like Cuba and still maintain a moral position at home and in the eyes of the world.

His final conclusion was that war was averted by making it firmly clear to Russia that the United States would not tolerate an offensive missile base in Cuba, while at the same time refusing to push Russia to the extent that her own vital security was affected.

He quoted his brother, as saying: "If anybody is around to write after this, they are going to understand that we made every effort to find peace and every effort to give our adversaries room to move. I am not going to push the Russia an inch beyond what is necessary."

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