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The "Phantom Battle" That Led To War

Can It Happen Again?

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Hours of Mystery, Years of War

On Aug. 4, 1964, daylight was fading over the Gulf of Tonkin when an urgent message reached the U.S. destroyers *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* on patrol in hostile waters off Communist-ruled North Vietnam.

It was a warning: The National Security Agency's monitors had intercepted enemy messages to two North Vietnamese gunboats and one PT boat, giving them the location of the two American warships and ordering preparations for combat.

Only two days earlier, PT boats had ambushed the *Maddox*, inflicting trivial damage while losing one of their craft to heavy gunfire from the destroyer and carrier aircraft. What happened on the night of August 4, however, was something far different.

Within 95 minutes, the fire and thunder of naval gunnery shattered the gulf's evening calm. Its waters roiled with the frantic zigzagging of America's destroyers as they sought to escape unseen enemy vessels and torpedoes—26 in all—as reported by radar and sonar crews. In pitch-black darkness, naval gunfire and missiles launched by U.S. carrier aircraft pierced the murky skies with fiery trails on their way to designated enemy targets.

Within 2 hours, it was all over. No casualties or damage were reported by the *Maddox* and *Turner Joy*. Yet that brief and mysterious encounter has generated bitter arguments among historians, and raised sensitive questions: Did enemy vessels actually attack the two destroyers—or did commanders fall prey to overheated imagination in a frightening and confusing situation? If there was an enemy attack, was it unprovoked? Were key facts being withheld from the U.S. public—and did President Lyndon Johnson seize on a questionable incident to expand his powers and speed America toward all-out war in Vietnam?

What the President, like his slain predecessor, John F. Kennedy, had been confronting for months was an unyielding question: Was it time for the U.S. either to abandon its ally, South Vietnam—or to plunge U.S. troops into full-scale war against North Vietnam?

That dilemma had only worsened in the nine months of growing instability in South Vietnam after the overthrow and murder of its autocratic leader, Ngo Dinh Diem, and Johnson's advisers were drafting a congressional resolution giving him the freedom to go to war if he so decided.

Though doubt quickly surfaced about the realities of the Tonkin Gulf naval incident, Johnson called congressional leaders to the White House to ask for a resolution that would make him surrogate for the warmaking authority reserved for Congress by the Constitution.

In three days, both houses passed the resolution with near unanimity. It was a historic yielding of their prerogative to the White House.

What emerges from new evidence is a chronicle of confusion and bad judgments—and duplicity in high places—that guided the nation into a cruel and unpopular war that would cost 58,000 U.S. lives and immerse Americans in years of disillusionment as seldom, if ever, before. And there came, too, hard lessons on the wrenching difficulties of sharing warmaking power between the President and Congress in nuclear war—difficulties that have been only too apparent in recent controversies over American military involvement in Lebanon, Central America and the Persian Gulf.

The Escalation Gambit

November, 1963: In Saigon and Washington, in the aftermath of presidential assassinations, a fresh chapter opened under new leadership in the long and frustrating involvement of America in South Vietnam.

In Saigon, a military junta that succeeded the slain Ngo Dinh Diem found itself mired in intrigue that would produce another regime in the next three months—even as Communist guerrillas overran growing chunks of countryside with help from North Vietnam's Marxist rulers.

In Washington, the benumbing murder of John F. Kennedy brought into the Presidency and global policymaking JFK's Vice President, Lyndon Johnson.

Continued

LIBRARY RELEASES

CUBAN CRISIS TAPES

Kennedy Archive Calls Timing of Its Disclosure of Secret Material a Coincidence

By FOX BUTTERFIELD

Special to The New York Times

BOSTON, Oct. 26 — In the first hours after discovering that the Soviet Union was installing missiles in Cuba, President Kennedy and his advisers seriously discussed air strikes against Cuba, according to secret White House tapes released today.

"I don't think we got much time on these missiles," Kennedy said at a meeting Oct. 16, 1962, shortly after being shown aerial reconnaissance photographs of the newly discovered Soviet missile sites.

"We're certainly going to do No. 1," the President told his top aides. "We're going to take out these missiles."

The tapes, along with transcripts of the White House talks, were made public by the John F. Kennedy Library here after review by national security officials in Washington. William W. Moss, chief archivist of the library, said 20 percent of the material had been deleted by the officials for security reasons.

Tapes Cover Two Meetings

The 87 pages of transcript and 33 minutes of tapes released today covered only two meetings on the Cuban missiles, both on Oct. 16, 1962, the first day of the 13-day crisis.

In June the Kennedy Library made public a first selection of materials from tapes secretly recorded by Kennedy. They involved the integration of the University of Mississippi in 1962 and discussions of Administration tax policy. The tapes' existence was first announced in 1973.

Mr. Moss said the timing of this release, on the day after the United States invasion of Grenada, was coincidental. It happened because the library only recently got the material back from Washington, he said.

Mr. Moss said the material on the Cuban missile crisis contained "no surprises." He said, "It doesn't change anything. There is nothing new of substance."

But he added that "it gives us the voices" of the participants in the crucial meetings and may provide historians with a more accurate sense of the personalities involved.

McNamara Role Dominant

In the view of Mr. Moss, the tapes show that the dominant actor in the first day of meetings was Robert S. McNamara, Secretary of Defense. "McNamara took a leading role in the discussions and tried to get people to focus on the issues," Mr. Moss commented.

It was Mr. McNamara, the transcript shows, who first defined three possible responses. The first was political or diplomatic, to consult with America's allies and give both the Cuban leader Fidel Castro and the Soviet leader Nikita S. Khrushchev ample warning that Washington would not accept the missiles in Cuba.

When Mr. McNamara described this as "a nonmilitary action," others in the meeting laughed, the transcript shows.

The second course, Mr. McNamara suggested, was a naval blockade to keep all further Russian offensive weapons from Cuba. It might mean "we search every ship," Mr. McNamara said. This was the option ultimately selected.

The third choice, which both the President and most of his officials seemed to favor on the first day, was a military attack to remove the missiles.

Kennedy Enumerated Them

Kennedy himself refined the military response into three options. "One would be just taking out these missiles," he said in the meeting, in the Cabinet Room. "No. 2 would be to take out all the airplanes," meaning a large number of Russian fighters that had recently also been shipped to Cuba. "No. 3 is invade," he said.

Gen. Maxwell W. Taylor, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as well as Mr. McNamara, favored a surprise attack to hit both the missile sites and the airplanes.

The transcripts show Kennedy closely questioning officials of the Central Intelligence Agency on how they know the small objects in the photographs, taken by a U-2 plane, were really Russian medium-range missiles. Their answers speak of a comparison with photographs of Soviet missiles displayed on parade in Moscow.

At one point in the first meeting, after he learned about the missiles, Kennedy mused on why the Russians decided to put the weapons in Cuba after publicly declaring they would not. There "must be some major reason for the Russians to set this up," he said. "Must be that they're not satisfied with their ICBM's."

Rusk Quotes McCone

Dean Rusk, the Secretary of State, then recalled that a few weeks before John McCone, the Director of Central Intelligence, warned that Khrushchev might put missiles in Cuba because "he knows that we have a substantial nuclear superiority."

Minutes before the first meeting, the transcript reveals, Kennedy chatted cheerfully over the phone with his daughter Caroline. The conversation between father and daughter has been deleted, in accordance with the conditions of the Kennedy family's gift of the President's papers to the library.

But it ended in laughter, that much was not censored.

Mr. Moss said that future release of material on the Cuban missile crisis would be very slow. He noted that all the tapes had first to be transcribed, which took 100 to 150 hours of work for each hour of recording. Then the transcripts had to be sent to Washington for clearance.

With these difficulties, and the Kennedy Library's shortage of money, he estimated that only three hours of recording could be prepared for review each year.

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ON PAGE A-1WASHINGTON POST
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Scowcroft Commission's Life Is Extended for Two Years

By Lou Cannon
Washington Post Staff Writer

President Reagan has decided to extend the life of the bipartisan Scowcroft commission for two years, administration officials said yesterday, in what one called "a guarantee of genuine follow-up on both arms control negotiations and the MX."

The Scowcroft panel, officially the President's Commission on Strategic Forces, has been the driving force behind the administration's thus-far successful effort to obtain congressional approval of the MX intercontinental ballistic missile after two earlier defeats.

The commission is scheduled to go out of existence on June 16, but officials said Reagan will extend its life to Jan. 1, 1985, with the expectation that it would become "institutionalized" and continue in some form either in his second term or in another presidency.

Continuation of the commission is likely to be hailed with approval by moderate congressional Democrats who voted for the MX after Reagan told them he is as committed to genuine arms control negotiations with the Soviets as he is to deploying 100 of the MX missiles in existing Minuteman silos.

Some moderates called for appointment of a continuing advisory unit on arms control as a condition of support for MX.

Administration sources said that Lt. Gen. Brent Scowcroft, a retired Air Force officer who served as national security affairs adviser to President Ford, had agreed to stay on as chairman, and that Thomas C. Reed, secretary of the Air Force in the Ford administration, would continue as vice chairman.

The retention of Reed, who has come under scrutiny by a federal grand jury and a congressional committee for a 1981 stock deal, could be controversial.

Reed resigned as White House consultant and deputy national security affairs adviser to the president after the Scowcroft commission submitted its report on April 6.

However, both the president and national security affairs adviser William P. Clark were said to be solidly in support of keeping Reed, the administration's MX expert, on the advisory panel, which would be headquartered in the Pentagon. Reed played a major role in Reagan's California gubernatorial campaigns, and served as first appointments secretary to Reagan as governor in 1967.

While Reagan won on MX last month, the White House recognizes that his support on the issue is potentially shaky and could disappear if the administration fails to adopt recommendations of the Scowcroft unit when the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START) resume with the Soviet Union in Geneva Wednesday.

The commission called for "vigorous pursuit of arms control" and recommended that the administration change its arms reduction proposal to count warheads instead of weapons.

Reagan has promised to do this and to propose some version of a "build-down" proposal advocated by Sens. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.) and William S. Cohen (R-Maine) in which both sides would remove more than one older nuclear weapon for each new one they add to their arsenals.

But exactly how to revise the START proposal has been a subject for debate in the administration.

White House spokesman Larry Speakes said the president is considering options this weekend at Camp David in preparation for a probable decision when the National Security Council meets Tuesday.

The Scowcroft commission also recommended development of a small, single-warhead missile ultimately designed to replace the MX and research and development on "hardening" of the Minuteman silos to give them better protection against a Soviet strike.

Administration officials said continuation of the commission would ensure follow-through on these objectives, and on research for an anti-ballistic missile defense.

Scowcroft agreed to continue as chairman after being assured that the workload would be distributed under a new committee system, officials said. They said the full commission probably would meet only two or three times annually.

The 11-man commission includes prominent national security and science officials in four administrations, including Reagan's former secretary of state, Alexander M. Haig Jr., former CIA director Richard M. Helms and President Carter's Pentagon chief of research and development, William J. Perry.

Among the counselors to the commission are Henry A. Kissinger and Carter's secretary of defense, Harold Brown, who is said to have played a major role in the commission's deliberations.

Former secretaries of defense Melvin R. Laird, Donald H. Rumsfeld and James R. Schlesinger Jr., Carter White House counselor Lloyd N. Cutler and former CIA director John McCone are the other counselors.

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