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An Introduction to the ExComm Transcripts

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# The Eleventh Hour of the Cuban Missile Crisis: An Introduction to the ExComm Transcripts

David A. Welch  
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Only now are we gaining access to some important documents that offer us a rare glimpse of U.S. governmental decision-making during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, thanks to the Freedom of Information Act and the passage of time. Some of the most important information may be found in the tapes made of the meetings of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (the "ExComm") during the missile crisis—tapes notable for their candor, as they were made without the knowledge of any of the participants save President John F. Kennedy and possibly his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy. Excerpts from the transcript of the first day's meetings (October 16, 1962) have already been published in this journal.<sup>1</sup> In those, we see the Administration's initial reactions to the discovery of Soviet medium- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles secretly being installed in Cuba, and the earliest formulations of possible American responses. McGeorge Bundy, who was Special Assistant for National Security, has recently transcribed the tapes of the meetings on October 27, just prior to the resolution of the crisis. Here we see the members of the ExComm trying to find a way to bring the crisis to a favorable conclusion in the face of conflicting signals from the Soviet Union and an escalating military situation in Cuba.

The body of literature devoted to the Cuban missile crisis is already enormous.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, revelations from this transcript and from new research

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1. "White House Tapes and Minutes of the Cuban Missile Crisis," *International Security*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Summer 1985), pp. 164–203.

2. The main treatments of the Cuban missile crisis include: Elie Abel, *The Missile Crisis* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1966); Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile*

and discussion prompted by the twenty-fifth anniversary of the missile crisis this year may lead us to rethink the event, and the idea of crisis management, in fundamental ways. Many believe that all of the relevant lessons have already been learned from the missile crisis.<sup>3</sup> But the received wisdom is being challenged by information newly available from conferences, interviews, and correspondence, and from previously classified transcripts, cables, memos, and reports. We are only now getting facts crucial to understanding the Cuban missile crisis.

This essay directs attention to surprising and important revelations in the record of the ExComm meetings of October 27. A record of this sort will always remain incomplete and suggestive: it contains only some of the discussions that occurred in the Cabinet Room, where recording equipment was installed; parts of the tapes are uninterpretable; and tapes from most of the other ExComm meetings have yet to be transcribed for reasons of classification, or the practical difficulties of transcription. Consequently, this document is unlikely to eliminate all controversy surrounding the events of October 27, 1962, but it ought to go a long way toward grounding the controversies empirically. While one should be cautious about over-emphasizing the importance of any single document, this one is remarkable both for its view of

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*Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1971); Herbert S. Dinerstein, *The Making of a Missile Crisis: October 1962* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976); Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), pp. 447–499; Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), pp. 159–229; Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969); Henry M. Pachter, *Collision Course: The Cuban Missile Crisis and Coexistence* (New York: Praeger, 1963); Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days* (New York: Fawcett Premier Books, 1965), pp. 250–277; Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 667–718; and Albert and Roberta Wohlstetter, *Controlling the Risks in Cuba*, Adelphi Paper No. 17 (London: Institute for Strategic Studies, 1965). Two useful collections of resource materials are: Robert A. Divine, ed., *The Cuban Missile Crisis* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1971); and David L. Larson, *The “Cuban Crisis” of 1962*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1986), which includes a useful bibliography. The literature on crisis management is voluminous, but several works stand out. These include Daniel Frei, ed., *Managing International Crises* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1982); Richard Ned Lebow, *Nuclear Crisis Management: A Dangerous Illusion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); Glenn H. Snyder and Paul Diesing, *Conflict Among Nations: Bargaining, Decision-Making, and System Structure in International Crises* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968); and Phil Williams, *Crisis Management: Confrontation and Diplomacy in the Nuclear Age* (New York: John Wiley, 1976).

3. One may find this view in Peter W. Rodman, “The Missiles of October: Twenty Years Later,” *Commentary*, October, 1982, pp. 39–45; Paul Johnson, *Modern Times: The World From the Twenties to the Eighties* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), pp. 627–628; and Eliot Cohen, “Why We Should Stop Studying the Cuban Missile Crisis,” *The National Interest*, Number 2, Winter 1985/86, pp. 3–13.

the climax of the crisis and for the feel it provides for what it must have been like to try to resolve a major superpower confrontation.

The remainder of the essay sets forth a brief outline of the events of the Cuban missile crisis, and then notes important issues that are illuminated, sometimes in quite surprising ways, by the transcript. These include cases where a significant conventional understanding or a controversial hypothesis about the crisis is strongly confirmed or is contradicted by new information. We also note several unsolved mysteries. We direct the reader's attention to telling portions of the transcript and provide information from other sources that aids understanding.

#### *Background to the Meetings of October 27*

On October 15, 1962, photographs from the previous day's reconnaissance flight revealed the presence of Soviet SS-4 and SS-5 missiles in Cuba, precipitating an intense crisis that lasted until October 28. On October 19, the CIA reported the construction of twelve SS-5 launch pads, likely to be operational in December, and more importantly, three SS-4 sites with four launchers each, two sites of which were reported to be operational already.<sup>4</sup> American intelligence also revealed the presence of forty-two Il-28 light bombers, capable of delivering nuclear weapons to a range of approximately 600 miles.

The President announced the discovery of the Soviet deployment in a televised speech at 7:00 p.m. on October 22. Soon after, he announced the imposition of a limited quarantine on shipments of military hardware to the island of Cuba, with the unanimous backing of the Organization of American States. American strategic nuclear forces were placed on a heightened state

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4. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Memorandum on "The Crisis: Cuba/USSR," October 19, 1962. (Available in the Cuban Missile Crisis file, National Security Archive, Washington, D.C.) The SS-5 intermediate-range ballistic missile was reported to have a range of 2,200 nautical miles—capable of reaching Central and Eastern Canada, as well as Southern Brazil—with a Circular Error Probable (a measure of accuracy) of 1.5 nmi (nautical miles). The likely maximum yield of the SS-5's warhead was reported to be in the range of 3–5 Mt. The SS-4 medium-range ballistic missile was reported to have a range of 1,020 nmi—capable of reaching Savannah, Georgia, New Orleans, or the Panama Canal—with a CEP of 1 to 1.5 nmi and a yield between 25 kt and 2 Mt. Both were liquid-fueled missiles, and each launcher was expected to have one reload. The SS-5 sites were being built at Guanajay and Remedios, the SS-4s at San Cristobal and Sagua la Grande. There was evidently some confusion in the ExComm as to what "operational" meant, discussed more fully below.

of alert (Defense Condition 2),<sup>5</sup> and some 100,000 troops and more than 500 combat aircraft—including one-third of the Air Force's worldwide tactical fighter resources—were rushed to Florida.<sup>6</sup> Soviet ships carrying suspect cargo did not challenge the quarantine, and Soviet conventional and nuclear forces were never placed on a comparable alert, but work on the missile sites in Cuba continued at what appeared to be an accelerated pace.

The Administration's goal in the crisis was to secure a Soviet commitment, first to halt work on the missile bases and then to withdraw their nuclear-capable systems from Cuba. A number of formal and informal channels of communication were open between Moscow and Washington throughout the public phase of the crisis (October 22–28), but by Friday, October 26, none of them seemed to be bringing the Administration any closer to its objectives. Some figured mainly in the battle over public opinion, such as the public exchange of letters between Kennedy, Khrushchev and Bertrand Russell on October 24 and 25, which contained no real basis for a negotiated solution.<sup>7</sup> Others, such as Khrushchev's unusual meeting in Moscow on October 24 with American businessman William Knox, provided no tangible

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5. At any given time, American forces are on one of five levels of alert. DefCon 1 is the highest, and it indicates a full war footing. Normally in peacetime most American forces would be at DefCon 5. DefCon 2 indicates full readiness for hostilities. The Cuban missile crisis is the only time American nuclear forces have been placed on DefCon 2. At a recent conference of scholars and former ExComm members at Hawk's Cay, Florida, it was revealed by Raymond Garthoff that the Commander-in-Chief of SAC, General Thomas Power, sent out the DefCon 2 alert in the clear, rather than in code, as would have been standard procedure. As Garthoff put it, "General Power had simply taken it upon himself to rub the Soviets' noses in their nuclear inferiority." Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara learned of this only at the Hawk's Cay meeting. David A. Welch, ed., *Proceedings of the Hawk's Cay Conference on the Cuban Missile Crisis, March 5–8, 1987* (hereafter HCT for "Hawk's Cay Transcript"), p. 121. See James G. Blight, Joseph S. Nye, Jr., and David A. Welch, "The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 66, No. 1 (Fall 1987) p. 186.

6. "Department of Defense Operations During the Cuban Crisis," a report by Adam Yarmolinsky, Special Assistant to the Secretary of Defense, February 13, 1963, ed. Dan Caldwell; reprinted in *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (July–August, 1979), pp. 91, 93.

7. British philosopher and activist Bertrand Russell had written an open letter to both Khrushchev and Kennedy appealing for a peaceful settlement. Khrushchev's reply included a vague proposal for a summit, but Kennedy was unwilling to commit to premature negotiations. Khrushchev's response to Russell appeared in the *New York Times*, Oct. 25, 1962, and is reprinted in Divine, ed., *Cuban Missile Crisis*, pp. 38–39. In it, Khrushchev used the opportunity to communicate a deterrent threat of his own: "We are fully aware that if this war is unleashed, from the very first hour it will become a thermonuclear and world war. . . . If the way to the aggressive policy of the American Government is not blocked, the people of the United States and other nations will have to pay with millions of lives for this policy." *Ibid.*, p. 38. A full exposition of Russell's view of the crisis may be found in Bertrand Russell, *Unarmed Victory* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963).

opportunities for bargaining but did allow the signalling of important information. Via Knox, for example, Khrushchev communicated to Kennedy that the missiles in Cuba were under strict Soviet control.<sup>8</sup>

Communications through the United Nations were more significant. The first concrete proposal for a negotiated solution came from Secretary-General U Thant, who publicly suggested on October 24 that the Soviet Union voluntarily suspend arms shipments to Cuba for a period of two to three weeks, and that the United States at the same time voluntarily suspend the quarantine, to provide time to resolve the dispute through negotiation.<sup>9</sup> Khrushchev immediately accepted the proposal, but President Kennedy rebuffed it, because it did not include a standstill on the construction of the missile sites in Cuba, which he insisted upon in order to prevent his negotiating leverage from slipping away.<sup>10</sup>

Although the U.N. proved unable to secure a standstill, it did serve the vital function of providing Khrushchev with a face-saving way of ordering his ships to stop short of the quarantine line—something the President's quarantine proclamation failed to do.<sup>11</sup> But perhaps the most important com-

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8. CIA Memorandum on "The Crisis USSR/Cuba," October 27, 1962, p. III-3 (Cuban Missile Crisis file, National Security Archive, Washington, D.C.). Whether Khrushchev was correct about his control over the weapons in Cuba remains unclear, as is the issue of what he meant to communicate by this statement. Three possibilities stand out: 1) Khrushchev may have had a naïve but powerful faith in his chain of command. This could hardly have been reassuring to a President who in June had just ordered permissive action links (PALS)—mechanical or electronic locks—installed on his own nuclear weapons to ensure that they would be fired only on his orders. It was not believed that the Soviets yet had any such devices. See generally Peter Stein and Peter Feaver, *Assuring Control of Nuclear Weapons: The Evolution of Permissive Action Links*, Center for Science and International Affairs Occasional Paper No. 2 (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1987). 2) The Soviet missiles in Cuba may not yet have had warheads despite Khrushchev's claim to Knox that they did. In this case, though they probably could have been fired without orders from Moscow, they could hardly have done any meaningful damage. According to this interpretation, Khrushchev was attempting to allay American fears of inadvertence without eroding the deterrent value of having his own missiles in Cuba. 3) Khrushchev may merely have been taking responsibility for military activities in Cuba, signalling that the relevant weapons were in Soviet rather than Cuban hands, thereby preventing the crisis from devolving into a U.S.–Cuban confrontation which might have led more easily to an American invasion. On this view, Khrushchev was in a backhanded way using Knox as a channel for communicating a deterrent threat.

9. U Thant's statement is reprinted in Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, pp. 180–184.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 185–186.

11. The Soviets called the quarantine proclamation a flagrant violation of international law. Consequently, Khrushchev would have had difficulty justifying orders that Soviet ships respect the quarantine without appearing weak to hard-liners in Moscow, to the Cubans, and to his more vociferous critics, such as the Chinese. However, on October 25, U Thant publicly asked Khrushchev to order his ships to stay clear of the quarantine line so as not to prejudice negotiations. Khrushchev complied in the name of peaceful crisis resolution. The exchange of messages may be found in Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, pp. 190–193.

munication was the correspondence between the two leaders. The Kennedy-Khrushchev letters—the “Missives of October”—became the medium through which the crisis was resolved.<sup>12</sup>

A most promising development came on Friday, October 26, when the White House received a lengthy, rambling letter almost certainly written by Khrushchev himself. It evinced a certain degree of desperation, perhaps exhaustion, and included the following encouraging, if vague, proposition:

Let us therefore display statesmanlike wisdom. I propose: we, for our part, will declare that our ships bound for Cuba are not carrying any armaments. You will declare that the United States will not invade Cuba with its troops and will not support any other forces which might intend to invade Cuba. Then the necessity for the presence of our military specialists in Cuba will be obviated.<sup>13</sup>

That same day, ABC news correspondent John Scali was approached by Alexander Fomin, an official at the Soviet Embassy. Fomin presented a clearer version of this proposal that would ultimately be the basis on which the crisis was resolved: the USSR would withdraw its offensive weapons from Cuba, and in return the United States would lift the quarantine and give assurances against an invasion of the island.<sup>14</sup>

With the Soviets now proposing acceptable terms, the crisis seemed near to a peaceful and successful resolution. But Saturday, October 27, was a day of shocks and reversals. Before a reply could be made to Khrushchev’s first letter, a second came through, this one apparently the work of a committee. Its terms were more demanding:

We agree to remove those weapons from Cuba which you regard as offensive weapons. We agree to do this and to state this commitment in the United Nations. Your representatives will make a statement to the effect that the United States, on its part, bearing in mind the anxiety and concern of the Soviet state, will evacuate its analogous weapons from Turkey. Let us reach an understanding on what time you and we need to put this into effect.<sup>15</sup>

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12. Robert Kennedy notes that there were almost daily communications between President Kennedy and Khrushchev. Most of these were private and were handled by the embassies (such as Khrushchev’s letter of October 26), but others were broadcast publicly (such as Khrushchev’s letter of October 27). For details, see *Thirteen Days*, pp. 60, 79–81, 86–90, 93–94, 102–4.

13. From R.R. Pope, *Soviet Views on the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1982), p. 48.

14. See *Thirteen Days*, pp. 90–91.

15. See *ibid.*, p. 199.

For the first time in the crisis, the Soviets were publicly linking the withdrawal of their own missiles from Cuba with the withdrawal of Jupiter missiles from Turkey. Fifteen Jupiters—first-generation intermediate-range ballistic missiles—were deployed in Turkey under the aegis of NATO. These missiles were owned by Turkey, though the United States had custody of their warheads.

The linkage with the Jupiters in Khrushchev's second letter clearly signalled a hardening of the Soviet bargaining position. There were other ominous developments on October 27 as well. An American U-2 on a routine air sampling mission strayed into Soviet air space over Siberia. Soviet ships began moving toward the quarantine line once again. A U-2 piloted by Major Rudolf Anderson, whose reconnaissance flight on October 14 had discovered the Soviet missiles in the first place, was shot down by a surface-to-air missile (SAM) over Cuba.

This was the situation when the ExComm convened in the Cabinet Room that afternoon, and these are the events President Kennedy and his advisors are seen grappling with in the transcript. In the course of the meeting, it was decided that the United States should reply to Khrushchev's letter of October 26, accepting its "proposal" as refined by Alexander Fomin, while ignoring Khrushchev's second letter altogether. This "Trollope Ploy," as it became known (named for the Victorian novelist Anthony Trollope, many of whose young heroines characteristically were eager to see in an ambiguous gesture a full-fledged proposal of marriage) was contained in a letter delivered to Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin by the President's brother, though the choice of messenger was not made by the full ExComm and is consequently not discussed in the transcript. At 7:45 p.m., Robert Kennedy met with Dobrynin and offered a public guarantee against the invasion of Cuba in return for a Soviet withdrawal of all offensive weapons from Cuba. At the same time, he communicated a vague threat of military action against Cuba in the event of a failure to comply. When pressed about the Jupiter trade, Robert Kennedy reportedly gave private assurances that missiles in Turkey would shortly be withdrawn, but refused to consummate a public deal to that effect.<sup>16</sup>

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16. Robert Kennedy's account of his meeting with Dobrynin may be found in *Thirteen Days*, pp. 106–109. Robert Kennedy reported that he told Dobrynin, "we had to have a commitment by tomorrow that those bases would be removed. I was not giving them an ultimatum but a statement of fact. He should understand that if they did not remove those bases, we would remove them." *Ibid.*, p. 108. Khrushchev's account of Dobrynin's report of the meeting is very



At 9:00 a.m. on Sunday, October 28, word reached Washington that the Kremlin had accepted the U.S. terms.<sup>17</sup> Khrushchev's acceptance had been announced by Moscow radio, and within three hours of the broadcast, workmen were dismantling the missile sites in Cuba.<sup>18</sup>

### *Highlights of the Transcript*

Several issues deserve particular attention in the transcript excerpts. The balance of this essay explains why they are of particular interest to historians and students of the crisis, and points to new interpretations suggested by the transcript and other relevant information.

#### THE PROBLEM OF THE TURKISH MISSILES

The issue that dominates the discussion in the transcript is very clearly the question of whether to trade American Jupiter missiles in Turkey for Soviet

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different: "Robert Kennedy looked exhausted. One could see from his eyes that he had not slept for days. He himself said that he had not been home for six days and nights. 'The President is in a grave situation,' Robert Kennedy said, 'and he does not know how to get out of it. We are under very severe stress. In fact, we are under pressure from our military to use force against Cuba. . . . Even though the President himself is very much against starting a war over Cuba, an irreversible chain of events could occur against his will. That is why the President is appealing directly to Chairman Khrushchev for his help in liquidating the conflict. If the situation continues much longer, the President is not sure that the military will not overthrow him and seize power. The American army could get out of control.'" *Khrushchev Remembers*, tr. and ed. Strobe Talbott (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1970), pp. 497–498. It is highly unlikely that Robert Kennedy said any such thing, but it is not unlikely that the appearance of exhaustion and agitation, whether genuine or feigned, proved useful in securing Soviet acceptance of his terms.

17. Cf. Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, p. 110.

18. At Hawk's Cay, Raymond Garthoff described the aftermath of the crisis (*HCT*, pp. 154–155): Enraged by the deal, Castro refused to allow U.N. inspectors to oversee the dismantling of the missiles and refused to relinquish the Il-28s, which he and the Soviets had regarded as Cuban property. Cuban soldiers apparently surrounded the missile sites, and Soviets took up defensive positions, though nothing further seems to have happened. On November 8, right in the middle of the Il-28 dispute, an American-sponsored "Mongoose" covert action sabotage team roving in Cuba blew up a factory. (The covert action operation had been suspended during the missile crisis, but this team had been infiltrated earlier and was acting on its own.) Struggling to enlist Castro's cooperation, the Soviets quietly sought U.S. leave to pull the bombers out later, as the United States was going to do with the Jupiters in Turkey, but they were rebuffed. The President wished to announce the end of the quarantine in a speech on November 20, and he would not do so until the bombers had gone. To prod the Soviets along, a message was sent to NATO warning of possible military action against the bombers, apparently on the understanding that this would leak to the Soviets. On November 19, Castro gave in. On November 20, the President announced that the bombers would be withdrawn, ended the quarantine, and cancelled the DefCon 2 alert. For a more complete review of the Il-28 issue in the Cuban missile crisis, see Raymond L. Garthoff, "American Reaction to Soviet Aircraft in Cuba, 1962 and 1978," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 95, No. 3 (Fall 1980), pp. 427–39.

missiles in Cuba. Some members of the Administration seem to have been expecting the Soviets to demand a trade for some time, and Khrushchev's second letter placed the U.S. in an awkward position. There was a great deal of opposition to the trade in the ExComm and in NATO, yet the President repeatedly expresses the belief that the public trade suggested by the Soviets will seem to many perfectly fair and reasonable (e.g., pp. 36, 37, 39). There was indeed a compelling superficial symmetry between the Soviet deployment in Cuba and the presence of American nuclear weapons in Turkey, and it was a symmetry that did not go unnoticed.<sup>19</sup> United Nations Ambassador Adlai Stevenson had suggested early on that a trade be considered as a lever for a negotiated withdrawal of Soviet missiles,<sup>20</sup> and Walter Lippmann had argued for the trade on symmetry grounds in a widely-read column in the *Washington Post* just two days earlier.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, President Kennedy and his advisors had the trade option in the back of their minds throughout, and at various times some expressed the view that the trade might be necessary. For instance, minutes of a meeting in George Ball's office on October 19 recount, "more than once during the afternoon Secretary McNamara voiced the opinion that the U.S. . . . would at least have to give up our missile bases in Italy and Turkey and would probably have to pay more besides."<sup>22</sup> Likewise, Bromley Smith's minutes of the 10:00 a.m. ExComm meeting of October 26 report:

Ambassador Stevenson . . . predicted that the Russians would ask us for a new guarantee of the territorial integrity of Cuba and the dismantlement of U.S. strategic missiles in Turkey. . . .

The President said we will get the Soviet strategic missiles out of Cuba only by invading Cuba or by trading. He doubted that the quarantine alone would produce a withdrawal of the weapons.<sup>23</sup>

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19. One important asymmetry, however, was that the Jupiters were in Turkey under a treaty of mutual defense, whereas no such treaty obligation existed between Cuba and the Soviet Union.

20. See, e.g., Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, pp. 49–50.

21. Reprinted in Divine, *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, pp. 43–45. For a more detailed history of the trade option and a less pessimistic analysis of its political consequences, see Barton J. Bernstein, "The Cuban Missile Crisis: Trading the Jupiters in Turkey?" *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 95, No. 1 (Spring 1980), pp. 104–117.

22. Minutes of the 11 o'clock meeting in the Conference Room of the Under Secretary of State, October 19, 1962, Leonard C. Meeker, reporting, quoted by Bernstein, "The Cuban Missile Crisis," p. 105.

23. Bromley Smith, "Summary Record of NSC Executive Committee Meeting No. 6, October 26, 1962, 10:00 a.m.," in "White House Tapes and Minutes of the Cuban Missile Crisis," *International Security*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Summer, 1985), p. 195.

Since a trade was among the available options, the Administration had explored its implications long before it was actually proposed in Khrushchev's second letter. No one was blind to the costs of a public trade. On October 24, Dean Rusk had cabled Paris and Ankara with a request for an assessment of its likely political repercussions within NATO and on U.S.–Turkish relations,<sup>24</sup> and he was informed in return that they would be very grave indeed.<sup>25</sup> This assessment was shared by Raymond Garthoff, who prepared a State Department analysis of the deal on October 27:

The Turks have already made abundantly clear that they do not want to be compared with the Cubans, used as a pawn, or shorn of the Jupiters which have always been to them a proud symbol of their ability to strike back if they are hit. Hasty surfacing of long-held U.S. military evaluations of the obsolescence of the Jupiters would be ineffective in meeting these strongly held views. The Jupiters are not important as a military-strategic asset—but then, neither is Berlin. Yet both have elemental significance as symbols of the integrity of the Alliance and especially of our commitment to stand by the interests of each of its members.<sup>26</sup>

The Turks themselves went so far as to issue a statement on October 27 rejecting the Soviet trade proposal in no uncertain terms.<sup>27</sup>

Those who have retrospectively told the story of the missile crisis consistently avoid the implication that the trade option was ever under serious consideration. Elie Abel reports a “general agreement” that the trade would “undermine the faith of the whole alliance in America’s pledged word”;<sup>28</sup> Theodore Sorensen writes that “the President had no intention of destroying the alliance by backing down.”<sup>29</sup> Clearly, many in the Kennedy Administration believed that the domestic and international perceptions of a trade *would* have been damaging to the U.S. They feared it would have been widely interpreted as selling out an ally and renegeing on NATO commitments in

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24. Doc. #806, 10/24/62, DOS 445/2345, Cuban Missile Crisis file, National Security Archive, Washington.

25. Doc. #779, 10/25/62, Paris 506; and #780, 10/26/62, Ankara 587, Cuban Missile Crisis file, National Security Archive, Washington.

26. R.L. Garthoff, Memorandum, Subject: The Khrushchev Proposal for a Turkey-Cuba Trade-off, October 27, 1962. (Declassified 1981; available from R.L. Garthoff, The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C.)

27. Bromley Smith, “Summary Record of NSC Executive Committee Meeting No. 7, October 27, 1962, 10:00 a.m.” In “White House Tapes and Minutes”, *International Security*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Summer, 1985), p. 199.

28. Abel, *The Missile Crisis*, p. 189.

29. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, p. 714.

order to resolve a local Caribbean problem. Domestically, the trade might indeed have been widely received as a major diplomatic defeat, particularly in view of President Kennedy's initial tough stance. Recognizing these costs, the Administration had all along attempted to stress the asymmetries in the Turkish and Cuban deployments and had urged its officials to avoid the parallels in their public comments.<sup>30</sup>

Yet as the transcript reveals, the President was in fact inclined to trade the Turkish missiles if he had to. He repeatedly returns to the countervailing considerations weighing in favor of the trade: it would widely be perceived as reasonable; the Jupiters were obsolete; and if the price of rejecting the trade were a major war escalating to Europe, NATO would condemn the U.S. for not having traded when it had the opportunity. In the light of the apparent toughening of the Soviet position indicated by the U-2 shoot-down over Cuba, the new Soviet ship movements, and the receipt of the second letter from Khrushchev, the President may have formed the opinion that the choice had narrowed to just two options: a trade or armed conflict. In the transcript, he repeatedly expresses his fear that the Soviets would not budge from their latest demand for a trade (see, e.g., pp. 37, 48, 59). Perhaps concerned about the risks of escalation associated with an air strike, the risks of inadvertence illustrated only that day by the stray U-2 over Siberia, and hence the possibility of a major unintended conflict, he seems indeed to have been strongly inclined to avoid military action or a prolongation of the crisis. Thus the popular view that the Administration considered the trade unacceptable is powerfully contradicted by the tone and content of the President's statements in the meetings of October 27.

This conclusion is strengthened by Dean Rusk's recent revelation that President Kennedy had prepared the diplomatic machinery for a public trade:

It was clear to me that President Kennedy would not let the Jupiters in Turkey become an obstacle to the removal of the missile sites in Cuba because the Jupiters were coming out in any event. He instructed me to telephone the late Andrew Cordier, then at Columbia University, and dictate to him a statement which would be made by U Thant, the Secretary General of the United Nations, proposing the removal of both the Jupiters and the missiles in Cuba. Mr. Cordier was to put that statement in the hands of U Thant only after further signal from us. That step was never taken and the statement I furnished to Mr. Cordier has never seen the light of day. So far as I know,

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30. See, e.g., Doc. #807, 10/25/62, DOS 448, Cuban Missile Crisis file, National Security Archive, Washington.

President Kennedy, Andrew Cordier and I were the only ones who knew of this particular step.<sup>31</sup>

By preparing this option—and by keeping it secret from the rest of the ExComm—the President seems to have signalled his willingness to suffer the political costs of a trade rather than the incalculable costs of armed conflict, should events force him to choose between the two.<sup>32</sup> The fact that he failed to gain a consensus on this point in the ExComm itself helps explain why he appears to have bypassed the ExComm in making crucial decisions thereafter. Not only was the ExComm never informed of the Cordier maneuver, but some significant members of the ExComm—such as Maxwell Taylor<sup>33</sup> and Paul Nitze<sup>34</sup>—were never informed that the President's brother Robert met with Dobrynin that evening to execute the Trollope Ploy.

When Rusk testifies that “the Jupiters were coming out in any event,” he implies that a decision to withdraw them had already been made. But the transcript does not suggest that this is generally understood by the members of the ExComm, none of whom makes any reference to such a decision. Indeed, the diplomatic problem posed by the trade, which leads to lengthy discussions of awkward ad hoc responses, would not have been so intractable if such a decision already existed.<sup>35</sup> Rusk himself notes that Polaris submarines would not have been available until 1963, and indicates that he, the

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31. Dean Rusk, *HCT*, p. 124. See Blight, Nye, Welch, “The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited,” p. 179. This passage is excerpted from a letter written by Rusk to James G. Blight, February 25, 1987, pp. 2–3.

32. Some of the Cuban missile crisis “revisionists” will have to rethink their views in the light of this transcript: among them Bruce Miroff, *Pragmatic Illusions: The Presidential Politics of John F. Kennedy* (New York: David McKay, 1976); James A. Nathan, “The Missile Crisis: His Finest Hour Now,” *World Politics* Vol. 27, No. 2 (January 1975); and Garry Wills, *The Kennedy Imprisonment: A Meditation on Power* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982). The suggestions that the President suffered from an unnecessarily belligerent “crisis mentality,” that he was systematically leading the discussions towards military action, or that he was risking a major conflict with the Soviet Union for domestic political reasons, are clearly contradicted by the content of this transcript.

33. Interview with Richard Neustadt, June 28, 1983, Washington, D.C. (Videotape available at the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, New York.)

34. Interview with James G. Blight and David A. Welch, May 6, 1987, Washington, D.C.

35. McNamara's leadership qualities are in evidence in his interesting argument that the Jupiters should be stood down to deprive the Soviets of retaliatory targets in the event of an American air strike on Cuba (see, e.g., pp. 52, 56, 75 below). This is a fascinating example of his willingness to think aloud and to lead discussion in new and creative directions without undue defensiveness. The argument taken to its conclusion, of course, is unpersuasive. The Soviets were not lacking for targets to hit in response to an American air strike if they were so inclined, nor was it necessarily desirable to redirect their response to a more populous or more politically explosive area—such as Berlin—by depriving them of a handful of militarily useless and relatively isolated targets in Turkey.

Turks, and the President had all understood that a withdrawal would be delayed at least until then.<sup>36</sup> The circumstantial evidence would seem to indicate that while the missiles may have been “coming out in any event,” there may have been little more than a vague conditional intention to remove them at a later date.

It is possible, therefore, that Robert Kennedy was wrong when he reportedly told Ambassador Dobrynin that “President Kennedy had been anxious to remove those missiles from Turkey and Italy for a long period of time. He 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.”<sup>37</sup> Moreover, on the evidence of this transcript and Rusk’s letter, we may have to re-evaluate Robert Kennedy’s version of what the President knew or believed about the Turkish missile situation:

At the President’s insistence, Secretary Rusk had raised the question with the representatives of Turkey following a NATO meeting in the spring of 1962.<sup>38</sup> The Turks objected, and the matter was permitted to drop. In the summer of 1962, when Rusk was in Europe, President Kennedy raised the question again. He was told by the State Department that they felt it unwise to press the matter with Turkey. But the President disagreed. He wanted the missiles removed even if it would cause political problems for our govern-

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36. A lengthy passage from Rusk’s letter to Blight is worth quoting on this point: “When President Kennedy took office, he had in front of him a very critical report from the Joint Atomic Energy Committee of Congress about the Jupiter missiles in Turkey and Italy. The committee considered these missiles to be both obsolete and vulnerable. I remember that we joked about which way the missiles would fly if they were fired. I also remember being told that a tourist driving an automobile along a public highway with a .22 caliber rifle could knock holes in the skins of these missiles. In any event, President Kennedy asked me to take up with the Turkish government the matter of withdrawing these missiles. On May 1, 1961, I attended a meeting of the Foreign Ministers of CENTO [Central Treaty Organization] held in Ankara. The United States was not a signatory of CENTO, but the Secretary of State usually attended as an observer. After dinner I had a walk in the garden with Mr. Selim Sarper, the Foreign Minister of Turkey, and took up with him the matter of withdrawing the Jupiters from Turkey. He expressed considerable concern on two grounds. First, he said that the Turkish government had just gotten approval in its parliament for the Turkish costs of the Jupiter missiles and that it would be very embarrassing for them to go right back and tell the Parliament that the Jupiters were being withdrawn. Second, he said that it would be very damaging to the morale of Turkey if the Jupiters were to be withdrawn before Polaris submarines became available in the Mediterranean but these submarines would not become available until the spring of 1963. Upon returning to Washington, I went over these Turkish points with President Kennedy, and he accepted the idea of some delay in removing the Jupiters.” Rusk to Blight, February 25, 1987, pp. 1–2.

37. Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, pp. 108–109.

38. Note the possible disparity between Rusk’s and Kennedy’s recollections. If they are speaking of the same meeting, Rusk recalls it being a CENTO meeting in the spring of 1961, and Kennedy a NATO meeting in the spring of 1962.

ment. The State Department representatives discussed it again with the Turks and, finding they still objected, did not pursue the matter.

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 to the Soviet Union.

He was angry.<sup>39</sup>

The transcript gives no indication of any such anger. Rusk says simply, "It is generally supposed that at the time of the Cuban missile crisis President Kennedy was angry when he discovered that the Jupiters had not been removed from Turkey. I would simply say that he never expressed any irritation to me because he had been fully briefed by me on that situation."<sup>40</sup>

The orthodox understanding of the trade option is undeniably challenged by the transcript, other documents, and Rusk's testimony. It is clear that the full story of the technical status of the Jupiters has yet to surface. But the more important and more surprising finding is that the story of what the President intended to do with them must now be revised. It appears that he was prepared to trade them for the Soviet missiles in Cuba if the alternative were military action.

#### UNDERSTANDING THE SOVIETS

President Kennedy's expectation that the Soviets would prove to be tough bargainers and insist on the Jupiter trade has already been noted, and was of course proven wrong by events. The transcript indicates that his pessimism was quite widely-shared. For example, at one point, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara expresses skepticism that a quick resolution would follow even if the U.S. accepted the Jupiter trade (p. 79). The pessimism evident in the transcript is reflected in later accounts. McNamara reports wondering if he would ever see another Saturday;<sup>41</sup> Robert Kennedy reports that after his meeting with Dobrynin, "The expectation was a military confrontation by Tuesday and possibly tomorrow."<sup>42</sup>

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39. *Thirteen Days*, pp. 94-95.

40. Rusk to Blight, February 25, 1987, p. 2. Barton Bernstein's argument that President Kennedy neither ordered the withdrawal of the Jupiters nor was surprised that they had not been dismantled thus appears to be confirmed. See "The Cuban Missile Crisis: Trading the Jupiters in Turkey?" pp. 102-104.

41. Robert S. McNamara, Sloan Foundation Videotape, June, 1983.

42. *Thirteen Days*, p. 109. It is interesting that those who later reported feeling no such pessi-

The only member of the ExComm who seems to have gauged the Soviets' position accurately was Llewellyn Thompson, former Ambassador to Moscow, who (perhaps for this reason) is now regarded by many former ExComm members as the unsung hero of the crisis.<sup>43</sup> Thompson was the only one present who had any extensive knowledge of the Soviets, and it was only after his argument that the Soviets might *not* insist on the Jupiter trade that the President approved the Trollope Ploy (pp. 59–60, 82–83).

The genesis of the Trollope Ploy is an interesting feature of the transcript, which shows that Robert Kennedy's account oversimplifies and distorts its origin. He recalls, "I suggested, and was supported by Ted Sorensen and others, that we ignore the latest Khrushchev letter and respond to his earlier letter's proposal, as refined in the offer made to John Scali. . . ."<sup>44</sup> By the time Robert Kennedy discussed the ploy in the ExComm meetings, many others had already raised and discussed it. It surfaces in remarks by McGeorge Bundy (p. 36) and Edward Martin (p. 55). It is clear that the idea entered the discussion gradually and was embraced by several members, and that Llewellyn Thompson's argument finally persuaded a reluctant President to accept it.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF THE U-2 SHOOT-DOWN

Many former ExComm members who recall hearing the news that Major Anderson's U-2 was shot down over Cuba have reported it as a turning point. Anderson was the first and, so far as is known, the only casualty of the crisis. The Soviets, as an unidentified speaker says in the transcript, had fired the first shot. Robert Kennedy reported that word of the shoot-down was "to change the whole course of events and alter history. . . . There was the realization that the Soviet Union and Cuba were preparing to do battle. And there was the feeling that the noose was tightening on all of us, on Americans, on mankind, and that the bridges to escape were crumbling."<sup>45</sup> Douglas Dillon recalls that "military action was beginning to look like it was

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mism—Dillon, Nitze, and Taylor in particular—are virtually silent on the issue in the transcript. James G. Blight and David A. Welch interview with Paul Nitze, May 6, 1987, Washington, D.C.; James G. Blight and Janet M. Lang interview with Douglas Dillon, May 15, 1987, New York; Richard Neustadt interview with Maxwell Taylor, *HCT*, p. 130.

43. Robert S. McNamara, Sloan Foundation Videotape, 1983; *HCT*, pp. 63–64, 68, 73.

44. Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, pp. 101–102.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 97.



going to be the only way to [get the missiles out of Cuba], and when the U-2 was shot down, it added enormously to the pressure to act.”<sup>46</sup>

While it was certainly a complication, it figures much less prominently in the transcript than one would have expected. For several minutes, the conversation focuses on whether news of the shoot-down ought to be released, whether the responsible SAM site should be attacked in response, and whether there ought to be a larger military operation against the entire Cuban air defense network to protect American reconnaissance planes (see pp. 66–72). There is brief discussion of whether the Soviets intended this to be a political signal, whether Cubans or Soviets had fired the shot, and whether it indicated a new tone of belligerence. Most suggestive of the ExComm’s having taken the shoot-down in its stride are McNamara’s attempts to change the topic (“I think we can forget the U-2 for the moment”), his proposal to have done with the matter by taking out the responsible missile site the next day (pp. 68–70),<sup>47</sup> and the President’s attempt to bring the discussion back to the question of the Turkish missiles (pp. 69, 71–72).

The transcript thus reinforces the view that the President’s mind was already moving in the direction of a quick, peaceful settlement. If an air strike or invasion had been the options he favored, then the difficult issues posed by the shoot-down—Soviet and Cuban anti-air capabilities, the question of Moscow’s control over the weapons in Cuba, and the problems of inadvertent escalation—surely should have attracted and held his immediate attention. If President Kennedy were thinking in terms of a prolonged, tightened quarantine, then the urgency of maintaining air surveillance in a SAM environment growing more deadly by the day should have led him to direct the discussion towards the details of various military measures needed to protect reconnaissance aircraft. But at the earliest convenient opportunity, the President brought discussion back to where his main interest lay: in Turkey, in the missile trade, and in the problem of clearing the political path to accomplishing it.

#### HAWKS AND DOVES?

Writing prior to the release of this transcript and on the basis of recollections from the participants, we recently wrote that at the height of the crisis,

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46. *HCT*, p. 116.

47. This view seems to be inconsistent with McNamara’s present insistence on the importance of avoiding potentially escalatory uses of force. James G. Blight and David A. Welch interview, May 21, 1987, Washington, D.C. Of course, it remains an open question whether McNamara actually would have ordered the attack the next day even if authorized to do so by the President.

debate between the “hawks” (those who favored military action) and the “doves” (those who did not) became polarized and heated.<sup>48</sup> We based our discussion on recollections such as Theodore Sorensen’s:

Bob [McNamara] and I were reminiscing last night about the night of Saturday the 27th. We had just dispatched Bobby Kennedy to Dobrynin, expecting the so-called “ultimatum” to be rejected. The only word which can describe the meeting that night is “rancorous”—we *did* show the effects of stress and fatigue, and the air strike *was* gaining strength and its proponents were becoming more and more vigorous. The President was under *tremendous* pressure at this point, and I think it’s highly speculative to say that the President would “never” have gone ahead with the air strike.<sup>49</sup>

George Ball recalls:

The hawks demonstrated increasing ferocity and more unity as time wore on. Paul Nitze was leading the charge of the hawks. I didn’t believe the President would consent to an air strike on the missile bases in Cuba, but I was scared to death that Nitze, Dillon and Taylor would wear the President down.<sup>50</sup>

Sorensen and Ball are not alone in their recollections. Yet it is remarkable how little evidence of this can be found in the transcript of October 27. Consistent with the transcriber’s remark that the audio tapes reveal no sign of rancor (p. 31), there is no indication in the transcript of tempers flaring, of intransigence, or even of prolonged disagreements between so-called “hawks” and “doves”. While the transcript periodically indicates both laughter and low voices, nowhere does it indicate shouting or lost tempers.

Similarly unexpected is the silence of those who have become known as the hawks. Dillon, McCone, Nitze and Taylor all speak relatively infrequently and are seldom engaged in conversation by those who dominate the discussion—the President, Robert Kennedy, McNamara, Bundy, Thompson and Rusk. Though McNamara and Dillon recently recalled that by October 27 there was a clear majority in the ExComm in favor of military action,<sup>51</sup> it is unclear from this transcript just who could have composed such a majority. Few if any remarks from any ExComm members indicate enthusiasm for significant military action against Cuba. One cannot fail to notice that, in contrast to these transcripts, the October 16 meetings appeared more hawkish

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48. See Blight, Nye, Welch, “The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited,” pp. 177, 179.

49. *HCT*, p. 67.

50. Interview with James G. Blight and Janet M. Lang, May 1, 1987, Princeton, N.J.

51. *HCT*, pp. 70, 114.

all around.<sup>52</sup> On the basis of the evidence we have thus far, it strongly appears that by October 27 the hawks were losing ground, rather than gaining it.

#### STRESS, FATIGUE, AND BREAKDOWN

Much attention has been paid recently to the problem of decision-making under fatigue and stress, particularly in major crises. Research has indicated that up to a certain point, stress can have a beneficial effect on performance, but that prolonged, intense stress can result in dysfunction or breakdown, with ominous implications for sound decision-making and the risks of war.<sup>53</sup>

It is commonly thought that the members of the ExComm were suffering from stress and fatigue by October 27. Theodore Sorensen acknowledges it in the passage quoted above. It is also widely believed, as Richard Ned Lebow writes, that “two important members of the ExComm had been unable to cope with the stress of [the] confrontation; they became entirely passive and unable to fulfill their responsibilities.”<sup>54</sup>

We see no indication of stress- or fatigue-induced dysfunction in the transcript, and certainly no indication that Dean Rusk, the member of the ExComm whose name is usually linked with rumors of breakdown, had in fact become passive or unable to fulfill his responsibilities.<sup>55</sup> In seeking to confirm these rumors, we have been unable to discover anything but hearsay in no

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52. See “White House Tapes and Minutes.” At least three other differences between the two meetings are worth noting: 1) There is much less talk of nuclear war on October 27 than on October 16; 2) The President assumes much greater control of the discussion in the later meeting; 3) It is concern with diplomatic issues that is behind a good deal of the discussion on October 27, whereas much of the discussion on October 16 revolves around the pros and cons of an air strike.

53. See, e.g., Joseph de Rivera, *The Psychological Dimensions of Foreign Policy* (Columbus, Ohio: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), pp. 150–151; Ole R. Holsti, *Crisis, Escalation, War* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1972); Ole R. Holsti and Alexander L. George, “The Effects of Stress on the Performance of Foreign Policy-Makers,” in C.P. Cotter, ed., *Political Science Annual: An International Review* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975), pp. 255–319; and Lebow, *Nuclear Crisis Management*, pp. 142–153. Good discussions of important historical breakdowns (Kaiser Wilhelm, Stalin, Nehru, Nasser) may be found in Richard Ned Lebow, *Between Peace and War: The Nature of International Crisis* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), pp. 135–45, 283–285.

54. Lebow, *Nuclear Crisis Management*, p. 147. On this, Lebow cites Alexander L. George, “The Impact of Crisis-Induced Stress on Decisionmaking,” paper prepared for the Institute of Medicine Symposium on the Medical Aspects of Nuclear War, National Academy of Sciences, Washington, D.C., September 20–22, 1985, p. 16.

55. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. writes the following: “At first [Rusk] was for a strike; later he was silent or absent. He had, Robert Kennedy wrote laconically in *Thirteen Days*, ‘duties during this period of time and frequently could not attend our meetings.’ Privately, Kennedy was less circumspect. Rusk, he thought in 1965, ‘had a virtually complete breakdown mentally and physically.’” Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (New York: Ballantine, 1978), pp. 546–547.

particular pattern, strongly suggesting that the rumors are simply false. Rusk is lucid throughout. So also is Robert Kennedy, whom Dobrynin apparently thought was on the verge of collapse. Of course, it is impossible, merely from reading a transcription, to determine with certainty whether any of the ExComm members were impaired by stress or fatigue. But this evidence strongly suggests that they were not, and confirms the views of those who recall the stress and fatigue being real but manageable.<sup>56</sup>

#### SMALL GROUP AND BUREAUCRATIC POLITICS

Irving Janis has identified small-group politics, or “groupthink”, as a powerful influence on collective decision-making.<sup>57</sup> In the presence of an authority, small groups are often led too quickly to dismiss views dissonant with those of the leader or those of an emerging consensus. The resulting decisions may be hastily considered and subject to inadequate criticism. Janis argues that the Kennedy Administration suffered greatly from groupthink in the Bay of Pigs fiasco, but that the President successfully avoided it in the Cuban missile crisis by organizing deliberations in such a way as to institutionalize the exhaustive consideration of the options and the objections to each of them, and by absenting himself periodically from the ExComm meetings. The transcript of October 27 confirms Janis’s view that the pernicious effects of groupthink were avoided in this case.<sup>58</sup>

Another well-established thesis is that bureaucratic politics can distort the rationality of a decision-making process.<sup>59</sup> Whereas a unitary rational actor might choose a value-maximizing course of action as the result of a careful exploration of the costs and benefits of the alternatives, groups of people representing diverse bureaucratic interests tend to produce a decision based upon the results of a political contest. “Where you stand is where you sit;”<sup>60</sup>

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56. E.g., George Ball, *HCT*, p. 65.

57. Irving Janis, *Victims of Groupthink* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972).

58. An alternative, admittedly controversial, theory is that groupthink *did* operate on the hawks. It is apparent from interviews that Dillon, Nitze and Taylor either did not completely speak their minds to the President, or have been deceived by their present memories of how they felt at the time. In addition, some, such as the Vice President, are silent when the President is in the room, but participate actively when he is not (pp. 74–82). Of course, it is ironic that the generally successful avoidance of groupthink in this case, though masterful, may have become moot by October 27. If the President were making key decisions with one or two of his closest advisors and consciously excluding the ExComm from them, little if anything depended on the avoidance of groupthink in the Cabinet Room.

59. See Allison, *Essence of Decision*, pp. 144–244.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

your contribution to the decision-making process will depend upon your parochial point of view and the interests of the organization you represent.

The transcript does not indicate that bureaucratic politics played a significant role in the ExComm's deliberations.<sup>61</sup> Taylor, the only military man present, does not argue a hawkish line throughout, nor is his participation as active as one might have expected given the fact that the organization he represented had a very great deal at stake in the choice of action. McNamara, the Secretary of Defense, obviously felt free to dissent from the military's preferred course of action throughout the crisis. Robert Kennedy, the Attorney General, and Douglas Dillon, Secretary of the Treasury, express wide-ranging views throughout the crisis unfettered by concern for their respective bureaucratic interests. Rusk and Ball from the State Department do not appear unduly parochial in their approach, although they exhibit greater sensitivity to the diplomatic dimensions of the issues. The various positions taken might better be accounted for by, e.g., the distribution of responsibility,<sup>62</sup> the personal histories of the participants,<sup>63</sup> and their understandings of the adversary.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF DOMESTIC POLITICS

It has been suggested that President Kennedy's course of action was heavily influenced by his concern for his political welfare and that of his party.<sup>64</sup> Robert Kennedy's memoir lends some powerful confirmation to this view. He recalls the following exchange with the President on Wednesday, October 24:

He said, "It looks really mean, doesn't it? But then, really there was no other choice. If they get this mean on this one in our part of the world, what will they do on the next?" "I just don't think there was any choice," I said, "and not only that, if you hadn't acted, you would have been impeached." The

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61. It has been suggested that bureaucratic politics should in any case be expected to play a greater role in the implementation than in the formulation of a decision, especially in a crisis. The evidence in the transcript appears consistent with this suggestion. See Fen Osler Hampson, "The Divided Decision-Maker: American Domestic Politics and the Cuban Crises," *International Security* Vol. 9, No. 3 (Winter 1984/85), pp. 131-132, esp. n. 5, n. 6.

62. See Blight, Nye, and Welch, "The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited," p. 177.

63. Dean Rusk and Robert McNamara interviews with Blight and Welch, May 18, 1987, Athens, GA; and May 21, 1987, Washington, D.C. respectively.

64. See the works already cited by Nathan and Wills. See also Lebow, *Between Peace and War*, p. 61; Ronald Steel, "End Game," *New York Review of Books*, March 13, 1969; and I.F. Stone, "The Brink," *New York Review of Books*, April 14, 1966.

President thought for a moment and said, "That's what I think—I would have been impeached."<sup>65</sup>

Fen Osler Hampson has argued that the President's actions can be explained in the light of a theory of political risk aversion.<sup>66</sup> When forced to make trade-offs between key values that cannot be maximized simultaneously, leaders tend to discount future costs and benefits for present benefits as determined by a hierarchy of values, chief of which is concern for their own political health, legitimacy, and survival.<sup>67</sup>

This transcript does not, however, support the claim that President Kennedy based his decisions on domestic political considerations. It is revealing that in the discussion of the political costs of the Jupiter trade, for example, he discusses at length the potential disruption of NATO and of relations with the Turks, but domestic political repercussions not at all. The upcoming elections, barely a week away, are not even mentioned.<sup>68</sup> The President seems willing to suffer the potentially severe domestic and international political costs of a trade rather than resort to arms (if forced to choose between the two). Though this does not cast doubt on the theory of political risk aversion per se, it appears that Kennedy's own political health was not his primary concern in this crisis.

#### WHY THE RUSH?

At several points in the discussion, it is possible to discern a real sense of urgency. The President and several of his advisors appear to have felt strongly that the crisis had to be resolved quickly. One might have expected concern over the operational status of the Soviet missiles in Cuba to have generated the urgency, as it did in the very first ExComm meetings.<sup>69</sup> As

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65. Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, p. 67.

66. Hampson, "The Divided Decision-Maker," pp. 142–149.

67. *Ibid.*, pp. 143–144.

68. Douglas Dillon recalls, "I never heard in the ExComm *any* comment about public opinion or how our choices would fly politically or anything else like that." *HCT*, p. 120.

69. McNamara says in the transcript of the 11:50 a.m. meeting on October 16, "Before I comment on either the unknowns or outlining some military alternatives, there are two propositions I would suggest that we ought to accept as, uh, foundations for our further thinking. My first is that if we are to conduct an air strike against these installations, or against any part of Cuba, we must agree now that we will schedule that prior to the time these missile sites become operational. I'm not prepared to say when that will be, but I think it is extremely important that our talk and our discussion be founded on this premise: that any air strike will be planned to take place prior to the time they become operational." See "White House Tapes and Minutes," pp. 173–174.

noted above, by October 19 the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had reported that two of the SS-4 sites were “operational,” though the presence of warheads was never confirmed. This terminology, according to CIA Deputy Director of Intelligence Ray Cline, angered the President throughout the crisis, presumably because it seemed vague and evasive. At each daily intelligence briefing, his first question was inevitably, “What about the *warheads*? Are they there or not?”<sup>70</sup>

Since the SS-5s would not have been ready for use until December, and as everything needed to launch the SS-4s may already have been in Cuba, it is difficult to imagine why on October 27 they would have generated an immediate sense of urgency, unless there was information on their status that is not yet on the public record. This is not entirely unlikely. Although the presence of warheads in Cuba was neither confirmed nor disproved, there was intelligence that warheads were on the way.<sup>71</sup> The ExComm may have felt strongly that the crisis had to be resolved soon, without waiting to know for certain that warheads were present.<sup>72</sup>

Various other possibilities may help explain the sense of urgency. On the morning of October 27, Robert Kennedy received notice from the FBI that Soviet personnel in New York were preparing to destroy sensitive documents, apparently in the expectation of war.<sup>73</sup> Surveillance over Cuba might not have been possible for long without a massive military operation against its growing air defense system. The presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba was increasingly becoming a feature of the status quo, making their removal more difficult politically.<sup>74</sup> As the crisis dragged on, the Administration’s strong worldwide political support might have eroded, particularly if the Turkish missile trade were widely perceived as reasonable. Khrushchev’s two letters

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70. David A. Welch interview with Ray Cline, June 2, 1987, Washington, D.C.

71. Raymond Garthoff noted at Hawk’s Cay: “We had some indications from inside the Soviet Union that preparations were under way to move warheads to Cuba. This movement was, however, interdicted by the quarantine. I’m afraid I shouldn’t say more than that. Of course, we didn’t *know* that there were *no* warheads in Cuba, we merely never confirmed that there were. Prudence dictated that we had to assume that they did have at least some of the warheads there.” *HCT*, p. 58. Garthoff’s remarks are confirmed by Ray Cline, interview with Welch, June 2, 1987, Washington, D.C.

72. It is worth noting that McGeorge Bundy does not recall ever being briefed on shipments of warheads from the Soviet Union to Cuba, casting some doubt on the hypothesis that this was responsible for the sense of urgency.

73. Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, p. 93. As Raymond Garthoff relates the story: “The Soviet embassy began burning its archives on October 27. Usually, this should be taken as a sign that things are very late in the game and that they expect the worst momentarily.” *HCT*, p. 122.

74. Garthoff, *HCT*, p. 77.

had indicated the possibility of confusion, desperation, struggles within the Soviet leadership, or a combination of these—Soviet behavior might soon become entirely unpredictable. The risks of inadvertence were mounting, as evidenced by the U-2 events. The troops and planes that had been rushed to Florida were being maintained at a high level of readiness, and their logistical support, though impressive for a peacetime operation, might not have been sufficient to prevent an eventual deterioration in their effectiveness. Finally, anxiety, uncertainty, and the press of normal business might all have pressured the President and his advisors to resolve the crisis quickly. All of these are possibilities which singly or in concert might account for the urgency. The transcript, however, does not yield many conclusions as to which played a role and to what extent.

#### HOW CLOSE WAS WAR? WHAT KIND OF WAR?

Theodore Sorensen reports that after the resolution of the crisis, President Kennedy confessed that he had believed the odds that the *Soviets* would go to war were "between one out of three and even."<sup>75</sup> The transcript suggests that the odds that the *Americans* would have gone to war were next to zero.

Had the United States initiated armed conflict, most likely it would have done so for one of two reasons: to destroy the Soviet missiles in Cuba in the face of Soviet intransigence, or to protect American reconnaissance aircraft by attacking SAM sites. The argument advanced above suggests that the former was unlikely. President Kennedy seemed willing to trade Jupiter missiles to avoid an armed strike against Soviet missiles. The latter was somewhat more likely, if only because at some point it might have become necessary to protect reconnaissance missions while a negotiated settlement was being sought. In the transcript, we see evidence of willingness by hawks and doves alike to undertake strikes against SAM sites. Yet the decision is to postpone a response to the U-2 shoot-down, giving President Kennedy time to try the Trollope Ploy (and possibly the Cordier maneuver) first.

Of course, it is possible that President Kennedy would have gone to war if for some reason the Soviets rejected the Jupiter trade. But this was highly unlikely given the fact that Khrushchev's letter proposing the trade had been publicly released. Another possibility is that the Soviets might have dragged their heels on a negotiated settlement, forcing the President to take action

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75. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, p. 705.



against Cuban SAMs to protect his reconnaissance aircraft in the meantime. But this would have found the Soviets in an increasingly awkward diplomatic position: delaying on their own proposal at the risk of world war. A third possibility is that the situation might have gotten out of control. An inadvertent clash of Soviet and American forces, or a desperate act by a desperate adversary, might have given the President no choice but to resort to arms.

Only once in the transcript, however, do we see any speculation about the train of events that might lead up the ladder of escalation to a major U.S.–Soviet conflict (pp. 74–75). Nowhere do we see any contingency planning for the steps that would have been taken at any stage in an armed conflict, nor do we see any discussion of what would be done to contain and arrest war with the Soviet Union.<sup>76</sup> We see no discussion of whether the Single Integrated Operations Plan (SIOP, the master nuclear war plan) would have been used.<sup>77</sup> One may conclude, therefore, that the President and his key advisors had a high degree of confidence that the crisis could be resolved without a serious superpower clash. Indeed, the President had done a great deal to ensure that war could be avoided.

#### HISTORY AND RECOLLECTION

Throughout the foregoing tour of issues, we have mentioned discrepancies between the testimony of the transcript and the recollections of the participants in the years after the missile crisis. While the occasional difference in nuance or lapse of memory should be expected, the frequency of stark contradictions and reversals of opinion is surprising. There is nothing useful to be gained simply by catching former policy-makers in error. But the point is worth noting simply because our understandings of the event have for so long depended so heavily on recollections alone. When apparent contradictions arise, it becomes increasingly important to try to understand why they do so and how we are to interpret the disparities. More than any other recent

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76. Though the transcript shows McNamara thinking in a vague way about how to limit a U.S.–Soviet war, it also suggests that he did not believe he had an acceptable answer to the problem. See p. 56.

77. This is fully consistent with the recollections of the principals at Hawk's Cay and in previously noted interviews. None recalls any meaningful discussion of military contingencies in the event of a Soviet response to an American air strike, an inadvertent escalation, or a use of nuclear weapons. Only the hawks—Dillon, Nitze, and Taylor—express confidence that there would have been no Soviet military response, largely because of the United States' massive superiority in strategic nuclear weapons.

development, the appearance of this transcript ought to open up such questions, even though it may not provide answers to them.

*Afterword*

The Administration which emerged from the Cuban missile crisis was in many ways more confident than the one we see agonizing in the transcript of October 27. But it was also an Administration that had learned a great deal about itself, about its adversary, and about international politics. Largely for good, sometimes for ill, we have seen the experience of the missile crisis shaping Soviet and American policy ever since.

One would like to be able to say that the Cuban missile crisis, which has exerted such a powerful influence on the conduct of superpower relations, is accurately understood. It is not. The transcript, as we note, seems to raise as many questions as it answers. But it does answer some. In the hands of thoughtful scholarship, this document and others will help us move closer to a depth of understanding we thought we had all along.