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JOHN F. KENNEDY

THE GREAT CRISES, VOLUME TWO

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Friday, October 19, 1962

To the press and public, this was a day on which the President was scheduled to fly to Cleveland, Ohio, and then on to Illinois for speeches and activities in Springfield and Chicago. But before leaving town, Kennedy wanted to confer secretly and directly with his military leaders.

9:45–10:30 A.M.

This blockade and political action, I see leading into war. I don't see any other solution for it. It will lead right into war. This is almost as bad as the appeasement at Munich.

Meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff on the Cuban Missile Crisis[1]

Continuing their analysis of earlier U-2 photography, National Photographic Interpretation Center analysts confirmed that the two MRBM sites near San Cristobal each had a regiment with eight SS-4s on launchers and eight more at hand for a second salvo. They pronounced both sites already operational. They had found another regiment of SS-4s east of Havana near Sagua La Grande. They expected these eight missiles to be operational within a week.

Although they had still spotted no IRBMs, the suppositions of the day before were hardening into a certainty that the two sites near Guanajay were intended for 2,200-mile-range SS-5s. The photos showed permanent construction, for SS-5s were too big and heavy to be fired from mobile launchers. And it was the construction pattern that was the giveaway, for they had not only seen it in photographs of the Soviet Union; they had technical data supplied by the spy Oleg Penkovsky. Seeing evidence of a nuclear warhead storage site in the area, the ana-

1. Including President Kennedy, George Anderson, Curtis LeMay, Robert McNamara, David Shoup, Maxwell Taylor, and Earle Wheeler. Tape 31.2, John F. Kennedy Library, President's Office Files, Presidential Recordings Collection.

lysts predicted that the IRBMs would be up and operational in six to eight weeks.[2]

The Joint Chiefs of Staff met at 9:00. Taylor told them about the previous night's meeting and that the President and his advisers were leaning toward a blockade of some kind. He said President Kennedy wanted to see them in a few minutes. The Chiefs agreed to recommend a massive air strike against Cuban military targets with no advance warning. They disagreed on the question of invasion; Taylor resisted this step. They then drove to the White House. McNamara joined them for their meeting with the President.

President Kennedy's view of the Joint Chiefs was respectful but skeptical, with a touch of the former junior Navy officer's attitude toward top brass. His most recent experience with the military in a crisis had angered him—not for the first time. On September 30, only a few weeks earlier, at the peak of the crisis over the admission of a black student, James Meredith, to the University of Mississippi, Kennedy had called on troops to provide security amid violent chaos on the campus. He had felt the military was unresponsive, remarking at one point to an aide (with the tape recorder running) that "They always give you their bullshit about their instant reaction and their split-second timing, but it never works out. No wonder it's so hard to win a war."

The Chiefs filed into the Cabinet Room at 9:45. Taylor was accompanied by Air Force Chief of Staff Curtis LeMay, a formidably competent figure then widely respected in the country for his prowess as a leader and organizer both during World War II and in the creation of the Air Force's Strategic Air Command. With them was Chief of Naval Operations George Anderson, a tall, handsome admiral who looked as if Hollywood had cast him for the part. Anderson was widely admired in the Navy as a "sailor's sailor," and his sermons on clean living had earned him the nickname "Straight Arrow." There was also Army Chief of Staff Earle Wheeler, whose reputation had been earned as a brilliant staff officer and Washington planner. Marine Corps commandant David Shoup had the opposite reputation. Shoup had won the Medal of Honor on the blood-soaked atoll of Tarawa in 1943 but was known, by 1962, as uninformed or erratic in the paper battles of the Pentagon. President Kennedy turned on the recorder in the Cabinet Room as the meeting began.

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2. The estimates briefed on 19 October were written down in a joint estimate of GMAIC, JAEIC, and NPIC, "Joint Evaluation of Soviet Missile Threat in Cuba," 19 October 1962.

Maxwell Taylor: Mr. President, as you know, we've been meeting on this subject ever since we discovered the presence of missiles in Cuba. And I would say the debates in our own midst have followed very closely in parallel those that you've heard from your other advisers.

From the outset I would say that we felt we were united on the military requirement: we could not accept Cuba as a missile base; that we should either eliminate or neutralize the missiles there and prevent any others coming in. From a military point of view that meant three things.

First, attack with the benefit of surprise those known missiles and offensive weapons that we knew about. Secondly, continued surveillance then to see what the effect would be. And third, a blockade to prevent the others from coming in.

I would say, again, from a military point of view, that seemed clear. We were united on that.

There has been one point, the importance of which we recognize, where we have never really firmed up our own position. Namely, the political requirements and the measures to offset the obvious political disabilities of this course of action. We know it's not an easy course of action, and it has at least two serious weaknesses.

The first is we're never sure of getting all the missiles and the offensive weapons if we fire a strike. Secondly, we see—all of us, all your advisers—that there would be a very damaging effect of this on our alliances.

To offset that, I have reported back some of the political measures considered. I think most of us would say we recognize that some of those things must be done, although they would be at some loss to our military effectiveness of our strikes. I reported the trend last night which I've detected for a couple of days, to move away from what I would call a straight military solution toward one based on military measures plus blockade. And that has been reported to the Chiefs this morning. I've taken the task Mr. McNamara assigned last night and we're working on that at this time.[3]

I think the benefit this morning, Mr. President, would be for you to hear the other Chiefs' comments either on our basic, what I call the military plan, or how they would see the blockade plan.

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3. Very late on 18 October Gilpatric, acting for McNamara, asked that the Chiefs work on how to help Latin American countries with their internal security, which of these countries could help the United States blockade Cuba, which offensive weapons should be included in a blockade, the possibility of blockading aircraft as well as ships, and related questions.

President Kennedy: Let me just say a little, first, about what the problem is, from my point of view.

First, I think we ought to think of why the Russians did this. Well, actually, it was a rather dangerous but rather useful play of theirs. If we do nothing, they have a missile base there with all the pressure that brings to bear on the United States and damage to our prestige.

If we attack Cuba, the missiles, or Cuba, in any way then it gives them a clear line to take Berlin, as they were able to do in Hungary under the Anglo war in Egypt. We will have been regarded as—they think we've got this fixation about Cuba anyway—we would be regarded as the trigger-happy Americans who lost Berlin. We would have no support among our allies. We would affect the West Germans' attitude towards us. And [people would believe] that we let Berlin go because we didn't have the guts to endure a situation in Cuba. After all, Cuba is 5[,000] or 6,000 miles from them. They don't give a damn about Cuba. And they do care about Berlin and about their own security. So they would say that we endangered their interests and security and reunification [of Germany] and all the rest, because of the preemptive action that we took in Cuba. So I think they've got . . . I must say I think it's a very satisfactory position from their point of view. If you take the view that what really . . .

And thirdly, if we do nothing then they'll have these missiles and they'll be able to say that any time we ever try to do anything about Cuba, that they'll fire these missiles. So that I think it's dangerous, but rather satisfactory, from their point of view.

If you take the view, really, that what's basic to them is Berlin and there isn't any doubt [about that]. In every conversation we've had with the Russians, that's what . . . Even last night we [Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko and I] talked about Cuba for a while, but Berlin—that's what Khrushchev's committed himself to personally. So, actually, it's a quite desirable situation from their point of view.

Now, that's what makes our problem so difficult. If we go in and take them out on a quick air strike, we neutralize the chance of danger to the United States of these missiles being used, and we prevent a situation from arising, at least within Cuba, where the Cubans themselves have the means of exercising some degree of authority in this hemisphere.

On the other hand, we increase the chance greatly, as I think they—there's bound to be a reprisal from the Soviet Union, there always is—of their just going in and taking Berlin by force at some point. Which leaves me only one alternative, which is to fire nuclear weapons—which is a hell of an alternative—and begin a nuclear exchange, with all this happening.

On the other hand, if we begin the blockade that we're talking about, the chances are they will begin a blockade and say that we started it. And there'll be some question about the attitude of the Europeans. So that, once again, they will say that there will be this feeling in Europe that the Berlin blockade has been commenced by our blockade.

So I don't think we've got any satisfactory alternatives. When we balance off that our problem is not merely Cuba but it is also Berlin and when we recognize the importance of Berlin to Europe, and recognize the importance of our allies to us, that's what has made this thing be a dilemma for three days. Otherwise, our answer would be quite easy.

Curtis LeMay: Mr. President—

President Kennedy: On the other hand, we've got to do something. Because if we do nothing, we're going to have the problem of Berlin anyway. That was very clear last night [in the meeting with Gromyko]. We're going to have this thing stuck right in our guts, in about two months [when the IRBMs are operational]. And so we've got to do something.

Now the question really is, what are we . . . let's see. [*Apparently reading passages from a document.*] Three . . . [*unclear*]. It's safe to say that two of these missiles [sites] are operational now; [missiles] can be launched within 18 hours after the decision to fire has been reached. We've seen [*unclear*] already alerted. These missiles could be launched within 18 hours after the decision to fire. We have now located 12 fixed launch pads near Havana. They'd [the IRBMs] be ready in December of '62. It says [*unclear*] additional missiles may be [*unclear*] . . . nuclear storage [*unclear*] . . . yields in the low megaton range. Communication, targeting, and an integrated air defense system is now nearing operational status. What does that mean, *integrated?*

Taylor: That means that we're hearing electronic emissions now, suggesting that they have sectors for the air defense of Cuba. I believe this is the latest intelligence here.

President Kennedy: I just wanted to say that these were some of the problems that we have been considering. Now I'd be glad to hear from . . .

Taylor: Well, I would just say one thing and then turn it over to General LeMay. We recognize all these things, Mr. President. But I think we'd all be unanimous in saying that really our strength in Berlin, our strength anyplace in the world, is the credibility of our response under certain conditions. And if we don't respond here in Cuba, we think the credibility of our response in Berlin is endangered.

President Kennedy: That's right. That's right. So that's why we've got to respond. Now the question is: What kind of response?

LeMay: Well, I certainly agree with everything General Taylor has

said. I'd emphasize, a little strongly perhaps, that we don't have any choice except direct military action. If we do this blockade that's proposed and political action, the first thing that's going to happen is your missiles are going to disappear into the woods, particularly your mobile ones.[4] Now, we can't find them then, regardless of what we do, and then we're going to take some damage if we try to do anything later on.

President Kennedy: Well, can't there be some of these undercover now, in the sense of not having been delivered?

LeMay: There is a possibility of that. But the way they've lined these others up—I would have say that it's a small possibility. If they were going to hide any of them, then I would think they would have hid them all. I don't think there are any hid. So the only danger we have if we haven't picked up some that are setting there in plain sight. This is possible. If we do low-altitude photography over them, this is going to be a tip-off too.

Now, as for the Berlin situation, I don't share your view that if we knock off Cuba, they're going to knock off Berlin. We've got the Berlin problem staring us in the face anyway. If we don't do anything to Cuba, then they're going to push on Berlin and push *real hard* because they've got us on the run. If we take military action against Cuba, then I think that the . . .

President Kennedy: What do you think their reprisal would be?

LeMay: I don't think they're going to make any reprisal if we tell them that the Berlin situation is just like it's always been. If they make a move we're going to fight. Now I don't think this changes the Berlin situation at all, except you've got to make one more statement on it.

So I see no other solution. This blockade and political action, I see leading into war. I don't see any other solution for it. It will lead right into war. This is almost as bad as the appeasement at Munich.

[*Pause.*]

Because if this [*unclear*] blockade comes along, their MiGs are going to fly. The IL-28s are going to fly against us. And we're just going to gradually drift into a war under conditions that are at great disadvantage to us, with missiles staring us in the face, that can knock out our airfields in the southeastern portion [of the United States]. And if they

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4. In fact the SS-4 MRBMs, the only type which were mobile, were far too large to move into dense woods, especially with all their associated equipment. But it took a few more days before U.S. officials comprehended this limitation. The SS-5 IRBMs were to be deployed at fixed concrete sites.

use nuclear weapons, it's the population down there. We just drift into a war under conditions that we don't like. I just don't see any other solution except direct military intervention *right now*.

George Anderson: Well, Mr. President, I feel that the course of action recommended to you by the Chiefs from the military point of view is the right one. I think it's the best one from the political point of view.

I'll address myself to the alternative of the blockade. If we institute a blockade, from a military point of view we can carry it out. It is easier for us and requires less forces if we institute a complete blockade rather than a partial blockade, because instituting a partial blockade involves visit and search of all of these neutral ships, and taking them in, perhaps, to ports, will certainly cause a great deal more concern on the part of the neutrals, than if we go ahead and institute a complete blockade.

If we institute a complete blockade, we are immediately having a confrontation with the Soviet Union because it's the Soviet-bloc ships which are taking the material to Cuba.

The blockade will not affect the equipment that is already in Cuba, and will provide the Russians in Cuba time to assemble all of these missiles, to assemble the IL-28s, to get the MiGs and their command and control system ready to go. And I feel that, as this goes on, I agree with General LeMay that this will escalate and then we will be required to take other military action at greater disadvantage to the United States, to our military forces, and probably would suffer far greater casualties within the United States if these fanatics do indeed intend to fire any missiles.

We certainly cannot guarantee under those circumstances that we could prevent damage and loss of life in the United States itself. I think we have a good chance of greatly minimizing any loss of life within the United States under the present conditions, if we act fairly soon, although we do recognize they're moving very fast. I do not see that, as long as the Soviet Union is supporting Cuba, that there is any solution to the Cuban problem except a military solution.

On the other hand, we recognize fully the relationship to the Berlin situation. The Communists have got in this case a master situation, from their point of view, where every course of action posed to us is characterized by unpleasantries and disadvantages. It's the same thing as Korea all over again, only on a grander scale.

We recognize the great difficulty of a military solution in Berlin. I think, on balance, the taking [of] positive, prompt affirmative action in Berlin demonstrating the confidence, the ability, the resolution of the United States on balance, I would judge it, would be to deter the Russians

from more aggressive acts in Berlin and, if we didn't take anything, they'd feel that we were weak. So I subscribe fully to the concept recommended by the Joint Chiefs.

President Kennedy: It seems to me that we have to assume that just when our two military . . . When we grabbed their two U.N. people [as spies] and they threw two of ours out [of the Moscow embassy], we've got to assume there's going to be—

Anderson: Tit for tat.

President Kennedy: —that they would strike this . . . I mean they can't do it [accept our attack] any more than we can let these go on without doing something. They can't let us just take out, after all their statements, take out their missiles, kill a lot of Russians and not do anything.

It's quite obvious that what they . . . I would think they would do, is try to get Berlin. But that may be a risk we have to take, but it would seem to me . . .

LeMay: Well, history has been, I think, the other way, Mr. President. Where we have taken a strong stand they have backed off. In Lebanon, for instance.[5]

Taylor: I would agree, Mr. President. I think from the point of view of face they'll do something. But I think it will be considerably less, depending on the posture we show here. I can't really see them putting the screws in. The dangers of hitting Berlin are just as great or greater after our action down here, because we have our—

President Kennedy: Right. But I think they're going to wait for three months until they get these things [the IRBMs as well as the MRBMs] all ready, and then squeeze us in Berlin. The only thing, at that point, for what it is worth [and] it may not be worth much, but at least we'd have the support of Europe this way.

Taylor: That is true.

President Kennedy: We have to figure that Europe will regard this action . . . no matter what pictures we show afterwards of [missiles] as having been . . .

Taylor: I think that's right.

Earle Wheeler: Mr. President, in my judgment, from a military point of view, the lowest-risk course of action if we're thinking of protecting

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5. A landing of thousands of U.S. Marines in Lebanon in 1958 was unopposed, and the bloodless action was believed to have prevented a takeover of Lebanon by anti-Western dissidents supported by the United Arab Republic and the Soviet Union.

the people of the United States against a possible strike on us is to go ahead with a surprise air strike, the blockade, and an invasion because these series of actions progressively will give us increasing assurance that we really have got the offensive capability of the Cuban-Soviets cornered. Now admittedly, we can never be absolutely sure until and unless we actually occupy the island.

Now, I've also taken into consideration a couple of other things at the present time. To date, Khrushchev has not *really* confronted us with *Soviet* power. In other words, he has not declared Cuba a part of the Warsaw Pact. Nor has he made an announcement that this is a Soviet base, although I think that there is a chance that he may do this at any time, particularly later in November when he comes to the United States. And this course of action would then immediately have us confronting the Soviets and not Cuba. And at that time Soviet prestige, world prestige, would be at stake, which it is not at the present time.

The effect of this base in Cuba, it seems to me, has at least two sizable advantages from his point of view and two sizable disadvantages from our point of view.

First, the announcement of a Soviet base in Cuba would immediately have a profound effect in all of Latin America at least and probably worldwide because the question would arise: Is the United States incapable of doing something about it or unwilling to do something about it? In other words, it would attack our prestige.

Not only that. Increasingly, they can achieve a sizable increase in offensive Soviet strike capabilities against the United States, which they do not now have. They do have ICBMs that are targeted on us, but they are in limited numbers. Their air force is not by any manner of means of the magnitude and capability that they probably would desire. And this short-range missile force gives them a sort of a quantum jump in their capability to inflict damage on the United States. And so as I say, from a military point of view, I feel that the lowest risk course of action is the full gamut of military action by us. That's it, sir.

President Kennedy: Thank you, General.

David Shoup: Mr. President, there's a question in my mind. Under what circumstance would Cuba want to inflict damage on the United States? The placing of the kind of weapons and the bombers that can do that certainly demand a hell of a lot of attention. There's one feature of this that I've been unable to reconcile. And I wonder whether the American people and the other nations of the world can reconcile it. That is that we are now so anxious or we're discussing the anxiety of eliminating the possibility of damage to America from the Cuban area, whereas for

a good many months the world has known, and we've known, that we have tremendously greater potential already aimed in on us from Russia and it has been for many months. And we didn't attack Russia. I think that's a hard thing to reconcile, at least it is in my mind, and I would think it would be in the American public and other nations of the world. If it's a matter of distance, that it's closer now, well, missiles land pretty . . . If they have nuclear warheads down there, we know they have them in Russia. So if they want to inflict damage, it's a question of whether Khrushchev wants to have them do it, and him keep out of it.

So if there is a requirement to eliminate this threat of damage, then it's going to take some sizable forces to do it. And as we wait and wait and wait, then it will take greater forces to do it.

And as long as it isn't done, then those forces . . . increasingly requirements for greater forces will be absolutely tied to that function. They're going to have to stand by to take care of that function. And you will then have a considerable force of troops, ships, aircraft tied to this requirement that some day may happen.

I can't conceive that they [the Cubans] would attack us just for the fun of it. They might do it at the direction of Khrushchev. But I cannot see why they would attack us because they couldn't invade and take us. So there's a question in my mind, in the political area and as I say the public and the people, what does this mean?

Does it mean they're [Cuba] getting ready to attack us, that little pipsqueak of a place? If so, Russia has a hell of a lot better way to attack us than to attack us from Cuba.

Then, in my mind, this all devolves upon the fact that they [the Soviets] do have it. They can damage us increasingly every day. And each day that they increase, we have to have a more sizable force tied to this problem and then they're not available in case something happens someplace else. And each time you then have to take some action in Berlin, South Vietnam, Korea, you would be degrading. You'd have to degrade your capability against this ever-increasing force in Cuba.

So that, in my opinion, if we want to eliminate this threat that is now closer, but it's not nearly the threat that we've experienced all these months and months, if we want to eliminate it, then we're going to have to go in there and do it in a full-time job to eliminate the threat against us. Then if you want to take over the place and really put in a new government that is non-Communist, then you'll have to invade the place. And if that decision is made, we must go in with plenty of insurance of a decisive success and as quick as possible.

President Kennedy: Well, it is a fact that the number of missiles

there, let's say . . . no matter what they put in there, we could live today under. If they don't have enough ICBMs today, they're going to have them in a year. They obviously are putting in a lot of—

LeMay: This increases their accuracy against the 50 targets that we know that they could hit now.

But the big thing is, if we leave them there, is the blackmail threat against not only us but the other South American countries that they may decide to operate against.

There's one other factor that I didn't mention that's not quite in our field, [which] is the political factor. But you invited us to comment on this at one time. And that is that we have had a talk about Cuba and the SAM sites down there. And you have made some pretty strong statements about their being defensive and that we would take action against offensive weapons. I think that a blockade and political talk would be considered by a lot of our friends and neutrals as being a pretty weak response to this. And I'm sure a lot of our own citizens would feel that way, too.

In other words, you're in a pretty bad fix at the present time.

President Kennedy: What did you say?

LeMay: You're in a pretty bad fix.

President Kennedy: You're in there with me. [*Slight laughter, a bit forced.*] Personally.

Taylor: With regard to the blockade plan, Mr. President, I say we're studying it now to see all the implications. We're not . . . we really haven't gone into it deeply. There are two things that strike us from the outset. One is the difficulty of maintaining surveillance. We just don't see how they can do that without taking losses and getting into some form of air warfare over this island.

Second, there is the problem of Guantánamo, which is a curious obstacle to us to some degree. I might ask Admiral Anderson to comment on how we can protect our position in Guantánamo during a state of blockade.

Anderson: Well, our position in Guantánamo becomes increasingly vulnerable because certainly the imposition of the blockade is going to infuriate the Cubans and they have got a mass of militia and they can come on around Guantánamo. And I don't know whether they would actually attack Guantánamo or not. But we would certainly have to provide increased forces around there to defend Guantánamo, which we're in the process of reinforcing right now. Also, they have these short-range cruise missiles. They have three groups of those primarily for coast defense. Their MiGs, their aircraft, all pose a threat to Guantánamo. So the threat is greatly increased and intensified during the course of a blockade.

Taylor: I think Guantánamo is going to cease to be a useful naval base and become more of a fortress more or less in a permanent state of siege.

President Kennedy: If we were going to do the . . . There's a good deal of difference between taking a strike which strikes just the missiles that are involved—that's one action which has a certain effect, an escalating effect. The other is to do a strike which takes out all the planes, that's very much of an island sweep. Third is the invasion, which takes a period of 14 days or so by the time we get it mounted. Maybe 18 days. Well we have to assume that—I don't know what—the Soviet response to each of these would have to be different. If one were slowly building up to an invasion and fighting our way across the island . . . That's a different situation from taking out these offensive weapons. It seems to you that—

LeMay: I think we have got to do more than take out the missiles, because if you don't take out their air at the same time you're vulnerable down in that section of the world [*unclear*] strikes from their air. They could come in at low altitude and do it. Because we haven't got much of a low altitude capability.

In addition, that air would be used against any other surveillance you have, too. So if you take out the missiles, I think you've got to take out their air along with it, and their radar, and their communications, the whole works. It just doesn't make any sense to do anything but that.

President Kennedy: Well, except that what . . . they've had the air there for some time. And what we've talked about is having ground-to-ground missiles.

There isn't any . . . You know, as I say, the problem is not really some war against Cuba. But the problem is part of this worldwide struggle where we face the Communists, particularly, as I say, over Berlin. And with the loss of Berlin, the effect of that and the responsibility we would bear. As I say, I think the Egyptian and the Hungary thing are the obvious parallels that I'm concerned about.

LeMay: If you lose in Cuba you're going to get more and more pressure right on Berlin. I'm sure of that.

Taylor: This worldwide problem has certainly been before us, Mr. President. We haven't ignored it. For me, it's been a deterrent to my enthusiasm for any invasion of Cuba, as I think you know.

On the other hand, now that we've seen that it's not just going to be a place where they needle us by mobile missiles as I thought perhaps earlier in the week, but really an organized base where the numbers of missile complexes are—

President Kennedy: Of course General Shoup's point, which is also made, is that there isn't any doubt [that] if it isn't today, it's within a

year they're going to have enough. . . . when we've talked about the number of ICBMs they have. They may not be quite as accurate. [But] they've got enough, they put them on the cities and you know how soon these casualty figures [mount up]—80 million, whether it's 80 or 100—you're talking about the destruction of a country. So that it . . . just regardless if you begin to duplicate your . . .

Taylor: And we lose our—

President Kennedy: You'll lose it all on cities.

Taylor: And we can never talk about invading again, after they get these missiles, because they've got these pointed at our head.

President Kennedy: Well, the logical argument is that we don't really have to invade Cuba. That's not really . . . That's just one of the difficulties that we live with in life, like we live with the Soviet Union and China.

That problem, however, is after . . . for us not to do anything, then wait until he brings up Berlin. And then we can't do anything about Cuba.

But I do think we ought to be aware of the fact that the existence of these missiles does add to the danger but doesn't create it. The danger is right there now. They've got enough to give us, between submarines and ICBMs, or whatever planes they do have, I mean now they can kill, especially if they concentrate on the cities, I mean they've pretty well got us there anyway.

Taylor: And by logic we ought to be able to say we can deter these missiles as well as the Soviet missiles, the ones from the Soviet Union. I think the thing that worries us, however, is that these [being] in potentially under the control of Castro. Castro would be quite a different fellow to own missiles than Khrushchev. I don't think that's the case now, and perhaps Khrushchev would never willingly do so. But there's always the risk of their falling into Cuban hands.

Shoup: Mr. President, one other item about the Guantánamo thing. Any initiative on our part immediately gives them the—I don't know the authority—but the right probably to let fly at Guantánamo. And thus, the weapons that they have, including now another SAM site or two at work on the place, plus surface-to-surface missiles . . . They have a considerable number of gun emplacements within range of Guantánamo. So unless something is done to also at the same time neutralize this ability to take on Guantánamo, well Guantánamo is in one hell of a fix.

President Kennedy: The only thing is, General, it's going to take us . . . before we could . . . what can we do about Guantánamo if we do this air strike and they retaliate on Guantánamo?

Anderson: Mr. President, our thinking on Guantánamo is this. We're

reinforcing it right now, building up the strength for the defense of Guantánamo. We have air all earmarked to suppress the weapons which would be brought to bear immediately on Guantánamo. We would evacuate the dependents from Guantánamo immediately prior to the air strike; get them clear. I think that with the forces that we've put in there and the air that is available, we can handle the situation in Guantánamo.

LeMay: The bulk of the naval air is available to defend Guantánamo.

Taylor: This can go on indefinitely. This could become a sort of Cuban Quemoy, where they shell us on odd days and make strikes and things of that sort.[6] There's no end in sight, really.

Anderson: Unless you carry on, yeah.

Taylor: That's right. I see.

Shoup: It eliminates the airfield there, in a sense so we can operate. They can bombard; then we can fix it; and we can operate. But it certainly terrifically reduces the potential value of the airfields there, the potential value of the shipping area, and what you then have is just a hunk of dirt that you're hanging on to for pride, prestige, political reasons, or what have you.

Taylor: It's a liability, actually.

Shoup: It becomes of no value unless [we destroy] the weapons and that, of course, includes your doggone airplanes that can bomb it. Unless the weapons that can cause trouble there are eliminated, all you have is a hunk of dirt that's taken a hell of a lot of people to hang on to.

President Kennedy: Well, let me ask you this. If we go ahead with this air strike, either on the missiles or on the missiles and the planes, I understand the recommendation is to do both. When could that be ready?

LeMay: We can be ready for attack at dawn on the 21st [Sunday], that being the earliest possible date. The optimum date would be Tuesday morning [October 23].

Taylor: Tuesday is the optimum date.

President Kennedy: I suppose with this news now . . . They've got two of them [MRBM sites] ready, we're running out of time, are we?

Taylor: This is the mobile missiles you're referring to sir? I have not seen that.

Robert McNamara: Mr. President, I think it's highly questionable

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6. Taylor is suggesting an analogy between the potential Cuban harassment of Guantánamo and China's continuing shelling beginning in 1958 of the offshore islands of Quemoy and Matsu, held by Taiwan, accompanied by China's threats to invade both these islands and Taiwan itself.

that they have two ready. This says . . . it's best to assume they do, but the best information we have indicates it's still highly [doubtful].

President Kennedy: Why is it Tuesday instead of Sunday, General? What's the argument for that?

LeMay: Well—

President Kennedy: We can't hold this much longer.

Taylor: We were told to get ready as fast as possible. We aren't recommending Sunday. We'd prefer Tuesday.

President Kennedy: Well, the only problem I see is that it starts to break out in the papers.

LeMay: Well, we would prefer Tuesday. Here's the only reason. We've had this plan for some time.

Some outside noise begins to interfere with general sound quality. For several minutes, only fragments of conversations are audible.

McNamara: For the U-2 photography we'll have complete coverage of the island, interpreted I would guess by late today.

President Kennedy: So then just—

Taylor: This morning I asked the question, Bob, and the estimate was later than that to see everything [*unclear*].

President Kennedy: Well, let's say it's this evening then. But you say that would be Monday. It's just really a question of how long this thing can hold without getting out.

Taylor: Mr. President, I've never been impressed with the argument of some of your advisers on that point. It seems to me we've had so many reports out of Cuba we can shrug them all off as rumors that [*unclear*].

President Kennedy: Well, when is that you begin to tell so many of the military that there's going to be this strike, that there's a chance of it getting out? The pilots and so on and their families.

Taylor: I don't think . . . The danger is minimal. The danger is minimal. The last time we spoke to these pilots—and we are briefing pilots today—it's not a very large number of pilots—it's only a briefing on these particular subjects. The other srikes are all [*unclear*].

President Kennedy: How effective is an air strike of this kind generally against a missile base?

LeMay: Well, I think we can guarantee hitting them.

President Kennedy: If it doesn't take care of the mobile, what does it do to them? [*Unclear.*]

Le May: The mobile missiles aren't the problem. It's the other ones, where there isn't much there [*unclear*] are now [*unclear*].

Anderson: But these are [*unclear*].

Taylor: [*Unclear*] the island.

President Kennedy: [*Unclear.*]

Taylor: Twenty thousand [*unclear*].

Anderson: You could hit it with a rocket or something like that, but [*unclear*] more important.

President Kennedy: Then, now the invasion would take . . .

Taylor: Seven days after the air strike you could start the invasion going on for about 11 days.

Unidentified: [*Unclear.*]

President Kennedy: It would go on for 11 days and then we would . . . We would, in other words, be prepared for it, but not necessarily . . . we'd still have seven days to decide whether we want to go in.

Taylor: We have flexibility. Once we strike we would start moving [*unclear*] even though you didn't decide that [*unclear*].

Wheeler: Mr. President, going back to the relationships between Cuba and Berlin. And I certainly feel that the Soviets have concocted what they think is a masterful strategy.

There is no acceptable military solution to the Berlin problem, whereas there is in Cuba. There's no acceptable political-economic solution to the Cuban problem. Conceivably, a solution to the Berlin problem lies in the diplomatic-economic-political field, if we put enough pressure on the Soviet bloc.

Now if we act in Cuba and they respond by making immediately a treaty with the East Germans and surrounding Berlin, denying our access to Berlin, our garrison—the people in Berlin—can survive there for a long time, assuming that the Russians are not just overrunning the city with their own troops. Could we not apply sufficient diplomatic-economic-financial pressures to the entire Soviet bloc and gradually expand this so that we, for a suitable period of time, we're progressively cutting the Soviet bloc off from their access to most of the countries in the free world? And at the same time have some sort of an acceptable, what would appear to be an acceptable long-range political solution to all of Berlin?

Forty-eight seconds excised as classified information.

President Kennedy: In any case, there's no . . . unfortunately. I'm just thinking we come out second-best. So we just . . . I think there's a meeting at eleven. I might as well continue with my tour because [*unclear*] surface all this, and we'll be back in touch tonight. I'm probably [*unclear*].

I appreciate your views. As I said, I'm sure we all understand how rather unsatisfactory our alternatives are. The argument for the blockade was that what we want to do is to avoid, if we can, nuclear war by escalation or imbalance. The Soviets increase; we use [force]; they blockade Berlin. They blockade for military purposes. Then we take an

initial action so that . . . We've got to have some degree of control. Those people [the Soviets] last night were so away from reality that there's no telling what the response would be.

Taylor: Did he [Gromyko] give any clue, Mr. President?

President Kennedy: Well, he talked tough about Berlin. On Cuba he really just talked about their defensive aspirations. He said, "We're only sending defensive weapons in." Of course, that's how they define these weapons, as defensive.

Taylor: Well, Mr. President—

President Kennedy: General Shoup, your point is not to argue against action by saying that we've been living with this sort of thing for years.

Shoup: A lot of people advance that. That is a real question for a reconciliation, for our people, and you and everybody else when . . . We've had a hell of a lot more than this aimed at us, and we didn't attack it. But they're closer, their distance is closer, and as General LeMay pointed out, there are certain areas in which he will certainly get in, if, as I presume, we're going to take him on.

President Kennedy: Well, I think . . . I don't think that it adds particularly to our danger. I think our danger is the use of nuclear weapons [*unclear*] anyway. Particularly on urban sites. With submarines and planes. They've got enough now; they sure will have in a year's [time]. I don't think that's probably the major argument. The major argument is the political effect on United States [*unclear*] Cuba. The certainty is the invasion is key for us.

On the other hand, there are going to be a lot of people that are just going to move away from us, figuring that our . . . I mean, we haven't prepared [*unclear*] existence. There isn't any doubt if we announce evidence of the missile sites, most people, including the Soviets would take a provocative act. Instead, the first announcement may be, under the plan suggested, an act that we took. So that we've got a real problem in maintaining the alliance.

Wheeler: Today . . . am I clear that you are addressing yourself as to whether anything at all should be done?

President Kennedy: That's right.

Wheeler: But that if military action is to be taken, you agree with us.

President Kennedy: Yeah.

Shoup: I question how to reconcile . . . the last thing you really want is [*unclear*] less threat than you've had for a long time.

Taylor: Mr. President, may I mention one thing before you go on because time is running out: the question of the low-level [reconnais-

sance] flights to get evidence. We discussed [them] last night and we're prepared to do them tomorrow. I'm a little concerned about doing that if there's any likelihood of our following a military course.

President Kennedy: Exactly. Oh, I agree. That's why we've got—

McNamara: No question that we should not undertake those until a decision has been made as to which course of action would—presumably you're ready?

LeMay: Yes, sir. We are.

McNamara: Good.

LeMay: [*Unclear.*]

Taylor: Thank you very much, Mr. President. We appreciate the chance to talk with you.

Anderson: Sir, did you make a decision on the [*unclear*], I mean the [*unclear*].

President Kennedy: I told [*unclear*] to go ahead [*unclear*].

Anderson: All right then.

President Kennedy: The Attorney General told me all the reports that he got was that your reaction [*unclear*].

Anderson: I think everything is pretty well under control.

President Kennedy: Yeah, that's right.

President Kennedy and McNamara begin talking privately to one side.

Taylor: I know the press is out here talking about [*unclear*]. [*Unclear exchanges.*]

McNamara: [*Unclear.*] Max, may I suggest this? That for [*unclear*] the Chiefs organize themselves following two alternative courses. One, the blockade in great detail. What are the instructions you ought to do? What ships can you do? And how would you do it without endangering the ships? In other words you—

Taylor: Pull them out.

McNamara: Pull them out. Exactly. Now, I realize that this [*unclear*] the ocean and that [*unclear*] greater naval force and so on. That would be the assumption you would try to start on. At the same time, let some other Chief or Chiefs work in great detail on the air strike. Because—I say this because as far as the President is concerned, we've just talked in very general terms about the air strike.

Taylor: Yeah.

McNamara: And with every passing day the number of airplanes that we would have in the air, the firepower, is increasing.

Taylor: The civilian targets are increasing too.

McNamara: Oh, I'm not suggesting that. I'm just saying that, if the

President were to decide on this, we should tell him exactly what we mean. What will we include? What authorities do we want?

Taylor: Those figures I showed you last night are the last [*unclear*].

McNamara: Well, just take Guantánamo. What authority does the Navy want in the event that the Air Force carries out an air strike on missiles, SAM sites, airfields, and so on?

Taylor: The Navy is doing a certain amount of that in coordinating problems related to the [*unclear*]. At the same time, they'd have close defense aircraft [*unclear*].

McNamara: Right. But how many air strikes are they likely to carry out from Guantánamo? It's maybe 200 to 300.

Taylor: 125 a day is roughly [*unclear*].

McNamara: Yeah. Yeah, that's right.

Taylor: I think we can get that information very quickly. We have that [*unclear*]. We don't have the surveillance requirements of the blockade and also the level of defense in Guantánamo [*unclear*].

McNamara: That's right. Yes. And we ought to plan both of those. I'm surprised the surveillance of the blockade isn't [*unclear*].

LeMay: I agree with you.

McNamara: I'm not sure that I would fully agree that this is bound to lead to some consequences. Can't we use these drones?[7]

Taylor: If they're adequate. I don't think any of us have any great confidence.

Unidentified: [*Unclear.*]

McNamara: Oh. Oh sure, they'd knock some of them down. But the rate of loss might be 10, 15, 20 percent.

Taylor: Well—

McNamara: And it takes quite a while. It'd take at least four to six weeks I would think given [*unclear*] drones [*unclear*]. [*Unclear exchanges.*]

Taylor: Any other chores, Bob, that you want us to—

McNamara: No, I think not, Max. The—

Taylor: Well, I will go with you and Vern.

Wheeler: I gather that with the authorization of the movement of the reinforced battalion from the West Coast to Guantánamo, if we see fit to move an extra company in, that's perfectly OK.

Taylor: I saw that covert plan [*unclear*] in the cable. You might want to look at that and decide if it looks alright. It seemed to me a bit, a little

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7. Drones are pilotless, remote-controlled reconnaissance aircraft.

too much. I don't think we have anything to say on that. In fact I don't think you need to say anything when we're coming in in this staggered way [*unclear*].

Shoup: Is the coast clear out there? [*Perhaps referring to President Kennedy's having taken off from the South Lawn in the presidential helicopter.*]

Mixed voices murmuring, a few fragments are intelligible. The remaining generals seem to be discussing various topics, including targets and their transportation back to the Pentagon.

Wheeler: The way to do that is the Joint Reconnaissance Group [JRG] getting the requirements from DIA, the input on the public relations from us. They already have wide profiles. They will have to be adjusted in the light of the [*unclear*].

Taylor: And you do [*unclear*] surrogate possibilities.

Wheeler: Yes, sir. Actually, we have authorized the Joint Reconnaissance Group to deal directly with the flight leader.

McNamara: I think it would be helpful if some one of the Chiefs would talk with DIA about it and get this formalized before [*unclear, unclear exchange*]. And have [DIA director General Joseph] Carroll work with the other groups here. There's this National Reconnaissance Office that's involved in this thing. There's a, in a sense, a third agency, that's responsible for the U-2, the drones, anything relating to special reconnaissance for CIA and DIA. We need to keep him involved. Carroll knows how to do this.

Wheeler: I think the JRG has all these strengths. That's a real fine outfit. Real fine outfit. They deal with DIA and some of these people on a daily basis, so I'm sure we can pull it together really quickly.

After a brief, inaudible exchange McNamara and Taylor leave. Apparently only three or four people remain in the room.

Shoup: Well what do you guys [*unclear*]. You, you pulled the rug right out from under him.

LeMay: Jesus Christ. What the hell do you mean?

Shoup: I just agree with that answer, General. I just agree with you. I just agree with you a hundred percent. I just agree with you a hundred percent. That's the only goddamn . . .

He [President Kennedy] finally got around to the word *escalation*. [*Unclear*] I heard him say *escalation.* That's the only goddamn thing that's in the whole trick. It's been there in Laos; it's been in every goddamn one [of these crises]. When he says *escalation,* that's it. [*Pause.*]

If somebody could keep them from doing the goddamn thing piecemeal. That's our problem. You go in there and friggin' around with the missiles. You're screwed. You go in and frig around with anything else, you're screwed.

LeMay: That's right.

Shoup: You're screwed, screwed, screwed. And if some goddamn thing, some way, he could say: "Either do this son of a bitch and do it right, and quit friggin' around." That was my conclusion. Don't frig around and go take a missile out.

Wheeler: Well, maybe I missed the point [*unclear*].

LeMay: [*Unclear*] off any decision, Dave.

Shoup: Well, that wasn't my intention. Goddamn it, if he wants to do it, you can't fiddle around with taking out missiles. You can't fiddle around with hitting the missile sites and then hitting the SAM sites. You got to go in and take out the goddamn thing that's going to stop you from doing your job.

Wheeler: It was very apparent to me, though, from his earlier remarks, that the political action of a blockade is really what he's . . .

Shoup: That's right. His speech about Berlin was the real . . .

Wheeler: He gave his speech about Berlin, and

LeMay: He equates the two.

Shoup: That's right.

Wheeler: If we smear Castro, Khrushchev smears Willy Brandt [in Berlin].

LeMay: Berlin [*unclear*] talk about it. I think our best chance is that we won't have anything happen.

Wheeler: [*Unclear, mixed voices.*] I gather that I can go ahead and issue these orders? [*Unclear exchange.*]

Unidentified: [*Unclear*] do the National Guard, cut it down to 600 and come back over a month with 300 replacements. [*Unclear exchange.*]

LeMay: We're all set then.

Wheeler: Well, this is good. I can get those people moving.

Unidentified: Right. OK then.

The generals leave, and the tape runs out shortly afterward in the now-empty room.

President Kennedy was now less sure that the blockade was the right answer. This might have been because of the weight of arguments he had heard from the Joint Chiefs. He had also talked again to Bundy, probably at the start of his day, before the meeting with the Joint Chiefs. Bundy had changed his mind during the night and had switched from supporting no action (because of concerns about Berlin) to supporting a surprise air strike. Though we can see from the meeting with the Chiefs that President Kennedy continued to favor a blockade, it is possible that Bundy's change of heart gave the President added cause for reflection.

After the crisis Bundy privately recorded that Kennedy, just before he left Washington on October 19 (in the few minutes after his meeting with the Joint Chiefs), asked Bundy to keep the air strike option open until he returned. In another brief exchange as he prepared to depart on his campaign trip to Ohio and Illinois, President Kennedy asked his brother, with Sorensen standing by, to "pull the group together."[8]

The President wanted to act soon and said Bobby should call if and and when he should cut short his trip and return to Washington. At 10:35 the presidential helicopter lifted off from the South Lawn of the White House.

Saturday, October 20, 1962

On Friday, October 19, the meetings at the State Department ran all day and into the night. The day started with advisers divided into two camps, one favoring a blockade and the other favoring an air strike. Bundy said that, in the course of a sleepless night, he had decided that an air strike was needed. Decisive action would confront the world with a fait accompli. He said he had spoken with President Kennedy and passed along this advice. Acheson, Dillon, McCone, and Taylor agreed with Bundy.

McNamara disagreed. Ball said he was wavering. Robert Kennedy then said, with a grin, that he too had spoken with the President and that a surprise attack like Pearl Harbor was "not in our traditions." He "favored *action"* but wanted action that gave the Soviets a chance to pull back.[1]

Rusk then suggested that the group divide into working groups to refine the blockade and air strike scenarios. It became plain to all, after

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8. Bundy's recollection is drawn from notes excerpted from his private papers by Francis Bator. Bator shared this information in an April 1998 letter to Ernest May and Philip Zelikow. Deputy Under Secretary of State Alexis Johnson, who attended almost all of the meetings during the crisis, remembered that the apparent consensus that had formed in favor of the blockade on October 18 "came unstuck" on Friday, 19 October. Alexis Johnson thought this was because of Dean Acheson's argument for an air strike. U. Alexis Johnson with Jef Olivarius McAllister, *The Right Hand of Power* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984), p. 383. In fact Kennedy had already heard Acheson's case on the afternoon of the 18th, *before* the consensus formed that night, and had not talked again to Acheson. On the "pull the group together" exchange, see Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 692.

1. This account draws on several sources, but these and other quotations from the 19 October meetings are from minutes drafted by State Department deputy legal adviser Ralph Meeker, in *FRUS*, 11: 116–22 (Robert Kennedy's emphasis on *action* is in Meeker's notes).