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# October 27, 1962: Transcripts of the Meetings of the ExComm

McGeorge Bundy,  
transcriber  
James G. Blight,  
editor

## Transcriber's Note

*In the summer of 1985 I went to the Kennedy Library and listened to the Presidential Recordings of meetings that I had attended during the Cuban missile crisis. These tapes were still highly classified, except for the tapes of October 16, 1962, which had been transcribed, "sanitized" and published in 1985. I was allowed to listen to the still-classified tapes because the appropriate authorities in Washington and at the Kennedy Library held that, since I had been present at these meetings as Special Assistant for National Security to President Kennedy, listening to the tapes was only a renewed access to their contents, parallel to the renewed access to classified documents that is often extended to those who worked with those documents while in office.*

*As I listened to these tapes I was rapidly persuaded that whatever one might think of President Kennedy's decision to engage in such secret taping—and I think I would have opposed it if I had been asked—the resulting record has important historical value. I therefore undertook the task of transcribing the tapes of the most important day, October 27, and presently the necessary Washington process of "sanitization" and declassification was completed. None of the still-classified material excised affects the substance of the transcript, and what was cut was, in the main, already known to close students of the crisis.*

*I am making use of this new evidence myself, in a book about political decisions related to nuclear weapons, but it seems important that new evidence of this sort should be promptly and fully shared with other students of these matters and with the public. The full text of my transcription is available from the Kennedy Library,*

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Tapes of the meetings of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (the "ExComm") of October 27, 1962, just before the resolution of the Cuban missile crisis, were transcribed by McGeorge Bundy and were edited and annotated by James G. Blight, who gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Marc Trachtenberg. The full transcript is available from the John F. Kennedy Library in Dorchester, Mass.

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*McGeorge Bundy was Special Assistant for National Security to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, 1961–1966. He is presently working on a book about political decisions related to nuclear weapons. James G. Blight is Executive Director of the Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University.*

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*and I am delighted that the editors of International Security are publishing this shortened version, edited and annotated by James Blight. The editors, Mr. Blight and I agree that specialists will want the full text, but I have compared his version with that text, and I find it faithful and fair. It is also much easier to read and to understand than the original, because what has been cut is neither as clear nor as significant as what appears here. Discussions involving a number of speakers are never easy to record and transcribe clearly, and we are dealing here with equipment of 1962 and a transcriber with no claims to expert skill. In such a situation, careful independent editing is helpful.*

*In closing I want to report that in repeated listening to these tapes of discussions in the Cabinet Room on the hardest day of the hardest nuclear crisis so far, I heard no voice raised in anger and no rancorous exchange. I have been at pains to indicate words that were given special emphasis by a speaker, but all such emphases are well within the range of even-tempered exchange. I also found no moment in which anyone forgot that, while the possibilities under discussion could be clarified and assessed by one advisor or another, and even by all of us together, the decisions must be those of one man. These tapes exist because of what I continue to think was a questionable decision by JFK, but none of his admirers needs to be ashamed of what the tapes tell about his way of making much larger decisions on a dangerous day. We have here a President fully on the job.*

—McGeorge Bundy

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*Editor's Note*

*Each section of transcript excerpt is preceded by James G. Blight's summary of background and developments of the crisis, indicated by larger type. Bracketed paragraphs within each transcript section summarize parts of the full transcript not reprinted here. Italics within the transcript indicate emphasis noted by transcriber McGeorge Bundy. Minor changes in punctuation and capitalization made by the editor are not indicated.*

*The following conventions are used in the transcript:*

- (        ) indicates transcriber's description of sounds or uninterpretable material.*
- [        ] indicates information or punctuation supplied by the editor.*
- [        ?] indicates tentative interpretations by the editor.*
- . . . . indicates that a few words or transcriber's description of sounds (such as "voices unclear") have been omitted by the editor.*
- . . . . . a line of ellipses in the left margin indicates that more than one line or more than one speaker has been omitted by the editor.*
- [deleted] indicates deletion of classified material by the sanitizers of the transcript.*
- VOICE: in the left margin indicates a speaker whose identity was not clear to the transcriber.*
- indicates that the speaker trails off or has been interrupted.*

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## The Annotated October 27 Transcripts

### *The Two Letters From Khrushchev*

Soviet Premier Khrushchev's first, private letter to President Kennedy on October 26 vaguely proposed a favorable deal: the Soviets would withdraw their missiles from Cuba in return for an American pledge not to invade the

island.<sup>1</sup> The transcript begins with the ExComm in consternation and initial confusion after having received Khrushchev's second, public, and more demanding letter. The letter demanded that American Jupiter missiles be removed from Turkey in exchange for removal of the Soviet missiles in Cuba. The members of the ExComm wonder which they should regard as the real Soviet offer. It is clear that all would prefer to reach an accord that does not include the appearance of trading the Jupiter missiles.

There ensues a wide-ranging discussion in which the President, believing that a trade of missiles will appear fair and reasonable to many observers, is confronted with arguments that such a trade might be very difficult and potentially very damaging to intra-NATO relations. Reasons are sought for believing in the efficacy of responding to the terms of the first letter while ignoring the second. The development of this response (nicknamed the "Trollope Ploy") can be traced in this transcript. The Trollope Ploy is endorsed by most ExComm members immediately, but the President initially resists. He believes it overlooks the wide public appeal of the missile trade proposed in the second letter from Khrushchev.

The ExComm discusses why two letters were received so quickly, one public and one private, with contradictory contents and conflicting messages. Llewellyn Thompson suggests that after Khrushchev sent the first letter, the Soviets may have become aware of a statement of Austrian Foreign Minister Bruno Kreisky, mentioning the possibility of a missile trade. Thompson suggests that either the Soviets interpreted the statement as a signal of American willingness to trade missiles, or the Soviets themselves put Kreisky up to it, then responded affirmatively to a "signal" they sent themselves. McGeorge Bundy suggests that the private Khrushchev proposal of the day before has been overruled by his harder-line colleagues in the Kremlin. Thompson suggests they may have been completely unaware of Khrushchev's earlier letter at the time it was sent.<sup>2</sup> After 25 years, however, the

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1. Encouraging signs had also emerged from an unofficial channel opened up by the Soviets the day before. Alexander S. Fomin, ostensibly a Counselor at the Soviet Embassy in Washington, but generally believed to be a high ranking officer of the KGB, had met with John Scali, State Department correspondent for ABC News, early in the afternoon at a Washington restaurant. Fomin had asked Scali whether he thought the U.S. would agree to a deal for ending the crisis that involved, in essence, a Soviet pledge to withdraw the missiles from Cuba and never to replace them, for an American pledge not to invade Cuba. Scali took this proposal to Dean Rusk, who sent him back to tell Fomin that the U.S. government would be interested in such a proposal, but also to tell him that time was getting short. See Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), pp. 217–19.

2. Marc Trachtenberg has recently advanced the hypothesis that shortly after the first Khrushchev letter was sent, the Soviets became aware of secret American diplomatic activity at the

mystery of the connection between the two discrepant Soviet letters is as deep as ever.

These opening pages of the transcript also suggest that the members of the ExComm feel an acute shortage of time.<sup>3</sup> Many students of the crisis have assumed that this sense of urgency appeared only when the ExComm learned that an American U-2 had been shot down over Cuba, but the sense of urgency is clear long before this news arrives. Possible reasons for it are suggested by the transcript: Adlai Stevenson's worry that Khrushchev's second letter, if not dealt with promptly, will cause the Americans to forfeit the peace initiative; the President's concern that the Turks may respond unilaterally to the Soviet proposal in a way that derails U.S. diplomatic efforts; and the fact that work is continuing at the Cuban missile sites day and night.<sup>4</sup>

JFK:<sup>5</sup> (Reading.) "Premier Khrushchev told President Kennedy yesterday he would withdraw offensive missiles from Cuba if the United States withdrew its rockets from Turkey."

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U.N. hinting that the U.S. might be amenable to a trade of missiles. Marc Trachtenberg in 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"], pp. 134-36.

3. On time-urgency see, e.g., Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1971), pp. 86-87; and Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 713-16.

4. Surprisingly, these factors are more related to diplomatic considerations than to strictly military ones such as the operational status of the Cuban missiles, the difficulty of maintaining the quarantine without incident, or the danger to American reconnaissance aircraft. See Scott D. Sagan, "Nuclear Alerts and Crisis Management," *International Security*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (Spring 1985), pp. 99-139.

5. Participants in the ExComm discussion are referred to as follows:

|            |   |
|------------|---|
| JFK:       | President John F. Kennedy                                     |
| RUSK:      | Dean Rusk, Secretary of State                                 |
| McNAMARA:  | Robert S. McNamara, Secretary of Defense                      |
| McCONE:    | John McCone, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency      |
| DILLON:    | Douglas Dillon, Secretary of the Treasury                     |
| BUNDY:     | McGeorge Bundy, Special Assistant for National Security       |
| RFK:       | Robert F. Kennedy, Attorney General                           |
| TAYLOR:    | Maxwell D. Taylor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff      |
| SORENSEN:  | Theodore C. Sorensen, Presidential Counsel                    |
| BALL:      | George W. Ball, Undersecretary of State                       |
| JOHNSON:   | U. Alexis Johnson, Deputy Undersecretary of State             |
| MARTIN:    | Edward Martin, Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America |
| GILPATRIC: | Roswell Gilpatric, Deputy Secretary of Defense                |
| NITZE:     | Paul H. Nitze, Assistant Secretary of Defense                 |
| LBJ:       | Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson                              |
| SALINGER:  | Pierre Salinger, Presidential Press Secretary                 |
| THOMPSON:  | Llewellyn Thompson, Special Advisor for Soviet Affairs        |

. . . .

VOICE: He didn't really say that, did he?

JFK: That may not be—he may be putting out another letter.

. . . .

JFK: That wasn't in the letter we received, was it?

VOICE: No. . . .

JFK: Is he supposed to be putting out a letter he's written me or putting out a statement?

SALINGER: Putting out a letter he wrote to you.

JFK: Let's just—uh—keep on going . . . .

. . . .

RUSK: Well, I think we better get—uh. . . . Will you check and be sure that the letter that's coming in on the ticker is the letter that we were seeing last night[?]

[The President and Secretary McNamara briefly discuss the intensity and frequency of American surveillance of the Soviet missile sites in Cuba. McNamara recommends additional night surveillance because the Soviets appear to be working at the sites day and night.]

RUSK: I really think we ought to have a talk about the political part of this thing, because if we prolong it more than a few days on the basis of the withdrawal of these missiles from Turkey—not from Turkey, from Cuba—the Turkish thing hasn't been injected into this conversation in New York and it wasn't in the letter last night. It thus appears to be something quite new.

[The President approves McNamara's plan for two daylight surveillance missions and one night mission. It is agreed that the order for the night mission is to be sent to the Pentagon at 6 p.m., unless interim developments dictate otherwise.]

JFK: I ought to have—In case this *is* an accurate statement, where are we with our conversations with the Turks about the withdrawal of these—

NITZE: Hare<sup>6</sup> says this is absolutely anathema, and as a matter of prestige and politics. George is ready with a report from Finletter.<sup>7</sup>

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6. Raymond Hare, U.S. Ambassador to Turkey.

7. Thomas K. Finletter, U.S. Ambassador to NATO.

- BALL:** Yeah, we have a report from Finletter, and we've also got a report from Rome on the Italians which indicates that that would be relatively easy. Turkey creates more of a problem. We would have to work it out with the Turks on the basis of putting a Polaris in the waters, and even that might not be enough according to the judgment that we've had on the spot. We've got a—we've got one paper on it already, and we're having more work done right now. It is a complicated problem, because these were put in under a NATO decision, and . . . .
- NITZE:** The NATO requirement involves the whole question as to whether we are going to denuclearize NATO, and I would suggest that what you do is to say that we're prepared only to discuss *Cuba* at this time. After the Cuban thing is settled we can thereafter be prepared to discuss anything— —
- JFK:** (Interrupting.) I don't think we can—if this an accurate—and this is the whole deal—we just have to wait—I don't think we can take the position— —
- BUNDY:** (Interrupting.) It's very odd, Mr. President, if he's changed his terms from a long letter to you and an urgent appeal from the Counselor [Fomin]<sup>8</sup> only last night, set in a purely Cuban context, it seems to me we're well within our—there's nothing wrong with our posture in sticking to that line.
- JFK:** But let's wait and let's assume that this is an accurate report of what he's now proposing this morning—there may have been changes over there . . . .
- BUNDY:** He—uh—I still think he's in a difficult position to change it overnight having sent you a personal communication— —
- JFK:** (Interrupting.) Well now let's say he has changed it. This is his latest position.
- BUNDY:** I would answer back saying I would prefer to deal with your—with your interesting proposals of last night.
- JFK:** Well now that's just what we ought to be thinking about. We're going to be in an insupportable position on this matter if this becomes his proposal. In the first place, we last year tried to get the missiles out of there because they're not militarily useful, number 1. Number 2, it's going to—to any man at the United Nations or any other rational man it will look like a very fair trade.

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8. Alexander S. Fomin, Counselor to the Soviet Embassy in Washington, D.C.



- NITZE: I don't think so. I don't think—I think you would get support from the United Nations on the proposition, "Deal with this Cuban thing." We'll talk about other things later, but I think everybody else is worried that they'll be included in this great big trade, and it goes beyond Cuba—
- RUSK: (Interrupting.) That's true of the Allies; it would not be true of the neutrals.
- BUNDY: No.
- . . . . .
- JFK: (Reading.) "A special message appeared to call for negotiations and both nations, Cuba and Turkey, should give their consent to the United Nations to visit their territories. Khrushchev said the Security Council of the Soviet Union was solemnly pledged not to use its territory as a bridgehead for an attack on Turkey, called for a similar pledge from the United States not to let its territory be used as a bridgehead for an attack on Cuba. . . ." Now we've known this was coming for a week—uh—we can't—it's going to be hung up here now. . . .
- . . . . .
- JFK: How much negotiation have we had with the Turks?
- RUSK: We haven't talked with the Turks. The Turks have talked with us—the Turks have talked with us in—uh—NATO.
- JFK: Well, have we gone to the Turkish government before this came out this week? I've talked about it now for a week. Have we had any conversation in Turkey, with the Turks?
- RUSK: We've asked Finletter and Hare to give us their judgments on it. We've not actually talked to the Turks.
- BALL: We did it on a basis where if we talked to the Turks, I mean this would be an extremely unsettling business.
- JFK: Well *this* is unsettling *now* George, because he's got us in a pretty good spot here, because most people will regard this as not an unreasonable proposal, I'll just tell you that. In fact, in many ways—
- BUNDY: But *what* most people, Mr. President?
- JFK: I think you're going to find it very difficult to explain why we are going to take hostile military action in Cuba, against these sites—what we've been thinking about—the thing that he's saying is, "If you'll get yours out of Turkey, we'll get ours out of Cuba." I think we've got a very tough one here.

BUNDY: I don't see why we pick that track when he's offered us the other track, within the last twenty-four hours. You think the public one is serious?

. . . .

JFK: Yeah. I think you have to assume that this is their new and latest position and it's a public one.

RUSK: What would you think of releasing the letter of yesterday?

(Pause.)

BUNDY: I think it has a good deal of virtue.

JFK: Yes, but I think we have to be now thinking about what our position's going to be on *this* one, because this is the one that's before us, and before the world.

(Short pause.)

SORENSEN: As between the *two* I think it clear that practically everyone here would favor the private proposal.

RUSK: We're not being offered the choice—we *may* not be offered the choice.

JFK: But seriously, there are disadvantages also in the private one, which is a guarantee of Cuba. But in any case this is now his official . . . we can release his other one, and it's different, but this is the one that the Soviet government obviously is going on.

NITZE: Isn't it possible that they're going on a dual track, one a public track and the other a private track; the private track is related to (words unclear), and the public track is one that's in order to confuse the public scene [and bring?] additional pressures.

JFK: Possible—

. . . .

THOMPSON: I think it's one that the Soviets take seriously.

RUSK: I think, yes, I think that the—uh—NATO—Warsaw Pact arms problem is a separate problem and ought to be discussed between NATO and Warsaw Pact. They've got hundreds of missiles looking down the throat of every NATO country. And I think this is—we have to get it into *that context*. The Cuba thing is a Western Hemisphere problem, an intrusion in the Western Hemisphere.

. . . .

NITZE: I think we ought to stand as much as we can on the separate stages.

VOICE: Absolutely. . . .

- NITZE: Fight the Turkish one with the best arguments we can. I'd handle this thing so that we continue on the real track which is to try to get the missiles out of Cuba pursuant to the private negotiation.
- BUNDY: The other way, it seems to me—if we *accept* the notion of a trade at this stage, our position will come apart very fast. It's a very difficult position. It isn't as if we'd got the missiles out, Mr. President. It'd be different. Or if we had any understanding with the Turks that they ought to come out, it would be different. Neither of these is the case.
- JFK: I'd just like to know how much we've done about it and how much did we talk about it—
- BUNDY: We decided *not* to, Mr. President. We decided *not* to play it directly with the Turks.
- RUSK: . . . our own representatives—
- BALL: If we talked to the Turks, they would take it up in NATO. This thing would be all over Western Europe, and our position would have been undermined.
- BUNDY: That's right.
- BALL: Because immediately the Soviet Union would know that this thing was being discussed. The Turks feel very strongly about this. They—uh—we persuaded them that this *was* an essential requirement, and they—they feel that it's a matter of prestige and a matter of real—
- . . . .
- BUNDY: In their own terms it would already be clear that we were trying to sell our allies for our interests. That would be the view in all of NATO. It's irrational, and it's crazy, but it's a *terribly* powerful fact.
- THOMPSON: Particularly in the case that this is a message to the U.N., to U Thant. It seems to me we ought to get word to [U.N. Ambassador Adlai] Stevenson that if this is put up there he should immediately say we will not discuss—discuss the Turkish bases.
- BUNDY: The problem is Cuba. The Turks are not a threat to the peace. . . .
- JFK: I think it would be very desirable to tell (word unclear) that until we get time to think about it, this thing—the fact of the matter is that we received a letter last night from Khrushchev with an entirely different proposal. Therefore we first ought to get clarification from the Soviet Union of what they're talking, at least give us—as I say you're going to find a lot of people think this a rather reasonable condition.

- JFK: (Reading bits from something.) "Besides he must guarantee not to intervene in Turkey and we must do the same in Cuba. . . ." Well, we know what the problem is there.
- RUSK: Well, I think that it's relevant here to be able to say that we support the declaration of Iran that they would not accept foreign missiles in Iran. The Turkish problem is a NATO–Warsaw Pact problem, and it's an arms problem between these two groups that is something for these two groups to talk about with *each other* as a problem of disarmament with respect to NATO and the Warsaw Pact.
- (Pause.)
- DILLON: Well, there's also this thing of upsetting the status quo, and we did not upset it in Iran. . . .
- JFK: He's put this out in a way that's caused maximum tension and embarrassment. It's not as if it was a private proposal, which would give us an opportunity to negotiate with the Turks. He's put it out in a way that the Turks are bound to say they don't agree to this. . . .
- . . . . .
- JFK: Until we have gotten our position a little clearer we ought to go with this—uh—last night business so that that gives us about an hour or two, we don't have Khrushchev—
- RUSK: (Interrupting.) There's nothing coming in yet on *our* tickers. I—
- JFK: He says he'd like to consider the following statement be issued—this is Stevenson—(reading) "The United States does not have any territorial designs against Cuba, but of course we cannot tolerate Soviet-Cuban aggression against us or our sister republics. [We welcome?] the Soviet offer to withdraw weapons in Cuba [in exchange for ?] assurance of our peaceful intentions towards Cuba. In the meantime it is imperative that further developments of Soviet bases stop and discussions proceed with the Secretary General of the United Nations in New York." Governor Stevenson recommends that such a statement be made in order to prevent the Soviets from capturing the peace offensive. Governor Stevenson also recommends that we not consider the Turkish offer as reported in the attached Reuters dispatch as an alternative or an addition to the Khrushchev proposal in his letter. I think that—uh—we ought to go at—we ought to get a statement *ready* which will—uh—I'm not sure that—which would—uh—these references to *last night's*—back on that, number one. Number two something about the work on the bases stopping while we're going to have a chance to discuss these matters. I don't know *what* we're going to say on the Turkish matter.

THOMPSON: Khrushchev may have picked up the statement which [Bruno] Kreisky, the Austrian Foreign Minister, made day before yesterday—has made and which he may think was inspired by *us*, in which he raised the question of Turkish [missiles ?]—

VOICE: Of course, maybe the Russians got Kreisky to do it, too.

. . . .

RUSK: And if we publish the letter of last night, Tommy, what other letters will get published[?]. . . .

THOMPSON: I think probably this—uh—whole exchange, this refers—uh—starting with this crisis—this refers to the previous letters. It starts out by saying, “I received your letter.” I’ve got the feeling that if you have someone explaining the situation, you have to publish the exchange.

JFK: I don’t know. You perhaps don’t have to put out the letter as much as you do the three proposals or so.

. . . .

RFK: The first point being that this—uh—this question of Cuba and the [missiles ?] must be resolved within the next few days; it can’t wait. The negotiations and discussions must—uh—get on, and the work that is continuing despite our protests has been going on. So therefore it’s got to be resolved quickly. Uh—this action that has been taken is not an action just by the United States but is an action by all of the Latin American countries *plus* the United States. This has *nothing* to do with the security of the countries of Europe, which do have their own problems. Uh—we would—uh—obviously consider negotiating the giving up of bases in—uh—Turkey if we can assure the—uh—Turks and the other European countries for whom these bases were emplaced that there can be some assurances given to them for their own security. This will entail inspection as we anticipate that there will be some inspection in Cuba and in the United States—uh—at the time that these bases are withdrawn from Cuba and we give assurances that we are not going to invade Cuba. Something along those lines.

. . . . (A new message reported arriving.)

RFK: I don’t see how we can ask the Turks to give up their defense. . . . unless the Soviet Union is also going to give up their—uh—

VOICE: . . . weapons.

MCNAMARA: Not only the weapons, but agree not to invade Turkey—

. . . .

MCNAMARA: . . . and allow inspection to ensure that they haven’t.

**RFK:** We would be glad for it. . . . We think that's a very good point made by the Russians, and we would be glad to—and we finally feel that this is a major breakthrough and we would be glad to discuss that. In the meantime this is a threat to the United States and not just that—to all of Latin America and let's get that done.

. . . . [The President leaves the room.] . . . .

**MCNAMARA:** Dean, how do you interpret the addition of still another condition over and above the letter that came in last night? We had one deal in the letter, and now we've got a different deal. And—uh—in relation— . . . . How can we negotiate with somebody who changes his deal before we even get a chance to reply and announces publicly the deal before we receive it?

**BUNDY:** I think there must have been an overruling in Moscow.

**VOICE:** What does Tommy say?

. . . .

**THOMPSON:** [First we received?] a long letter last night he wrote himself.

**RUSK:** And was that sent out without clearances?

**THOMPSON:** Without clearances, yes.

. . . .

**MCNAMARA:** It completely changes the character of the deal we're likely to be able to make, and also therefore our action in the interim. So I [suggest that we?] really keep the pressure on [them?] . . . .

**BUNDY:** This should be knocked down publicly. A private—let me suggest this scenario—we knock this down publicly in the way we've just described, separating the issues, keeping attention on Cuba, and the four-point reply that Bob has framed.<sup>9</sup> Privately we say to Khrushchev, "Look—uh—your public statement is a very dangerous one because—uh—it makes impossible immediate discussion of your private proposals and requires us to proceed urgently with the things that we have in mind. You'd better get straightened out."

**VOICE:** This is exactly what I'd say.

**MCCONE:** I think that's exactly right.

**VOICE:** And we release the fact that there was the other letter?

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9. "Bob" or, subsequently, "Bobby" refers to RFK.

- BUNDY: No, we don't. I guess we say we are reluctant to release this letter which would display the inconsistency in your position, but we don't have very much time.
- MCNAMARA: The point, Bobby, is he's changed the deal. . . . Before we even got the first letter translated, he added a completely new deal and he released it publicly. . . .
- RFK: What is the advantage? I don't know what—where you are in twenty-four hours from now—uh—so we win that argument but what twenty-four hours—
- MCNAMARA: We incorporate a *new* deal in *our* letter.  
. . . .
- RFK: Now the problem is going to be—uh—not just this fact that we have this exchange with him . . . . but the fact that he's going to have a ploy publicly that's going to look rather satisfactory at present. How are we going to have *him* do anything but take the ball away from us publicly, if we don't—if we just write him a letter[?]
- BUNDY: [We'll have] to surface his earlier message, Bobby—
- RFK: *All* of that. I think that we're going to have to, in the next three or four hours, not just put the ball completely in—uh—in his hands and allow him to do whatever he wants. We have an exchange with him and say he's double-crossed us, and we don't know which deal to accept, and then he writes back, and in the meantime he's got all the play throughout the world. . . .
- MCNAMARA: Just turn it down publicly.
- RFK: Yeah, but I think that's awful tough—  
. . . .
- MCCONE: I don't think you can turn that down publicly without—uh—referring publicly to his letter of yesterday.
- RFK: I'd like to have the consideration of my thoughts. . . . He's offered this deal—. . . . that he will withdraw the bases in Cuba for assurances that we don't intend to invade. We've *always* given those assurances. We will be glad to give them again. He said, in his letter to me, he said that we were to permit inspection. Obviously that entails inspection not only of Cuba but entails inspection of the United States to ensure that we're not—by United Nations observers—to ensure that we're not getting ready to—uh—invade. Now this is one of the things U Thant—the bases in Cuba—uh—involve—uh—the security of the Western Hemisphere. This is not just a question of the United States. This is a question of all the Latin American countries, which have all

joined together in this effort. Time is running out on us. This must be brought to fruition.—uh—The question of the Turkish bases, we think that's excellent, that you brought that up, and that—uh—that—uh—there should be disarmament of the Turkish bases, but that has nothing to do with the security of the Western Hemisphere. It *does* have to do with the security of Turkey, and we would be happy, and we're sure the Turks would be, of making a similar arrangement in Turkey. We will withdraw the bases from Turkey if—uh—and allow [for ?] inspection of Turkey to make sure we've done that, and you withdraw your invasion bases of—uh—of the Soviet Union and permit inspection there.

[The President has re-entered the room, apparently during preceding RFK remarks.]

VOICE: I think it's too complicated, Bobby.

RFK: Well, I don't think it is.

JFK: Wait, just, it seems to me the first thing we ought to try to do is not let the Turks issue some statement that's wholly unacceptable. So that before we've even had a chance to get our own diplomacy the first thing it seems to me we ought to emphasize is that. . . . But they've given us several different proposals in twenty-four hours. And work's got to stop today, before we talk about *anything*. At least then we're in a defensible position. The other thing is to not have the Turks making statements, so that this thing—Khrushchev puts it out and the next thing the Turks say they won't accept it. Then whatever we do in Turkey—in Cuba—it seems to me he has set the groundwork to do something in Turkey. So I think we ought to have the Turks—we ought to have a talk with the Turks because I think they've got to understand the peril that they're going to move in the next week. When we take some action in Cuba, the chances are that he'll take some action in Turkey, and they ought to understand that. And in fact he may even come out and say that. . . . he's tried to be fair and if we do any more about Cuba then he's going to do it to Turkey. So I think the Turks ought to think a little. . . . We ought to try to get them not to respond to this till we've had a chance to consider what action we'll take. Now how long will it take to get in touch with the Turks?

### *The Standstill Agreement and the Problem of the Two Different Audiences*

As the discussion progresses, we see the quandary into which the American government felt itself thrown by the second letter from Khrushchev. The President veers off in one direction, while many of his senior advisors take quite a different tack. The fundamental problem they face in choosing a



response to Khrushchev is phrased in the following section by McGeorge Bundy as the problem of their “two different audiences.” The President has in mind the United Nations audience or world opinion. He returns again and again to the *prima facie* reasonableness of the proposal in the second, public, letter from Khrushchev—especially the idea of trading NATO missiles in Turkey for Soviet missiles in Cuba. The President, in fact, seems throughout much of the early discussion to assume that there is no way the Soviets are going to remove their missiles without the benefit of some such trade.

The President’s senior advisors, notably McGeorge Bundy, have in mind a different audience: the governments of the NATO alliance. As Paul Nitze has said, the mere suggestion of appearing to trade away the security of our NATO ally, Turkey, in order to solve an American local problem in the Caribbean, is “absolutely anathema” to the Turks. Bundy, obviously speaking for several others, believes that any such trade might lead to a precipitous and general weakening of NATO, with long-term disastrous consequences.<sup>10</sup> The President wants a standstill agreement; he believes it represents an offer that will play well in the court of world opinion. The President’s advisors, it appears, have nothing against a standstill agreement *per se*, only the implication given by the President that it is a precursor to a public trade of missiles. This isn’t a debate between a dove and several hawks, but a discussion about which particular political problem is central: that arising from the U.N. because the U.S. does not trade, or that deriving from NATO if it does. At this stage, the solution to the problem of how to respond to Khrushchev is still far from obvious.

[A discussion has been initiated by Rusk, joined by JFK, McNamara and Bundy, regarding some technical details of the custody arrangements of the NATO missiles in Turkey. The discussion turns to how to respond to the two conflicting proposals from Khrushchev, during which the President begins to arrive at what is, for him, the key requirement of any agreement: that work on the missile sites in Cuba be stopped.]

JFK:                    Now let’s—uh—I would think the first thing we have to do is to—as I say, rather than get into the details—the fact that work is going on

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10. One must be careful to make neither too much nor too little of the differences at this stage between the President and his advisors. One may be tempted, for example, to revise the revisionist thesis and argue, on the basis of this transcript, that a dovish President is pulling his reluctantly hawkish advisors along toward a trade. But this conclusion overestimates and misidentifies their differences.

is the one defensible public position we've got. They've got a very good card. This one is going to be very tough, I think, for us. It's going to be tough in England, I'm sure—as well as other places on the continent—we're going to be forced to take action, that might seem, in my opinion, not a blank check but a pretty good check to take action in Berlin on the grounds that we were wholly unreasonable. Most think—people think that if you're allowed an even trade you ought to take *advantage* of it. Therefore it makes it much more difficult for us to move with world support. These are all the things that—uh—why this is a pretty good play of his. That—uh—being so—uh—I think that we—the only thing we've got *him* on is the fact that now they've put forward varying proposals in short periods of time, all of which are complicated, and under that shield this work goes on. Until we can get some un—agreement on the cessation of work, how can we possibly negotiate with proposals coming as fast as the wires can carry them [?]

BUNDY: And the ships are still moving. In spite of his assurances to U Thant his ships still— —

JFK: I don't think we ought to emphasize the ships. . . .

DILLON: There's one other—uh—very—might be a very dangerous sentence in this thing that no one has particularly mentioned, but it's a thing I've been afraid of all along on a Cuban trade, and it's where he says, "How are we to react when you have *surrounded* our country with bases about which your military speak demonstratively?" That opens up our whole base system— —

JFK: I thought he pinned it to Turkey, though.

DILLON: Oh no. Then he goes *on* and says that, but he's left it open to. . . . say it's—uh— —

JFK: It . . . the direct phrase suggests it's Turkey.

THOMPSON: Mr. President, it's larger than the missiles, because he says "the means which you consider aggressive" which—this could include planes, the presence of technicians, and everything else. That means the real abandonment of our base in Turkey. . . .

BUNDY: Yeah, obviously that's subject to various shades. He could take missiles for missiles, which wouldn't be good enough from our point of view because it's [unique?] to Cuba. It would be tough anyway.

JFK: It would be tough for three weeks (words unclear) because the problem is if the work on their bases stops, that's in my opinion our defensible position.

MCNAMARA: Stop the (words unclear) the operability of it—uh—

. . . .

MCNAMARA: I would certainly put that in the same message. It isn't enough to stop work on a base that's already operable.

JFK: We've got to—now let's see now—let's see what Stevenson's suggesting. . . .

VOICE: I don't think it's a strong line to suggest the *peculiar* ways of debating (words unclear). It's going to look to the public as though we're confused.

JFK: Well no, the only thing that I'm trying to suggest is all these proposals come; they're all complicated, and what they can do is hang us up in negotiations on different proposals while the work goes on.

NITZE: That looks like a rationalization of our own confusion. I think you've got to take a firmer line than that.

BUNDY: I myself would send back word, by Fomin, for example, that last night's stuff was pretty good; *this is impossible*, at this stage of the game, and that time is getting very short.

JFK: What's our public position?

BUNDY: Our public position is as you outlined it, but I think that it's very important to get *them* to get the message that they—if they want to stop something further in Cuba, they have to do better than *this* public statement.

[The President then asks to speak with Adlai Stevenson on the telephone. After a brief discussion about the precise number of Jupiters in Turkey, the President speaks with Stevenson and solicits his views on how to respond to the two Soviet proposals. (The tape did not record Stevenson's end of the conversation.) The President then, for the first time, brings Berlin into the discussion.]

JFK: What about our—what about our putting something in about Berlin?

DILLON: Well that's (words unclear) if you start talking about Cuba and about Turkey, and then you talk—

JFK: Let's get it out of this problem, then we might as well I mean just decide on sand in *his* gears for a few minutes.

VOICE: In what way?

JFK: Well, satisfactory guarantees for Berlin.

(Pause.)

JFK: That's not any good. I'm just trying to cope with what the public problem is about—because everybody's going to think that this is very reasonable.

[Dillon and Rusk agree emphatically: Berlin ought not to be brought into the discussion, and the matter is dropped. There follows a lengthy discussion of the precise wording of the letter in preparation to Acting U.N. Secretary General U Thant. Various portions of drafts are read aloud and criticized. Two interruptions occur, one from George Ball who is apparently working on a draft reply to the Soviets, and one from Maxwell Taylor, who reports that U.S. reconnaissance planes have drawn fire over Cuba. The President then puts a hold on the night-flight draft previously approved, and Rusk discusses possible public remarks regarding an American U-2 that has strayed off course over the Soviet Union. The President then returns to the draft to U Thant.]

JFK: I think we've got two questions. One is, do we want to have these conversations go on, on Turkey and these other matters while there's a sort of standstill in Cuba, or do we want to say that we won't talk about Turkey and these other matters until they've settled the Cuban crisis[?] I think these are [the main?] questions. And I don't think we're going to get there—they're not going to—now that they've taken the public position obviously they're not going to settle the Cuban question until they get [s]ome compensation in Cuba (sic). That being true, I think the best position now, with him and publicly, is to say we're glad to discuss this matter and this whole question of verification and all the rest once we get a positive indication that they've ceased their work in Cuba. Otherwise—uh—what we're really saying is "We won't discuss Turkey till they settle Cuba," and I think that he will then come back and say the United States has refused his offer, and I don't think that's as good a position as saying we're glad to discuss his offer if we can get a standstill in Cuba. That puts us in a much stronger world position because most people will think his offer is rather reasonable. I think we ought to put our emphasis right now on the fact that we want an indication from him in the next twenty-four hours that he's going to stand still and disarm these weapons. Then we'll say that under *those* conditions we'll be *glad* to discuss these matters. But I think that if we don't say that he's going to say we rejected his offer, and therefore he's going to have public opinion with him. So I think our only hope to escape from that is to say that we insist that he stand still. Now we don't think he'll do that, and therefore we're in much better shape to put our case on that rather than that Turkey's irrelevant. . . . Yeah, I think we ought to say "if" his proposal. (Reading.) "The proposal made by the Soviet Union broadcast"—this would be to the Secretary General—"this morning involved

a number of countries and complicated issues not directly related to the existing threat to peace posed by Soviet offensive missile bases in Cuba. The United States would be glad to discuss this matter with you and others after consultation with the members of NATO, whose interests are also involved. The discussions required for any peaceful settlement of these other matters, however, will require time for consultation with the countries whose interests—uh—with these countries and cannot be undertaken by this country until it is assured that work on these bases in Cuba has halted and the bases themselves are inoperable. I therefore request with the utmost urgency that you seek such assurances from the Soviet Union in order that negotiations can go forward." Anybody object to that?

VOICE: No it's fine.

JFK: OK, we'll send that, now. You want to ask Adlai to deliver it right away and ask for an answer, don't you think?

VOICES: ("I'll get that off" among them.)

VOICE: The only question I'd like to raise about that is that while really it sets Turkey as a quid pro quo—

VOICE: That's my worry about it.

JFK: Well, the negotiations. The point is—the point is that we're not in a position today to make the trade. That's number one. And we won't be—maybe—may in three or four days, I don't know, we have to wait and see what the Turks say. We don't want to be—we don't want the Soviet Union or the United Nations to be able to say that the United States rejected it. So I think we're better off to stick on the question; freeze, and then we'll discuss it—

BUNDY: Well there are two (words unclear) different audiences here, Mr. President, there really are, and I think that if we sound as if we wanted to make this trade, to our NATO people and to all the people who are tied to us by alliance, we are in *real* trouble. I think that—we'll all join in doing this if it's the decision, but I think we should tell you that that's the universal assessment of everyone in the government that's connected with these alliance problems.

RFK: Well now what reports did you get from Chip Bohlen,<sup>11</sup> saying that?

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11. Charles E. Bohlen, newly-appointed Ambassador to France.

**BUNDY:** That the knockdown in this White House statement this morning was well received.<sup>12</sup> Finletter's report is in. Hare's long telegram is in. They all make the same proposition, that if we appear to be trading our—the defense of Turkey for the threat to Cuba we—we will—we just have to face a radical decline in the—

**JFK:** Yes, but I should say that also, as the situation is moving, Mac, if we don't for the next twenty-four or forty-eight hours, this trade has appeal. Now if we reject it out of hand and then have to take military action against Cuba, then we also face a decline. Now the only thing we've got for which I would think we'd be able to hold general support would be—well let's try to word it so that we *don't* harm NATO—but the thing that I think everybody would agree to—while these matters, which are complicated, *are* discussed, there should be a cessation of work. Then I think we can hold general support for that. If they don't agree to that, the Soviet Union, then we retain the initiative. . . .

*The Prospect of War and the Elements of a Way Out*

The President directs attention to what he regards as the consequences of failing to agree to the Soviet offer to trade missiles: if a standstill agreement is not reached, and no trade takes place, then the United States will be forced to attack Cuba. The result will probably be a Soviet counteroffensive—perhaps the seizure of West Berlin or a counter-attack on the Turkish missiles, or both. The President does not believe the NATO allies understand that war is imminent and that if war comes in Cuba, they will stand vulnerable to a Soviet attack, all because they were reluctant to trade off a few obsolete missiles in Turkey. The President seems to believe that he cannot get his trade without a NATO meeting, that such a meeting is unlikely to support a trade in any event, that the Soviets will therefore continue working on the missile sites and thus that the U.S. must, bereft of any other diplomatic options, destroy the missile sites before they are completed. He wants this communicated to the NATO allies: without a trade, the risk of war that escalates from Cuba to Europe is unacceptably high.

Two very different reactions are provoked by the President's dark and blunt portrayal of the situation, both motivated quite clearly by the wish to

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12. Bundy here refers to the "White House Statement on Soviet Proposals," October 27, 1962, in which the U.S. acknowledged getting "several inconsistent and conflicting proposals . . . made by the USSR within the last twenty-four hours." See David L. Larson, *The "Cuban Crisis" of 1962*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1986), pp. 186–87.

avoid a war. McNamara first proposes defusing the Jupiters in Turkey and increasing coverage by Polaris submarines near Turkish shores to protect the Turks in the event of an American attack on Cuba. A different but eventually complementary line is developed by RFK, Bundy and Edward Martin: RFK suggests a step-wise approach, in which the standstill is agreed upon first. After work on the missile sites is stopped, the U.S. can consult with the NATO allies about a trade, perhaps involving a Polaris component. Martin and Bundy suggest that the U.S. in effect simply say “thank you” to the first Khrushchev letter after releasing it publicly via U Thant. But the President is not initially receptive to this proposal. By now he seems convinced that without a public trade on the terms of the second Soviet letter, war is very likely.<sup>13</sup>

With the benefit of hindsight it can be seen that almost all of the elements of the eventual solution are present: the desire to avoid war; the awareness that the concept of “trading” missiles might be open to several different, somewhat looser constructions; and the proposal somehow just to say “thank you” to the first Khrushchev letter. But a crucial element is still lacking: The President does not yet believe that the Soviets will, in effect, say “you’re welcome.” Thus Bundy suggests that, lacking an agreement, the U.S. ought seriously to consider tightening the quarantine rather than going immediately to war.

[The discussion has concerned drafting a “standstill-then-negotiate” letter to U Thant for approximately 30 minutes in the President’s absence. Upon his return, the letter to U Thant is approved for release at 6 p.m. The President then speaks with Gen. Lauris Norstad, Supreme Allied Commander (SACEUR) of NATO, who suggests that the President call a meeting of the NATO council the following morning (Sunday, October 28). The discussion concludes with Ball’s prediction that the NATO ministers would reject any U.S. plan for a negotiated trade, thus further constraining U.S. options.]

JFK: I don’t think the alternative’s been explained to them. You see they just think it’s a continuation of the quarantine. They don’t have any notion that we’re about to *do* something. That’s got to be on them.

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13. Despite the President’s pessimistic mood at this stage, neither he nor anyone in the room expresses enthusiasm for attacking Cuba. This is a far cry from the discussion as it has often been portrayed, sometimes by the participants themselves, as a fight between hawks and doves, between those seeking war and fearing no retaliation and those fearing war and expecting retaliation and escalation. Rather, each participant seems to be working mightily and, often quite creatively, to find a way to a diplomatic solution to the crisis.

You see that hasn't been explained to NATO. I'm not going to get into *that* before they do something.

DILLON: If you have a Council meeting you'll probably get a *strong* reaction from a great many of the members of NATO against our taking any action in Cuba. They say, "Don't trade," but they also say, "Don't do anything in Cuba."

VOICE: Exactly.

. . . .

MCNAMARA: Mr. President, I wonder if we should not take certain actions with respect to the Jupiters in Turkey and Italy *before* we act in Cuba. If we decided to take that action with respect to the Jupiters in Turkey and Italy before we acted in Cuba, then we could *tell* NATO that at the time we talked to them about this proposal from Khrushchev and our response to it. If we act in Cuba, the only way we can act now is with a full attack. I don't think we can make any limited attacks when they're shooting at our reconnaissance aircraft because we would—we would not dare to go in with the kind of limited attack that we've been thinking about the last twenty-four hours without taking out their SAM-sites. The moment we take out the SAM-sites and the MiG airfields we're up to the [deleted] sortie program. If we send [deleted] sorties in against Cuba, we must be prepared to follow up with an invasion in about [deleted] days. If we start out on that kind of a program, it seems to me the Soviets are very likely to feel forced to reply with military action some place, particularly if these missiles—Jupiter missiles—are still in Turkey. We might be able to either shift the area in which they would apply their military force or give them no excuse to apply military force by taking out the Turkish Jupiters and the Italian Jupiters before we attack Cuba. One way to take them out would be to simply develop a program of bilateral negotiations between Turkey, Italy and the U.S. saying that we are today defusing the Jupiters in those two countries and replacing them with Polaris submarines stationed off the shores of those nations to carry the same targets the Jupiters were directed to in order to reduce the risk to those two nations but maintain the full defense of NATO. Now if we were willing to undertake—first place, I think that kind of action is desirable prior to invasion of Cuba. In the second place, if we're willing to decide to do that, we're in a much better position to present this whole thing to NATO.

BALL: What would be the reaction if the Soviet Union was to reply that they were going to maintain three atomic submarines off the United States coast?



- MCNAMARA: . . . We've already detected three submarines off the U.S. coast in the last forty-eight hours. Now they—as far as we know they don't carry missiles, but that's just happenstance.
- VOICE: The Turks won't take them out, will they?
- MCNAMARA: I think, I think we could, first place we can tell them. . . .
- JFK: If we took them out, we'd get the trade the Russians have offered us. If we take them out, they'll take them out.
- MCNAMARA: Well, I think we have to say to the Turks we're going to cover the targets with Polaris missiles.
- JFK: Yes, but I think, if we're going to take them out of Turkey they say they'll take them out of—
- BUNDY: It's one thing to stand them down, Mr. President, in political terms, it's one thing to stand them down as a favor to the Turks while we hit Cuba, and it's quite another thing to trade them out.
- MCNAMARA: But what we could do is unilaterally, unilaterally—bilaterally with Turkey we would agreed to defuse them and replace them with Polaris. Then we'd go back to the Soviet Union and say, "Now the threat is there—the threat is gone, you don't have to worry about that; we're going back to your letter of last night, and this is the proposal we make. We agree not to invade, you agree to take your . . . ." Turkey is gone.
- BUNDY: It could lead the Soviet Union (words unclear) to come back to the next problem. (Voices unclear.)
- RFK: If you made an offer—up there now—and you also ask U Thant to find an answer to this, now if U Thant should come back and say, number 1, that they're going to continue to work [on the missile sites?], in which case I suppose we have to move in some way, or they're going to say that they're going to discontinue the work on the bases. Uh—they say they're going to discontinue the work on the bases, they can either accept our proposal, or they can reject the proposal and say we still want Turkey for Cuba. If they reject the proposal and say they want Turkey for Cuba but they're going to discontinue the work on the bases, *then* I would think would be the time to have—bring NATO in and say, "This is the proposal. Do you want to consider it?" We haven't lost anything, and they've discontinued the work on the bases. Uh—if they say they're going to continue the work on the bases, I think then we've got to decide whether—if they have said by tomorrow morning they're going to continue the work on the bases—whether we should have a military strike. . . . I think if you have a meeting of NATO tomorrow morning—uh—I don't see that that's going to—I

think it's going to shoot this other possibility which U Thant has suggested, of going forward with this letter and seeing if we can trade the non-invasion of Cuba for this, and I think we're keeping the pressure on, we don't look like we're weakening on the whole Turkey complex. I mean I don't see that you're losing anything by not having a meeting tomorrow morning, except the fact—I admit you're risking something, because some of the allies are going to say you're out of your mind—

BUNDY: I would prefer to let Finletter find out for a day what people think. . . .

JFK: It's going to be—You see, they haven't had the alternatives presented to them. They'll say, "Well God, we don't want to trade them off." They don't realize that in two or three days we may have a military strike which could bring perhaps the seizure of Berlin or a strike on Turkey, and then they'll say "By God we should have taken it." So when the time—the crucial time comes, obviously we want it, now the question is whether it's tomorrow morning or Monday morning. . . .

MCNAMARA: I think the point is related to the strike. If tomorrow we don't have a favorable answer from U Thant or Khrushchev to this message that's going out now, is it important to strike tomorrow or do we have some more time. If we have some more time, then you can still have the NATO meeting. It would seem to me the NATO meeting ought to be held before the strike. If it's necessary to strike tomorrow, there ought to be a NATO meeting tomorrow morning.

RFK: May I just say—what if he says, "We're going to discontinue the work on the bases and we going to—uh—we're going to make the missiles inoperative, and we'll work out with you United Nations supervision," that could take three weeks to just work that problem out there. And then what are we doing for—

MCNAMARA: If he said he's going to discontinue work on the bases and he's willing to make them inoperative, we carry on surveillance—

RFK: And we continue the—uh—the—

MCNAMARA: The blockade.

RFK: The blockade. . . .

MCNAMARA: That's a good course of action—

RFK: He's in bad shape.

MCNAMARA: No, that's an excellent course of action which I don't believe *he's* going to accept. The probability is he won't say he'll stop work on the bases, and we're faced with a decision tomorrow what to do.

RFK: Yeah, but of course we're in—before the world we're in much better shape.

THOMPSON: It would seem to me that we ought to surface all of this correspondence including this letter. He broke his proposal before you got it, and I'd do the same thing. Then you've got the world—the attention of the world focused back on Cuba and Latin America and the fact that work there is not [being stopped?] and this makes it I think much tougher for him go to ahead. . . .

JFK: What I'm concerned about is that NATO—Norstad said that the BBC radio and TV said that there's no connection and that there's going to be a lot of tough talk in New York; he's saying that they all said it and they're going to say it in Paris—there's no connection. They don't have a—they don't realize that—what's coming up.

RUSK: On the other hand, Mr. President, if NATO seems solid on this, this has a chance of shaking Khrushchev off this point.

MARTIN: Suppose that we give him a letter which is addressed to his letter of yesterday and ask U Thant to release them both—he's the fellow to release them—and then he releases correspondence which consists really of an offer from Khrushchev and we—we come back and write.

BUNDY: "Thank you."

MARTIN: Perhaps we'll say, "thank you, yes." And it doesn't *mention* Turkey. Then it seems to me that—

BUNDY: He's in a difficult position.

. . . . .

JFK: Well, I think that he'd probably just say that the work's going on, that we're not going to take these—that we're *not* interested in this deal, then I think we're going to have to do *something*—I don't think he has to say that it is—but the escalation is going to go on, and we think this is very likely, that there would be some reprisal against possibly Turkey and possibly against Berlin, and we should be aware of that. What we don't want is to have a cheap turndown by them, without realizing that the turndown puts *us* in the position of then having to do something. What we're going to be faced with is—because we wouldn't take the missiles out of Turkey, then maybe we'll have to invade or make a massive strike on Cuba which may lose *Berlin*. That's what concerns me.

. . . .

RUSK: Mr. President, here's one other variation here that Mr. Foster<sup>14</sup> has given some thought to, and that is that we say that the missiles in Cuba and the missiles in Turkey be turned over to the U.N. for destruction and that the—uh—nuclear defense of NATO, including Turkey, is provided by other means. An actual disarmament step, send them off for destruction on both sides.

THOMPSON: The Soviets don't want to let anybody get at them, and see what their technology is.

VOICE: Take them out.

JFK: I think that—uh—the real problem is what we do with the Turks first.

VOICE: Yeah.

JFK: If we follow Secretary McNamara, what we're going to do is say to the Turks—which they're bound to think is—uh—under Soviet pressure, we want to get your missiles out of there.

MCNAMARA: Well what I'd say—what I'd say to the Turks: "Look here, we're going to have to invade Cuba. You're in mortal danger. We want to reduce your danger while at the same time maintaining your defense. We propose that you defuse those missiles tonight. We're putting Polaris submarines along your coast. We'll cover the same targets that your Jupiter missiles did, and we'll announce this to the world before we invade Cuba and thereby would reduce the pressure on the Soviet Union to attack you, Turkey, as a response to our invasion of Cuba." Now this is what I would say to the Turks.

RFK: Now, then they say—uh—what if the Soviet Union attacks us anyway[?] Will you use the missiles on the nuclear submarines?

MCNAMARA: Then I think, before we attack Cuba I think we've got to decide how we'll respond to Soviet military pressure on NATO, and I'm not prepared to answer the question.

. . . .

BUNDY: Well we haven't tried the block—the enlargement of the blockade. We haven't even thought about it for some hours, and it's been on my mind a good deal. POL<sup>15</sup> we still have to—

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14. William C. Foster, Director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency.

15. "POL" refers to petroleum, oil and lubricants. Bundy is suggesting that the ExComm may want to add these items to the list of items restricted by the quarantine.

*Approval of the Trollope Ploy*

In the first major turning point of the discussion, the President is at length led by some ExComm members to wonder whether it is absolutely necessary to trade missiles publicly in order to resolve the crisis peacefully. At the conclusion of this sequence the President approves the Trollope Ploy.

First, Bundy and Sorensen argue that the President ought to consider a private response to the first, acceptable Khrushchev letter. For the time being, this idea seems to lay fallow mainly because whether the response is private or public seems to the President secondary to his belief that the terms of the second offer, requiring the missile trade, are necessary to any resolution of the crisis. But this belief is powerfully challenged in a pivotal exchange with Thompson:

JFK: . . . we're going to have to take our weapons out of Turkey . . . .

Thompson: I don't agree, Mr. President, I think there's still a chance that we can get this line going.

JFK: He'll back down?

Thompson: Well, because he's already got this other proposal which he put forward. . . . The important thing for Khrushchev, it seems to me, is to be able to say "I saved Cuba, I stopped an invasion. . ."

Not that Thompson convinces the President easily. In fact, the President appears never to have quite believed that a deal could be struck with Khrushchev on the basis of the non-invasion pledge alone. But Thompson's forthright contradiction of one of the President's fundamental assumptions prompts increased insistence by RFK, Bundy and Sorensen that Thompson might be right. Finally, the President agrees and so the Trollope Ploy is on its way to becoming policy.<sup>16</sup>

VOICE: There's nothing strange (words unclear) different bargain—

THOMPSON: Mr. President, if we go on the basis of a trade which I gather is— somewhat in your mind, we end up, it seems to me with the Soviets still in Cuba with planes and technicians and so on even though the

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16. It appears that the reluctance of the President to forego the trade and embrace the Trollope Ploy was also due to his keen awareness of the price of being wrong. The President Kennedy who emerges from this transcript has a sense that if his advisors are wrong, if the Soviets *do* require a missile trade, and if the U.S. fails its chance at such a trade and has to go to war, the trade will retrospectively increase in attractiveness and in proportion to the destructiveness of the resulting war.

missiles are out, and that would surely be unacceptable and put you in a worse position—

JFK: Yeah, but our technicians and planes and guarantees would still exist for Turkey. I'm just thinking about what—what we're going to have to do in a day or so, which is [deleted] sorties and [deleted] days, and possibly an invasion, all because we wouldn't take missiles out of Turkey, and we all know how quickly everybody's courage goes when the blood starts to flow, and that's what's going to happen in NATO, when they—we start these things, and they grab Berlin, and everybody's going to say, "Well that was a pretty good proposition." Let's not kid ourselves that we've got—that's the difficulty. Today it sounds great to reject it, but it's not going to, after we do something.

NITZE: There are alternatives. One of them is to tell [the NATO allies?] that this is going to result in an attack by them some place. . . . The other alternative is to make a blockade, total. . . .

[A brief discussion ensues about how to prevent a premature public response from the NATO allies regarding a missile trade.]

JFK: Norstad just feels that no matter what we do, there's going to be—we've got to have NATO have a hand on this thing or otherwise we'll find no matter—if we take no action or if we take action—they're all going to be saying we should have done the reverse—and we've got to get them with us. Now the question really is—two or three—two questions—first, whether we go immediately to the Turks and see if we can work out some—see if they're receptive to the kind of deal which the Secretary talked about. If they're *not* receptive then we ought to go to the general NATO meeting because the NATO meeting may put enough pressure on them. (Pause.) I just tell you I think we're better off to get those missiles out of Turkey and out of Cuba, because I think the way of getting them out of Turkey and out of Cuba is going to be very grave . . . and very bloody, one place or another.

(Mixed voices.)

NITZE: The Turks will not take them—will not agree to take them out except under NATO pressure.

DILLON: I don't see any point in talking to the Turks (words unclear) you have to do it through NATO.

BUNDY: Well, I'm not sure—because I think—let's speculate with this, Mr. President. If you have that conviction, and you are yourself sure that—uh—this is the way we want—the best way out—then I would say that an immediate personal telegram . . . was the best thing to do.

JFK: Well, I don't think we accept it. What I think you'd have to do is get the Turks to agree—accepting it over their opposition and over NATO opposition I think *would* be—I'd rather go to the total blockade route, which is a lesser step than the military action. What I'd like to do is have the Turks and NATO *equally* feel that this is the wise move.

SORENSEN: I wonder, Mr. President, inasmuch as your statement this morning does give some answer to the public statement of the Soviets, whether we can't defer this for twenty-four or forty-eight hours while we try the private letter route in answer to his private letter of last night. There's always a chance that he'll accept that. . . . We meanwhile would [not?] have broken up NATO over something that never would have come to NATO.

[Rusk then reads aloud the text of a letter drafted by Stevenson as a possible response to Khrushchev. Stevenson argues that the standstill in Cuba is a prerequisite to a discussion of issues, such as those involving NATO and the Warsaw Pact. The letter is discussed at length, with JFK concluding that Khrushchev probably will reject it.]

JFK: It seems to me what we ought to—to be reasonable. We're not going to get these weapons out of Cuba, probably, anyway. But I mean—by negotiation—we're going to have to take our weapons out of Turkey. I don't think there's any doubt he's not going to [retreat?] now that he made that public, Tommy, he's not going to take them out of Cuba if we—

THOMPSON: I don't agree, Mr. President, I think there's still a chance that we can get this line going.

JFK: He'll back down?

THOMPSON: Well, because he's already got this other proposal which he put forward—

JFK: . . . . Now this other public one, it seems to me, has become their public position, isn't it?

THOMPSON: This is, maybe, just pressure on us, I mean, to accept the other, I mean so far—

. . . .

THOMPSON: The important thing for Khrushchev, it seems to me, is to be able to say "I saved Cuba, I stopped an invasion," and he can get *away* with this, if he wants to, and he's had a go at this Turkey thing, and that we'll discuss later. And then, and that discussion will probably take—

JFK: All right, what about at the end of this, we use *this* letter and say, "will be a grave risk to peace. I urge—urge you to join us in a rapid

settlement of the Cuban crisis as your letter (word unclear) suggests, and (words unclear). The first ingredient, let me emphasize, for any solution is a cessation of the—uh—work and the possibility [of verification?] under reasonable standards”—I mean I want to just come back to that. Otherwise time—uh—slips away on us.

(Pause. Words unclear and mixed voices.)

SORENSEN: In other words, Mr. President, your position is that once he meets this condition of the—uh—halting of the work and the inoperability, you're then prepared to go ahead on either the specific Cuban track or what we call the general détente track.

JFK: Yeah, now it all comes down—I think it's a substantive question, because it really depends on whether we believe that we can get a deal on just the Cuban—or whether we have to agree to his position of tying. Tommy doesn't think we do. I think that having made it public how can he take these missiles out of Cuba . . . if we just do nothing about Turkey.

. . . . .

THOMPSON: The position, even in the public statement, is that this is all started by our threat to Cuba. Now he's removed that threat.

RFK: He *must* be a *little* shaken up or he wouldn't have sent the message to you in the first place.

JFK: That's last night.

[A lengthy discussion develops again concerning the content of the draft letter to Khrushchev sent to the ExComm by Stevenson. Rusk reads the successive drafts. Finally, RFK objects that the Stevenson draft is unusable because it is too "defensive." RFK recommends that the letter leave out Turkey altogether, for now.]

BUNDY: You've got to give him [Khrushchev] something [in the way of assurances].

JFK: What?

BUNDY: You've got to give him something to get him back on this track.

RFK: Well, can't you say, "Like I've said publicly before" [?]

. . . . .

JFK: Governor Stevenson's version—he likes his draft so much better. He's going to have to conduct it. I don't see that there's a substantive difference about it. Do you?

RFK: I think there is.

JFK: Why?



**RFK:** Because I think, one, it's just in general terms, rather defensive, and it just says we don't want to get in—please don't [get] into discussion of NATO, or Turkey, because we want to talk about Cuba. The other one says, "You made an offer to us, and we accept it," and you've also made a second offer which has to do with NATO, and we'll be glad to discuss that at a later time. The other first letter—of Adlai—I don't think says anything, I don't think we're any further along, except we don't like you—what you said.

(Pause.)

**SORENSEN:** It may be possible to take [some?] elements of his, [and] part of ours.

**RFK:** I wouldn't repeat about the NATO thing twice. . . . You've got it once, twice. I think it sounds rather defensive about this has really thrown us off by the fact that you've brought this thing up. I think we just say he made an offer, we accept the offer, and it's silly bringing up NATO at this time, based on whatever . . . . explanations. . . .

**JFK:** What is the reason Adlai's unhappy about our first letter?

. . . . .

**JFK:** Well we can't—I'll tell you—

**SORENSEN:** I tell you, Mr. President, I think Adlai—I think if we could take our letter, introduce some of the elements of his letter in the last part of it, that might do it. I'm not sure how yet.

**RFK:** Why do we bother you with it? Why don't you guys work it out and—

. . . . .

**JFK:** I think we ought to move. I don't—there's no question bothering me, I just thing we're going to have to decide which letter we send—

**RFK:** Why don't we try to work it out without you being able to pick—

(Prolonged laughter.)

**JFK:** The one you're going to have to worry about is Adlai, so you might as well work it out with him.

(Laughter—louder.)

**SORENSEN:** Actually I think Bobby's formula is a good one. Does it sound like an ultimatum if we say, "we are accepting your offer in your letter last night and therefore there's no need to talk about these other things" [?]

. . . . .

**JFK:** As I say, we're not going to—he's not going to—now Tommy isn't so sure, but anyway, we can try this thing, but he's going to come back,

I'm certain, but the only thing is I don't want him—that's why we've got to end—*end* with saying, whatever we're going to do, that we've got to get a cessation of work.

BUNDY: That's right, but I think that Bobby's notion of a concrete acceptance on our part of how we read last night's telegram is very important—

. . . .

JFK: In other words you want to—you have to get them to say we accept your proposal.

### *The Shoot-down of the U-2*

Late in the afternoon of October 27, we move into what some recall being the most dramatic hours of the Cuban missile crisis. The discussions take on an unmistakable urgency, as Taylor reports that low-flying American reconnaissance aircraft have encountered anti-aircraft fire, probably from Cuban-controlled batteries. There is general agreement with Taylor's assessment that 24-hour surveillance is absolutely necessary at this stage. But in the face of anti-aircraft fire from the Cubans, McNamara argues, "we have to put a cover on"—that is, provide protection for the reconnaissance aircraft. He then presents the President with his options: limited fire at the offending anti-aircraft batteries the next day (Sunday), or go in the following day (Monday) and destroy all the batteries. The President thinks the latter course will be necessary, although he postpones the decision a day to determine whether a general pattern is developing or whether the fire just encountered was an aberration.

The ExComm next receives news that Major Anderson's U-2 has been shot down over Cuba. This has been generally believed to be the single most significant event of the missile crisis, so frightening and sobering to the American leadership that they sought and found a way to resolve the crisis peacefully less than 24 hours later.<sup>17</sup> The U-2 shoot-down posed difficult questions: the SAMs in Cuba were believed to be under control of the Soviets, unlike the anti-aircraft batteries which were controlled by Cubans. Did this mean that the tougher, second letter from Khrushchev was only part of a plan to rush the Americans to the brink, or over it, and that such a plan

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17. For a fuller discussion of the importance of the U-2 shootdown, see David A. Welch and James G. Blight, "The Eleventh Hour: An Introduction to the ExComm Transcripts," *International Security*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Winter 1987/88) pp. 19–22.

henceforth included *Soviet* attacks on American aircraft over Cuba? If the Americans bombed the SAM sites which existed solely to protect the missile sites, would the Soviets use nuclear missiles against the continental United States? Would they attack in Europe, where their military power was dominant?<sup>18</sup>

TAYLOR: Mr. President, the Chiefs have been in session during the afternoon on—really the same basis as we have over here. This is—the recommendation they give is as follows: that the big strike—OP Plan 3-12—be executed no later than Monday morning the 29th unless there is irrefutable evidence in the meantime that offensive weapons are being dismantled and rendered inoperable; that the execution of the Strike Plan be part of the execution of 3-16, the Invasion Plan, [deleted] days later.

(Pause.)

RFK: That was a surprise.

(Laughter.)

TAYLOR: It does look now from a military point of view. . . . They just feel that the longer we wait—

DILLON: Well, also we're getting shot at. . . .

[The President then dispatches RFK to speak with Adlai Stevenson about the content of the just-drafted reply to the first Khrushchev letter. An inconclusive discussion ensues regarding whether to approach the Turks directly, explaining that it might be in their interest to consider relinquishing their Jupiter missiles, or whether to try to put additional pressure on them by going through the NATO Council.]

TAYLOR: . . . . Flak came up in front of the flight, and they—they veered away.

. . . .

MCNAMARA: . . . . Let's put it this way. We had fire on the surveillance. Now the first question we have to face tomorrow morning is, are we going to send surveillance flights in? And I think we have basically two alternative[s]. Either we decide not to send them in at all or we decide to send them in with proper cover. If we send them in with proper cover

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18. The standard account of the U-2 shoot-down in RFK's *Thirteen Days* gives the very distinct but, on the evidence of this transcript, quite misleading impression that the U-2 shoot-down precedes the discussion and Presidential approval of the Trollope Ploy, when in fact, considerably before the news of the shoot-down, it is RFK himself who is sent out to communicate to Stevenson the contents of the reply to Khrushchev's first letter.

and they're attacked, we must attack back, either the SAMs and/or MiG aircraft that come against them, or the ground fire that comes up. We have another problem tomorrow—the *Graznyy* approaching the zone—we sent out a message today outlining the interception zone which was publicly released. . . . Well, we sent it to U Thant and it's released publicly. The *Graznyy* will be coming into the zone. Khrushchev has said he is ordering his ships to stay out of the zone. If a Russian ship moves into the zone after he's said that publicly, we have two choices: stop it and board it, or don't. Now when you—

VOICE: Stop it.

MCNAMARA: When you put the two of these together—the question of—you know stopping surveillance and not stopping the ship—it seems to me we're too weak—

VOICE: Yeah, yeah.

TAYLOR: I'd say we must continue surveillance. That's far more important than the ship.

MCNAMARA: Well—uh—my main point is I don't think at this particular point we should—uh—show a weakness to Khrushchev, and I think we would show a weakness if we—if we failed on both of these actions.

TAYLOR: And we must not fail on surveillance. We can't give up twenty-four hours at this stage.

MCNAMARA: All right, I fully agree, Max. I was just trying to lay out the problem. Therefore I would recommend that tomorrow we carry on surveillance, but that we defer the decision as late as possible in the day to give a little more time because if we go in with surveillance, we have to put a cover on, and if we start shooting back, we've escalated substantially.

JFK: When would you shoot—

DILLON: [Put a] cover on? I don't understand.

MCNAMARA: Well, we can't send these low—we can't send these low-altitude aircraft in. . . .

JFK: If you're going to take a reprisal—the cover isn't much good because you've got anti-aircraft guns. You've got somebody up there at 10,000 feet and actually they can't give much more cover—what you'd really—seems to me—have is a justification for a more elaborate action, wouldn't you? Do we want to worry about whether we're going to shoot up that one gun, or do we want to—just—uh—use this as a reason for doing a lot of other—

. . . .

TAYLOR: The main thing is to assure effective reconnaissance. Whether that—what that implies, we won't know really till we—

. . . .

JFK: I would think we ought to take a chance on reconnaissance tomorrow, without the cover, because I don't think cover's really going to do you much good. You can't protect—well—hide them from ground fire . . . tomorrow, and you don't get an answer from U Thant, then we ought to consider whether Monday morning we—we—uh—I'm not convinced yet of the invasion because I think that's a much—I think we may—

TAYLOR: I agree with that. My personal view is that we . . . [must be?] *ready* to invade but make no advance decision on that.

MCNAMARA: Well, I doubt—

JFK: -- I don't think the cover's going to do much good.

MCNAMARA: No, I—I fully agree. I don't think you should stop the surveillance tomorrow. That I want to underline. Point number two is, if we carry on a surveillance tomorrow, and they fire on it—

TAYLOR: Now that's a big one—then we know—

MCNAMARA: Then I think we ought to either do one of two things. We ought to decide at that moment we're either going to return that fire, tomorrow, but in a limited fashion against the things that fired against us, or against their air defenses, or, alternatively, if we *don't* return the fire tomorrow, we ought to go in the next day with (words unclear) sorties. One or the other.

. . . .

JFK: I'm rather inclined to think that the more general response—However, why don't we wait. Let's be prepared for either one tomorrow—let's wait and see whether they fire on us tomorrow. Meanwhile we've got this message to U Thant—and we're—so let's be well prepared.

DILLON: We've got to be very clear then that—uh—if we're doing this tomorrow, and they do shoot weapons, and then we do need to have the general response, there's no time to do what you're talking about with Turkey, and then we—

JFK: That's why I think we ought to get to that. I think what we ought to do is not worry so much about the cover, do the reconnaissance tomorrow. If we get fired on, then we meet here, and we decide whether we do a much more general . . . *announce* that the work is going

ahead, *announce* that we haven't got an answer from the Soviets, and then we decide that we're going to do a much more general one than just shooting up some gun down there.

[The discussion then shifts once again to the problem of how to deal with the Turks and the prospect of a trade of Turkish missiles for Cuban missiles. Various approaches are suggested that may make the Turks more amenable to a missile trade, such as emphasizing how obsolete the Jupiters are and how much more secure the Turks will be if the Jupiters are replaced by Polaris. Finally, RFK and Bundy point out that any decision on the Turks is difficult at this stage because no one knows whether the Soviets will yet agree to the American proposal, just drafted, that omits the trade entirely. RFK recommends waiting for a response from Khrushchev before trying to decide the question of how to persuade the Turks.]

RFK: What is the rush about this other than the fact that we have to make— —

MCNAMARA: I think the rush is what do we do— —

VOICE: The U-2.

MCNAMARA: The U-2 is shot down—the fire against our low-altitude surveillance— —

RFK: U-2 shot down?

MCNAMARA: Yes . . . . it was found shot down.

RFK: Pilot killed?

TAYLOR: It was shot down near Banes which is right near a U-2 (sic) site in Eastern Cuba.

VOICE: A SAM-site.

TAYLOR: The pilot's body is in the plane. Apparently this was a SAM-site that had actually had the energy. . . . It all ties in in a very plausible way.

. . . .

JFK: This is much of an escalation by them, isn't it?

MCNAMARA: Yes, exactly, and this—this relates to the timing. I think we can defer an air attack on Cuba until Wednesday or Thursday, but *only* if we continue our surveillance and—and—uh—fire against anything that fires against the surveillance aircraft, and only if we maintain a tight blockade in this interim period. If we're willing to do these two things, I think we can defer the air attack until Wednesday or Thursday and *take* time to go to NATO— —

JFK: How do we explain the effect—uh—this Khrushchev message of last night and their decision, in view of their previous orders, the change

of orders? We've both had flak and a SAM-site operation. How do we—I mean that's a—

MCNAMARA: How do we interpret this? I know—I don't know how to interpret—  
. . . .

TAYLOR: They feel they must respond now. The whole world knows where we're flying. That raises the question of retaliation against the SAM-sites. We think we—we have various other reasons to believe that we know the SAM-sites. A few days ago—

JFK: How can we put a U-2 fellow over there tomorrow unless we take out *all* the SAM-sites?

MCNAMARA: That's just exactly—in fact, I don't think we can.  
. . . .

TAYLOR: . . . . It's on the ground—the wreckage is on the ground. The pilot's dead.

MCNAMARA: In the water, isn't it?

TAYLOR: I didn't get the water part.

BUNDY: If we know it, it must be either on friendly land or on the water.

VOICE: It is on Cuban land. (Words unclear.)

TAYLOR: That's what I got. . . .

MCCONE: I wonder if this shouldn't cause a most violent protest . . . . a letter right to Khrushchev. Here's, here's an action they've taken against—against us, a new order in defiance of—of public statements he made. I think that—

VOICE: I think we ought—

VOICE: They've fired the first shot.

MCCONE: If there's any continuation of this, we just take those SAM-sites out of there.  
. . . .

VOICE: Isn't this what we told the NATO people we'd do?

VOICE: Yes we told . . . .

BUNDY: You can go against one. Can you, now, tonight?

MCNAMARA: No, it's too late. This is why it gets into tomorrow, and I—without thinking about retaliation today, what are we going to do if we want to defer the air attack to Wednesday or Thursday?

. . . .

TAYLOR: It would be very dangerous, I would say, Mr. Secretary, unless we can reconnoiter—reconnoiter each day. . . .

MCNAMARA: And if we're going to [do?] reconnaissance, carry out surveillance, each day, we must be prepared to fire each day.

JFK: We can't very well send a U-2 over there, can we, now? And have a guy killed again tomorrow?

TAYLOR: We certainly shouldn't do it until we retaliate and say that if they fire again on one of our planes, that we'll come back with great force.

VOICE: I think you've just got to take out that SAM-site, you can't (word unclear) with them.

JFK: Well, except that we've still got the problem of—even if you take out *this* SAM-site—the fellow still is going to be awfully vulnerable tomorrow from all the others, isn't he?

VOICE: . . . . If you take *one* out . . . .

MCNAMARA: I think we can forget the U-2 for the moment—

. . . .

RUSK: It builds up, though, on a somewhat different plane than the all-out attack plan.

MCNAMARA: We can carry out low-altitude surveillance tomorrow, take out this SAM-site, and take out more SAM-sites tomorrow and make aircraft (words unclear).

JFK: Well now, do we want to announce tonight that this U-2 was shot down?

MCNAMARA: I think we should.

. . . .

GILPATRIC: Earlier today, Mr. President, we said any interference with such surveillance will meet counteraction and surveillance will—

JFK: Do we want to announce we're going to take counteraction or just take it tomorrow morning?

VOICE: Take it . . . .

JFK: The U-2 was shot down?

GILPATRIC: No, no. This general statement that we would enforce surveillance.



JFK: Well now do we want to just announce that an American plane was shot down? A surveillance plane was shot down in Cuba? It seems to me that's been--

VOICE: I would announce it after you've taken . . . .

TAYLOR: Well in a sense Havana has announced it, that's where we--

JFK: Well, I think *we* ought to announce it because it shows off--

VOICE: Havana announced it--

. . . . .

JFK: We haven't confirmed that, have we?  
(Pause.)

JFK: There are so goddam many—we could take it all day if—well let's say if we're sure the U-2's been shot down it seems to me we've got to announce it—it's going to dribble out. Havana's announced it anyway. You ought to announce it--

VOICES: Yeah.

JFK: Then we ought to not say anything, don't you think, and just take the reprisal without making any announcement. We don't want to announce that we're going to take a reprisal against that SAM-site tomorrow or would that make our reprisal more difficult?

VOICE: It would certainly make it more difficult.

JFK: I think we ought to announce that—uh—that—uh—action is being taken—action will be taken to protect our fliers.

MCNAMARA: Exactly. Then we ought to go in at dawn and take out that SAM-site, and we ought to send the surveillance aircraft in tomorrow with the regular flights early in the morning, and we ought to be prepared to take out more SAM-sites and knock out the--

JFK: Well what we ought to do then is get this announcement written. . . . Ros, why don't you write this out, plus this thing about what we're going to do, and then we'll get back to what we're going to do about the Turks. . . .

MCNAMARA: Well I think he was shot coming in.

RUSK: The map I have showed him the other way round.  
. . . .

RFK: In addition there was one other shooting at the low level.

VOICE: Where was that, Bob?

MCNAMARA: I haven't the detail.

. . . .

TAYLOR: They started the shooting.

JFK: Well now, we're going to get out an announcement and . . . . we're going to say that – uh – (pause).

MCNAMARA: We're going to say it was shot down and we're going to continue our surveillance protected by U.S. fighter aircraft –

DILLON: Suitable protection.

. . . .

MCNAMARA: I'd just say fighter aircraft so there isn't any doubt about it. . . .

RFK: Tomorrow morning add POL?

MCNAMARA: I wouldn't do it tonight, Bobby, I'd just announce this one. Tomorrow morning we ought to go in and take out that SAM-site and send our surveillance in with proper protection, immediately following it or on top of it, or whatever way. . . .

TAYLOR: . . . . The plane is on the ground and not in the water.

VOICE: In Cuba.

. . . .

VOICE: We must put it out. Otherwise they will put it out.

VOICE: We don't know.

JFK: It's overdue anyway isn't it, so we assume –

TAYLOR: Hours overdue.

JFK: Do we want to say it's shot down? We don't know—do they say it's been shot down? The Cubans? Well why doesn't Ros—and you, General—get a statement which would cover in any case. It may be—we don't know it was shot down.

VOICE: We don't know it.

MCNAMARA: I think—uh—I think I'd say it was shot down. The probabilities are that it *was* shot down, and we want an excuse to go in tomorrow and shoot up that SAM-site and send in our –

DILLON: If the plane's on the ground there, it was shot down. I think it didn't just come down.

. . . .

JFK: The only point is, the only thing that troubles us is the other plane was shot at.

MCNAMARA: That's right, exactly.

JFK: They say—uh—that's why I'd like to find out whether Havana says they did shoot it down.

VOICE: We don't have anything from Havana yet, do we?

VOICE: We assume these SAM-sites are manned by Soviets.

VOICE: That's the significant part if it *is* the SAM-site.

. . . . .

MCNAMARA: This is a change of pattern, now why it's a change of pattern we don't know.

RFK: Yeah.

VOICE: The important thing to find out if we possibly can is whether this was a SAM-site.

MCNAMARA: There's no way to find out. What we know is that that particular SAM was the one that had the . . . . radar . . . . which was required for control of the missiles.

VOICE: Would we know whether it's in operation?

MCNAMARA: And it was in operation, we believe, at the same time that the U-2 was over. We checked it this morning. . . .

JOHNSON: It's a very different thing. You could have an undisciplined anti-aircraft—Cuban anti-aircraft outfit fire, but to have a SAM-site and a Russian crew fire is not any accident.

. . . . .

JFK: I think we ought to—why don't we send an instruction to Hare to have a conversation, but also have the NATO meeting? And say to them what's happening over here. Otherwise we're going to be carrying a hell of a bag.

DILLON: I think we're going to have such pressure internally in the United States too, to act quickly . . . .

JFK: . . . . That's why I think we'd better have a NATO meeting tomorrow. . . . Explain the thing, where we are—uh—I'm just afraid of what's going to happen in NATO, to Europe, when we get into this thing more and more, and I think they ought to feel that they've a

part of it. Even if we don't do anything about the Turks, they ought to feel that they know . . . .

[The discussion then returns to a consideration of the Turkish missile problem. A consensus appears to form, led by McNamara, that the Turks are to be told forthrightly that their Jupiter missiles ought to be defused in order to help prevent Soviet retaliation in the event of an American attack on Cuba. The President expresses concern that any such arrangement will be viewed by NATO as a trade of missiles, but Bundy points out that such a perception is unavoidable. The President then asks for a NATO meeting the following afternoon to consider the matter, although no decision is reached about what, exactly, to tell the Turks.]

### *Refocusing on Cuba*

President Kennedy is absent from all but the very end of the discussion that follows. One can see by his absence how controlling and decisive he has heretofore been. McNamara takes charge of the meeting and proposes a verbal exercise: what will happen if the Soviets do not agree to remove the missiles in return for a non-invasion pledge, and a missile trade cannot be consummated? He argues that, since these failures would almost certainly mean an American attack on Cuba, leading to war, a letter ought to be sent immediately to the Turks and to all the NATO governments explaining that the Turkish missiles are being defused, in order to reduce the likelihood of a Soviet counter-attack on Turkey.<sup>19</sup>

Most of the other ExComm members appear to miss McNamara's point.<sup>20</sup> The point is that if the U.S. attacks Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba, and the Soviets respond against our NATO ally in Turkey, we very likely will find ourselves in a catastrophic nuclear war. The focus of McNamara's attention is out on the horizon, if all diplomatic initiatives have failed, and an attack on Cuba is imminent. What can be done now, to avoid a nuclear war at that point? McNamara's blunt appraisal brings the prospect of nuclear war for the first time into the center of the discussion. The Strategic Air Command is on full nuclear alert and this state of extreme readiness for all-out war is

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19. See the discussion in Welch and Blight, "The Eleventh Hour," p. 16, n.35.

20. In a recent interview, McNamara expressed himself this way: "If you keep your mind focused on the potential adverse consequences in a situation like the Cuban missile crisis, then inad-vertence and the risk of escalation will concern you a lot. It's got to. You must focus first and foremost on the *possible* catastrophe and see to it that you do nothing to raise the risk of its occurrence." Interview with James G. Blight and David A. Welch, May 21, 1987, Washington, D.C.

itself, as McNamara says, "damned dangerous". His argument is a proposal for a contingency plan, to be undertaken if all else fails, to deal with the *possibility* of escalation to nuclear war.

The effect of McNamara's exercise is evidently quite electrifying. Many ExComm members appear to believe that McNamara is saying that war, nuclear war, is becoming increasingly *probable*. This misunderstanding generates several pointed exchanges. A telling index both of the degree to which McNamara has struck the fear of uncontrollable nuclear war into the ExComm, and of the importance of the President's absence, is that Ball and McCone express very directly their disregard for NATO sensibilities regarding the missile trade.

McNamara never says he believes it is too late to trade, but he suggests that the prospects are dim for the letter currently on its way to Khrushchev. His reason: he has re-read the first Khrushchev letter and discovered to his astonishment that it is "twelve pages of—of fluff." Nowhere in it does Khrushchev say precisely that he will remove Cuban missiles in exchange for a non-invasion pledge from the U.S. However, the message received simultaneously through the Scali-Fomin connection erased the ambiguity perceived by McNamara.

Against this background of awareness of nuclear danger, and the complementary pessimism about the prospects for the diplomatic response to Khrushchev, Llewellyn Thompson makes another critical contribution to the discussion. Toward the end of the President's absence, Thompson expresses his belief that the growing pessimism over the prospects for the Trollope Ploy is unwarranted, premature, and possibly harmful. Thompson is concerned that the Soviets may get wind of American-generated discussions within NATO about trading missiles.

When the President re-enters the room, Ball, McCone and McNamara are apparently away drafting letters, Ball and McCone to Khrushchev, McNamara to NATO. Bundy notes that wide differences of opinion exist in the ExComm and calls on Thompson to lay out the situation. Thus Thompson's view is the first to inform the President. Thompson explains why he believes they ought to stick with the diplomatic response to Khrushchev's first letter which is, as he points out, "centered on Cuba." Give it a chance to work, he argues, before sending out any more letters to anyone. The President agrees. Thus Thompson, with a strategic assist from Bundy, appears to have buoyed up the President's confidence sufficiently to give the Trollope Ploy a chance to work, at a time when several of the others were ready to assume

it would fail. Thompson refocused the President on a solution to the *Cuban* missile crisis, while others were out of the room trying to head off a *Turkish* missile crisis.

MCNAMARA: This is the point. If we attack in Cuba, we don't say this publicly before we've attacked—

DILLON: Just a few hours before we attack and then we attack. . . .

LBJ: What you're saying is if you're willing to give them up, as McNamara proposes, why not trade?

. . . .

MCNAMARA: Let me start my proposition over again.

VOICE: And save a few hundred thousand miles.

MCNAMARA: Let me start my proposition over again. We must be in a position to attack, quickly. We've been fired on today. We're going to send surveillance aircraft in tomorrow. Those are going to be fired on without question. We're going to respond. You can't do this very long. We're going to lose airplanes, and we'll be shooting up Cuba quite a bit, but we're going to lose airplanes every day. So you just can't maintain this position very long. So we must be prepared to attack Cuba—quickly. That's the first proposition. Now the second proposition. When we attack Cuba we're going to have to attack with an all-out attack, and that means [deleted] sorties at a minimum the first day, and it means sorties every day thereafter, and I personally believe that this is almost certain to lead to an invasion, I won't say certain to, but *almost* certain to lead to an invasion—

DILLON: Unless you get a cease-fire around the world—

MCNAMARA: That's the second proposition.

BUNDY: Or a general war.

MCNAMARA: The third proposition is that if we do this, and leave those missiles in Turkey the Soviet Union *may*, and I think probably will, attack the Turkish missiles. Now the fourth proposition is, *if* the Soviet Union attacks the Turkish missiles, we *must* respond. We *cannot* allow a Soviet attack on the—on the Jupiter missiles in Turkey without a military response by NATO.

THOMPSON: Somewhere.

MCNAMARA: Somewhere, that's right. Now, that's the next proposition.

. . . .

VOICE: Frankly, I don't—

MCNAMARA: Well, I've got a—why don't I get through—then let's go back and attack each one of my propositions. Now the minimum military response by NATO to a Soviet attack on the Turkish Jupiter missiles would be a response with conventional weapons by NATO forces in Turkey, that is to say Turkish and U.S. aircraft, against Soviet warships and/or naval bases in the Black Sea area. Now that to me is the absolute minimum, and I would say that it is *damned dangerous* to—to have had a Soviet attack on Turkey and a NATO response on the Soviet Union. This is extremely dangerous. Now I'm not sure we can avoid anything like that, if we attack Cuba, but I think we should make every effort to avoid it, and one way to avoid it is to defuse the Turkish missiles *before* we attack Cuba. Now this . . . . this is the sequence of thought . . . .

VOICE: Why you don't make the trade then?

. . . .

BALL: I would say that in the assumption that if you defuse the Turkish missiles that saves you from a reprisal, it may—may mean a reprisal *elsewhere*.

MCNAMARA: Oh, I think it doesn't save you from a reprisal.

. . . .

BALL: I think you're in a position where you've gotten rid of your missiles for *nothing*.

MCNAMARA: Well, wait a minute. I didn't say it saved you from a reprisal. I simply said it reduced the chances of military action against Turkey.

BALL: Well, but what good does that do you [in the event of?] action against Berlin, or somewhere else[?]

. . . .

MCNAMARA: You have to go back in my proposition and say if there aren't Jupiter missiles in Turkey to attack, they're going to employ military force elsewhere. I'm not—I'm not at all certain of that.

BALL: Oh, I am.

LBJ: Bob, if you're willing to give up your missiles in Turkey, you think you ought to . . . . why don't you say that to him and say we're cutting a trade—make the trade there? . . . . save all the invasion, lives . . . .

. . . .

VOICE: The State Department . . . . we talked about this, and they said they'd be *delighted* to trade those missiles in Turkey for the things in Cuba.

MCNAMARA: I said I thought it was the realistic solution to the problem.

LBJ: Sure.

. . . .

LBJ: What we were afraid of was he'd never offer this, but what he'd want to do was trade. . . . *Berlin*.

. . . . .

MCNAMARA: I'm not opposed to it, now, all I'm suggesting is, don't push us into a position where we *haven't* traded it and we *are* forced to attack Cuba, and the missiles remain in Turkey. That's all I'm suggesting. Let's avoid that position. We're fast moving into that.

BALL: Well, but I—

. . . .

BUNDY: We were going to *let* him have his strike in Turkey, as I understood it last week . . . . at one point at least that was the way we talked about it.

. . . .

MCNAMARA: Yeah, that's right. That was one alternative.

BALL: What—actually, what we were thinking last week was that what he was doing was. . . . We thought that if we could trade it out for Turkey this would be an easy trade and a very advantageous deal. Now we've—uh—made that offer to him . . . . And then we don't want it, and we're talking about a course of action which involves military action with enormous casualties and a great—a great risk of escalation. Now I—I really don't think this is—we ought to shift this one.

MCNAMARA: Well, why don't we look at *two* courses of action[?]

. . . .

VOICE: Let's see what consequence George draws.

BALL: Well. I would far rather—if we're going to get the damned missiles out of Turkey *anyway*, say, we'll trade you the missiles, we're going to put Jupiters—I mean we're going to put Polaris in there, you're not going to benefit by this—but *we will*, if this is a matter of *real* concern to you, to have these on your borders, all right, we'll get rid of them, you get rid of them in Turkey—in, in Cuba. These things are obsolete



anyway—I mean . . . you're not going to reduce the retaliatory power of the NATO Alliance.

. . . .

VOICE: You put Polaris in there, it's going to be a lot bigger.

BALL: Yeah.

. . . .

MCNAMARA: Well, I think you have two alternatives.

. . . .

BUNDY: I missed your statement: I have to ask you to say it again.

BALL: I'd say, sure, we'll accept your offer. If this is a matter of grave concern to you, and you equate these things, which we don't but if you do, ok, we can work it out. We're going to put Polaris in the Mediterranean because you've got the whole seas to range in, and we can't keep you out of the ocean—

BUNDY: And what's left of NATO?

BALL: I don't think NATO is going to be wrecked, and if NATO isn't any better than that, it isn't that good to us.

DILLON: What happens to the missiles in Cuba over the next three weeks, while this is going on?

BALL: Well, I mean, if you do this, you do it on the basis of an *immediate* trade and they immediately—

VOICE: And surveillance[?]

BALL: And surveillance.

. . . .

VOICE: What you do, with the Turks and NATO, you go through the propositions that Bob has outlined here.

MCNAMARA: Let me suggest this: let's get the message ready on the assumption that either the Soviet[s] don't want a trade or we don't want a trade, one or the other, and hence the trade route of Jupiters in Turkey for missiles in Cuba is not acceptable, and therefore we're going to attack Cuba. Now, let's follow that and get a message written on that basis. Before we attack Cuba we're going to reduce the danger to Turkey to a minimum.

. . . .

BUNDY: I'd like to see *both* of these messages written. . . . I think they both need to be written.

MCNAMARA: But Mac, this other course will in a sense be that, so—let's get first the message written on the assumption that—

BALL: [Someone should?] write that. And I'll go write the other.

. . . . .

RFK: . . . . I think it's worth while.

. . . . .

BUNDY: You want to write one, or do you want me to draft it or what do you want to do[?] I'll get a draft.

. . . . .

VOICE: Who's it to, Bob?

MCNAMARA: Well, it's going to go to three parties. It's going to go to the Turks, to the heads of government of NATO countries, and the North Atlantic Council—same message in effect.

(Pause.)

VOICE: Do people want dinner downstairs, or on trays, or do you want to wait?

VOICE: Let's wait . . . .

MCNAMARA: We probably ought to think about the course of action in the next two or three days, what we're going to [do?]. Max is going back to work out the surveillance problem for tomorrow with the Chiefs and see how much cover we need and so on. So we're just going to get shot up sure as hell. There's no question about it. We're going to have to go in and shoot. We can carry this on I would think a couple of days, maybe three days, possibly even four. But we're going to lose planes. We had eight planes going out today. Two aborted for mechanical reasons. Two went through safely and returned, and four ran into fire.

. . . . .

MCCONE: You know, it seems to me we're missing a bet here. I think that we ought to take this case to—send directly to Khrushchev by fast wire the most violent protest, and demand that he—that he stop this business and stop it right away, or we're going to take those SAM-sites out *immediately*. That's what I'd tell him. I'd tell him this is a—I'd just use one of the . . . . messages *he* sends *us*, and I'd send it right off, and if he won't—and I'd trade these Turkish things out right now. I wouldn't even talk to anybody about it. We sat for a week, and *everybody* was in favor of doing it, and I'd make that part of the message. I'd tell him we're going to conduct surveillance, as announced by the President, and *one shot* and in we come, and he can expect it. If he wants to sit

down and talk about this thing, he can call off his gunfire and do it right away.

MCNAMARA: Well, I think that we can assume that that kind of an approach will be made—ex the—I think we can assume an approach to trade the missiles will be made one way or another. He'll know that. But now let's assume that that's made and time goes by and nothing happens and we're losing airplanes. What—what do we *do* there?

DILLON: Well, I mean this is a job for the—

. . . .

MCNAMARA: Let's assume that the approach is made—

VOICE: And he doesn't do it.

MCNAMARA: Either he doesn't do it or he comes back—let me go back a second. When I read that message of last night this morning, I thought, *My God* I'd never sell—I'd never base a transaction on *that contract*. Hell, that's no offer. There's not a damned thing in it that's an offer. You read that message carefully. He didn't propose to take the missiles out. Not once—there isn't a single word in it that proposes to take the missiles out. It's twelve pages of—of fluff.

VOICE: Well his message this morning wasn't—

. . . .

MCNAMARA: Well, no, I'm speaking of the last-night message. The last-night message was twelve pages of fluff. That's no contract. You couldn't sign that and say we know what we signed. And *before* we got the damned thing read the whole deal changed—*completely* changed. All of which leads me to conclude that the *probabilities* are that nothing's going to be signed quickly. Now my question is, *assuming* nothing is signed quickly, what do we do. (Pause.) Well, I don't think attack is the only answer. I think we ought to be *prepared* for attack, all-out attack, but I think we ought to know how far we can postpone that. But I *don't* think that's the only answer, and we ought to think of some other answers here. Now John's suggestion, I think, is obviously one—to try to negotiate a deal.

MCCONE: I wouldn't try to negotiate a deal. . . . I'd send him a threatening letter. I'd say, you've made public an offer. We'll accept that offer. But you shot down a plane today before we even had a chance to send you a letter, despite the fact that *you knew* that we were sending unarmed planes on a publicly announced surveillance. Now we're telling you, Mr. Khrushchev, this just one thing, that we're sending unarmed planes over Cuba. If one of them is shot at, we're going to take the

installations out, and you can expect it. And therefore, you issue an order *immediately*.

VOICE: Right.

MCCONE: And I'd be prepared to follow that up.

[The meeting breaks up after McNamara agrees to return with a draft letter to NATO for the ExComm to consider.]

LBJ: I've been afraid of these damned flyers ever since they mentioned them. Just an ordinary plane goin' in there at two or three hundred feet without arms or an announcement. . . . Imagine some crazy Russian captain. . . . He might just pull a trigger. Looks like we're playing Fourth of July over there or something. I'm scared of that, and I don't see—I don't see what you get for that photograph that's so much more important than what you—you know they're working at night; you see them working at night. Now what do you do? Psychologically you scare them. Well, Hell, it's like the fellow telling me in Congress, "Go on and put the monkey on his back." Every time I tried to put a monkey on somebody else's back I *got* one. If you're going to try to psychologically scare them with a flare you're liable to get your bottom shot at.

RUSK: What is George Ball doing?

VOICE: He's drafting.

LBJ: . . . . He says that if you're going to—you ought to accept the trade if you're going to give up the Turkish bases, that you ought to say, ok, we'll give them up for Cuba. McNamara says tell them we'll give them up for nothing. That's the way I see it. There are two sides. . . . McNamara says if we're going to hit Cuba, we've got to say to the Turks that we want you to give up your Jupiters, and we'll give you Polaris instead. Ball said, well if you're going to do that, just say to Mr. Khrushchev, "Yes to your proposal today". So he's drafting. . . . McNamara's drafting one, Ball drafting the other, both of them coming back with the two.

[Dillon then reads a draft letter to Khrushchev, largely taking the position expressed earlier by McCone, demanding that the Soviets cease firing on American reconnaissance planes. The draft is then discussed by Dillon, LBJ, Rusk and Thompson.]

THOMPSON: That's why I think any suggestion that we're willing to accept this unless there is an irrevocable decision that we're to take these out by bombing is very dangerous. Because then we'd really be getting noth-

ing but defeat. . . . I can't believe it's necessary. You know, the night before he was willing to take this other line.

. . . .

LBJ: So what happened? Is somebody forcing him to up his ante, or is he trying to just see—maybe we'll give more—let's try it, and I can always come back to my original position.

THOMPSON: Well, I think it's one of two things. Either Khrushchev was overruled and—or Khrushchev and/or his colleagues were deceived by the Lippmann piece<sup>21</sup> and the fact that Kreisky put this out which made them think that *we* were putting this out, that we were willing to—to make a trade.

DILLON: Well, Lippmann can work this thing differently. It's our position to say unless you agree not to shoot at our unarmed planes until these things of yours are inoperable in Cuba, then we're going to have to hit you. The choice is yours.

. . . . .

THOMPSON: These boys are beginning to give way. Let's push harder. I think they'll change their minds when we take continued forceful action, stopping their ship or—or taking out a SAM-site. That kills some Russians. . . .

DILLON: Well, would you rather send them a thing like this which says if they shoot at all you're going to take them all out, or would you rather just go in and take *one* SAM-site out[?]

THOMPSON: I'm inclined to take one because I don't think giving an ultimatum is recommended.

. . . . .

LBJ: You warhawks ought to get together.

[McCone then reads a draft letter to Khrushchev, making many of the same points Dillon made previously, followed by discussion.]

THOMPSON: The only thing that bothers me at all about it is the—uh—you can see that we have two conflicting things here. One is to prepare for action in Cuba, and the other is to get a peaceful solution along the lines which he has proposed. And the purposes are conflicting because if we want to get him to accept the thing that he put in his letter last night, then we shouldn't give any indication that we're ready to talk

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21. Columnist Walter Lippmann had published a piece in the *Washington Post* on Thursday, October 25, 1962, advocating a trade of Turkish for Cuban missiles as a way to end the crisis equitably.

about the Cuba-Turkish thing. . . . We have to take one of those two courses.

[Thompson and LBJ then discuss trading missiles, an action with which Thompson disagrees.]

LBJ: You just ask yourself what made the greatest impression on you today, whether it was his letter last night or whether it was his letter this morning. Or whether it was his . . . . U-2 boys?

THOMPSON: The U-2.

LBJ: That's exactly right. That's what everybody [will say?] and that's what's going to make an impression on *him*.

[JFK returns.]

JFK: I'm sorry to keep you. I think we ought to go—essentially go back to this problem and then when we get these messages to the Turks, the British, and the NATO messages.

BUNDY: We have to go back to—we have to instruct Finletter, we have really to agree on the track, you see, Mr. President and I think there's a very substantial difference of opinion—

LBJ: McNamara is drafting that message.

. . . .

JFK: Let's see what the difference is, and then we can think about that. What is the difference?

BUNDY: Well I haven't been in as much of the discussion as some others, Mr. President, but I'll ask Mr. Thompson to speak.

THOMPSON: Well, I can't express his view better than Bob McNamara could do, but—uh—I think we clearly have a choice here—uh—that either we go on the line that we've decided to attack Cuba and therefore are terribly bound to that, or we try to get Khrushchev back on the peaceful solution, in which case we shouldn't give any indication that we're going to accept this thing on Turkey, because the Turkish proposal is I should think clearly unacceptable—missiles for missiles, plane for plane, technician for technician, and it leaves—if it worked out, it would leave the Russians installed in Cuba, and I think that—uh [we shouldn't?] accept. It seems to me there are many indications that—uh—they suddenly thought they could get—uh—up the price. They've upped the price, and they've upped the action. And I think that we have to bring them back by upping our action and by getting them back to this other thing without any mention of Turkey. This is bad

for us, from the point of view of [the NATO solution?]. We have to cover that later, but we're going to surface his first proposal which helps the public position. It gets it back on—centered on Cuba, and our willingness to accept it. And that—that somewhat diminishes the need for any talk about—about Turkey. It seems to me the public will be pretty solid on that, and that we ought to keep the heat on him and get him back on the line which he obviously was on the night before. That message was almost incoherent and showed that they were quite worried, and the Lippmann article and maybe the Kreisky speech has made them think they can get more, and they backed away—

JFK: When did Kreisky make his suggestion about Turkey?

THOMPSON: In a public speech to a party group.

JFK: And Lippmann had it when?

BUNDY: Two days ago.

JFK: Two days ago?

SORENSEN: It was in the *Washington Post*.

. . . .

JFK: Well, I think we ought to—just a second—I'll just say, of *course* we ought to try to go the first route which you suggest. Get him back—that's what our letter's doing—that's what we're going to do by one means or another. But it seems to me we *ought* to have this discussion with NATO about these Turkish missiles, but more generally about sort of an up-to-date briefing about where we're going.

[A brief discussion follows about the precise meaning of a "trade" involving Turkish and Cuban missiles.]

JFK: We can't very well invade Cuba with all its toil, and long as it's going to be, when we could have gotten them out by making a deal on the same missiles in Turkey. If that's part of the record I don't see how we'll have a very good war.

[JFK adjourns the meeting until 9:00 p.m.]

### *Turning up the Temperature in Cuba*

Instructed by the President and Rusk, Robert Kennedy has gone to his office at the Justice Department where, at approximately 7:45 p.m., he has met with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin. The letter agreeing to what the

Americans take to be the terms of Khrushchev's first letter is on its way to the Kremlin. The President has also seen fit to convey a less formal, more personal statement to Khrushchev, through his brother and through Dobrynin. RFK informed Dobrynin of the contents of the letter and he also told him that, while there could be no public deal regarding Turkish missiles for Cuban missiles, the Soviets should understand that those missiles in Turkey would probably be removed in due course anyway.<sup>22</sup> The RFK mission to Dobrynin was meant to keep the focus on Cuba, to emphasize that the Turkish missiles were irrelevant to resolving the crisis and to confirm that the U.S. was simply saying "yes" to the offer proposed by Khrushchev in his first letter of October 26. But clarification of the Turkish missile issue proved to be a distinctly subsidiary accomplishment of the RFK mission to Dobrynin. Its real value may have been to strike the same fear of uncontrollable war into the Soviets that the previous ExComm discussion, initiated by McNamara, had struck into many ExComm members themselves.

As we come in on the final ExComm meeting of October 27, only a few (probably Rusk, McNamara, Bundy, Sorensen, and Thompson) are aware of the RFK mission to Dobrynin, and of course none yet knows the outcome. Ironically, it is Taylor who quickly emerges as a moderating influence on a discussion that is evidently quite concerned to continue to apply pressure to force the Soviets to remove their missiles from Cuba. Disagreeing with McNamara, Taylor expresses the view that they can do without low-level reconnaissance the following day. The President agrees, but believes that any further reconnaissance will probably require a massive attack on all the anti-aircraft batteries and SAM sites protecting the Soviet missiles. Thompson's point of view has clearly by this time become the central assumption of the ExComm: Give the Trollope Ploy a chance to work before talking about Turkish missiles or shooting up Cuba. RFK, returning from his meeting with Dobrynin, argues that the U.S. should not mention Turkey at the meeting of NATO allies called for the following morning. He has just given the diplomatic effort a boost via Dobrynin and he doesn't want it sabotaged by loose talk about Turkish missiles at the NATO meeting.

Finally, as the meeting breaks up after almost twelve continuous hours (on this, the twelfth day of the crisis), we may feel that we are voyeurs on a conversation that is private and not a little moving. RFK reassures McNamara

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22. See Welch and Blight, "The Eleventh Hour," p. 11.



that they have done, for now, all they can possibly do. McNamara responds with deep concern. He wonders who would govern Cuba in the aftermath of a bloody war. He wonders how, in the event of a Soviet response in Europe to an American attack on Cuba, will he—McNamara, the Secretary of Defense—be able to prevent a catastrophic nuclear war? The moment is powerfully poignant, but it soon passes, as an unidentified committee member cracks a joke about making RFK the mayor of Havana. One senses that for McNamara, unaware of the decisive impact on Khrushchev of the RFK mission and utterly pessimistic, it seems, about the prospects for the Trollope Ploy, the joke is a grisly one. Knowing only what he knew then, he must have guessed that the price of making anyone the “mayor of Havana” might be a horrendous nuclear war.

Many members of the ExComm have recorded in memoirs and interviews that when they left the Cabinet Room after the meeting just concluded, they were not optimistic, either about the prospects for a diplomatic resolution or about controlling a war in Cuba.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps what is most remarkable about the recollections, in the new light of this transcript, is the absence of mention that there was still the ace-in-the-hole, the missile trade. Perhaps this is because it was only the President who expressed strong and repeated enthusiasm for the merits of the trade. On the evidence of this document, one guesses that if President Kennedy had lived to write his own memoir of the missile crisis, it would have differed considerably from those of his brother and other close associates. It is hard to avoid the impression that here was a man who went to sleep on the evening of October 27 knowing well what he would not do if the Trollope Ploy failed. He might order a tightening of the quarantine. He might trade Turkish missiles for Cuban missiles. He would *not* go to war.

RUSK: Certainly he's made a public speech on the subject. But—uh—we've also made some public speeches, and—uh—I think we're in such a confrontation that—uh—he's got to worry very much as the telegram last night that came in late obviously showed—he's got to worry a great deal about how far he wants to push this thing. . . . I would think that tomorrow we take certain steps to build up the pressure—we have the enforced surveillance; we shoot anybody who gets in our

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23. See, e.g., R.F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, p. 87; Sorensen, *Kennedy*, pp. 715–16.

way; we see whether the town<sup>24</sup> produces any result tonight for when we're here in the morning; we intercept that Soviet ship, we—uh—consider tomorrow afternoon including the oil in the blockade. . . . In firing that goes on in Cuba, we keep the—keep the focus on the Cubans. I had suggestions in John McCone's draft that would tend to do that—the message to Khrushchev about the necessity for enforced surveys, that would keep the monkey on Cuba's back in this regard. If we do have to enforce our right to overfly and to have a look—it's an accidental fact that some Russian technicians may be around at the time we have to—shoot, since they've already fired the first shot. . . . It's something that is regrettable but it's not something that we make a very public issue out of, we're enforcing this with respect to Cuba, not the Soviet Union—the surveillance business.

DILLON: You do anything about the SAM-site that shot down our plane?

JFK: We don't know if it did yet, Doug.

. . . .

RUSK: If we're going in tomorrow with—with the [reconnaissance then we must be sure?] that we're going to enforce the right to surveillance.

BUNDY: If we can't get assurances of allowing them to proceed. . . .

. . . .

TAYLOR: The Chiefs have been—I went back this [afternoon?] and talked this over with the Chiefs. The problem of low-level surveillance is becoming difficult because in all the flights today around the SAM-sites, the—uh . . . . missile sites, there's low-level ack-ack. . . . Quite a bit. The planes returned (words unclear) the first to the missile sites and then the second turned back and cut out. We have some photography and I would say by tonight—by the end of the day—we probably have seen some of the dispositions around these sites. . . . So that by tomorrow I would say we're *not* ready to go back with *armed* reconnaissance preceding the actual photographic missions. . . . We think, however, the Chiefs would recommend, that we still go back with about six planes tomorrow, picking out targets which we don't know have this kind of flak around, to verify that the work is still going ahead, and also to prove we're still on the job. But we're approaching the point, I think, Mr. President, where low-level reconnaissance will be entirely impossible. When we reach that point, and if we're going to continue reconnaissance without actually taking out the whole works, we're faced with taking out a number of the SAM-sites that [threaten

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24. Rusk is apparently referring here to Washington ("the town"), that is, the U.S. government, and its ability to apply various forms of pressure on Cuba.

our?] medium and high-level reconnaissance. But low-level reconnaissance *probably* is on its way out, and I think we'll learn that tomorrow.

MCNAMARA: I would add to that I don't believe we should carry out tomorrow's U-2 mission. . . . but I do believe we should carry out the low-level reconnaissance with the necessary fighter escorts and preparations for following our reconnaissance, if it's attacked, with attack on the attackers.

VOICE: You don't think that fighter escort on the low-level will help tomorrow?

TAYLOR: These planes are off the coast now, in case they have a cripple coming out, but . . . .

DILLON: . . . . I wasn't quite clear—are the anti-aircraft shooting at these things around the missile sites themselves?

TAYLOR: The vicinity of the missile sites.

. . . .

MCNAMARA: Well, I think the point is that if our planes are fired on tomorrow, we ought to fire back.

. . . . .

JFK: Let me say, I think we ought to wait till tomorrow afternoon, to see whether we get any answer—if U Thant goes down there—we're rapidly approaching a real—I don't think that firing back at a twenty-millimeter coming off the ground is good. I think we ought to figure that Monday—if tomorrow they fire at us, and we don't have any answer from the Russians, then Monday, it seems to me, we ought to—we can consider making a statement tomorrow about the fire and that we're going to take action now any place in Cuba, on those areas which can fire, and then go in and take all the SAM-sites out. I'd rather take—I don't think that it does any good to take out—to try to fire at a twenty millimeter on the ground. You just hazard our planes, and the people on the ground have the advantage. On the other hand, I don't want to—I don't think we do any good to begin to sort of *half* do it. I think we ought to keep tomorrow clean, do the best we can with the surveillance. If they still fire, and we haven't got a satisfactory answer back from the Russians then I think we ought to put a statement out tomorrow that we were fired upon, and we are therefore considering the island of Cuba as an open territory, and then take out all these SAM-sites. Otherwise what we're going to do is find this build-up of the—of the protection for the SAM-sites, low, and the SAM-sites high—and we'll find ourselves without—our requirement will be so limited, that we'll find ourselves with all the disadvantages. I think we ought to, tomorrow—let's get U Thant our messages—take—if they

fire on us, tell them we'll take them all out and if we don't get some satisfaction from the Russians or U Thant or Cuba tomorrow night, figure that Monday we're going to do something about the SAM-sites. What do you think?

MCNAMARA: . . . . I would say only that we ought to keep some kind of pressure on . . . . tomorrow night, that indicates we're [serious?]. Now if we call up these air squadrons tonight, I think that settles . . . . I have a paper here . . . . I believe we should issue an order tonight calling up the twenty-four air reserve squadrons, roughly 300 troop carrier transports, which are required for an invasion, and this would both be a preparatory move, and also a strong indication of what lies ahead—

JFK: I think we ought to do it.

[McNamara then reads a draft of an Executive Order authorizing the call-up of Air Force reservists. Discussion of the draft follows. Taylor reiterates the Chiefs' view that reconnaissance is unnecessary the following day. Discussion turns to what to do about a Soviet ship approaching the quarantine line. It is agreed that a decision on whether or not to intercept it can be postponed until about noon the following day. RFK returns.]

RUSK: Mr. President, just to remind us of seven things that have happened today. He, by the way, is telling us the pressure's on Khrushchev (words unclear). One was the statement this morning on the broadcast. Second, was this business on the intercept (word unclear) U Thant. Third was an announcement on enforced surveillance. Fourth was our short message to U Thant (words unclear). Five was our answer to K's letter of October 26. Six, was a call-up of air squadrons. Seven will be a warning to U Thant of an approaching ship. Now, in general, I think that's—uh—for one day, that's building up. Tomorrow, we'll need to be sure that the pressures continue to build up.

JFK: Well, we've got two things. First place we've got the POL. Secondly, we've got the announcement about these—whatever happens—if we don't *take* the ship, we announce that the (words unclear) been broken, and from now on, it's POL, all ships, and—uh—so on (words unclear). Nine ships (words unclear) in addition our own ships. So it seems to me we've got two or three things tomorrow, that—

(Pause.)

[The President then reads aloud a letter from General Lauris Norstad, Supreme Allied Commander of NATO forces, who raises several issues that he feels certain are bound to arise in any NATO meeting called to consider a missile trade: Are Cuban and Turkish missiles really analogous? Is Turkey, like Cuba, a satellite nation? Will a

missile trade strengthen the U.S. long-term position? Will NATO resolve be enhanced by a trade? Will relations with Greece and Turkey be improved? Norstad clearly believes the answer to all these questions is "no." Rusk responds by proposing that the U.S. say its preference is to settle on a Cuban basis alone, but that the NATO allies ought to understand that this may not be possible. The President cautions that the goal must be to get the NATO allies to come to this conclusion themselves.]

JFK: Well now, will the introduction of Turkey, we think that if we take an action which we may have to take, I don't think we ought to say—which we may well have to take the way it's escalating, if they hit Turkey and they hit Berlin, we want them—if they want to get off, now's the time to speak up.

MCNAMARA: Mr. President, do we believe that we'll be able to settle Cuba more easily with or without the Jupiters in Turkey[?] I think we ought to decide this point before we open the door to NATO.

RFK: That's what—can't we wait? Isn't it possible to get through tomorrow at three or four o'clock without even getting into NATO with the Turkey business? And then figuring, I mean if we lose the gamble with—and I think that—if once they find, playing around and figuring on Turkey, we're willing to make some deal—if I were they I'd push on that, and then I'd push on Italy, figuring that well if they're going to go on that they can carry it one step further. But if we are *hard* on this thing—the gains that we have—we know that we've got some respite—that [they may?] see some way in Moscow—the way that they made the offer initially. Why don't we just wait another eighteen hours, see if that's been eased at all. We're hard and tough on this. We called up the planes tonight, and we wait. We find out if U Thant is successful, then we find that he's not successful—the whole thing looks like it's collapsing, and we're going to have to go in there. So then we call them together, and we say what the problem is.

JFK: Have we called the meeting yet?

VOICE: Yes we have.

. . . .

BUNDY: I think it says in Norstad's message ten o'clock.

. . . .

BUNDY: Three o'clock our time. No, other way around, morning our time.

. . . .

RFK: I think you could say it tomorrow, if you had the information. State the facts, and say we think that this should be based—based completely in the Western Hemisphere. This is what we had—

BUNDY: We have an obligation to talk with you, and more of an obligation and we'll meet with you again raising this irrelevance, at ten o'clock tomorrow morning.

RFK: Then if the thing *blows* tomorrow, then we go at ten o'clock the next morning and say that—

. . . .

RFK: Well, I think you've got to figure—that's another twenty-four hours. You could do it—OK. Well—uh—one day, I can't believe it's going to make that much difference.

. . . .

RFK: I think—I think you've got to give them a chance. But I think if we indicate to them tomorrow that we're willing to make a deal on Turkey if they're willing to make a deal, that half of them are going to be willing to make it, half aren't—I think then you'd be in a—

JFK: Well, but the only thing is have we lost anything [?] . . . .

VOICE: You shouldn't discuss the Turkey deal.

RFK: No, I think you just keep silent. Tell them what has happened today. Go through the whole thing. This is just to report to them what we've done, and what steps we're taking, and then they're—that we called up the air, and we're thinking of calling up the ships . . . . calling up the ships—this is what happened—we sent the U-2 over—it looks like it got shot down—we got some of these—and this is the offer that they've made to us, with the messages that came through Scali and through the other people—we've accepted this—the President [accepted this?] when they suddenly came in with the Turkey business—we haven't considered that because we think it should be restricted to the Western Hemisphere—uh. We made that—we said that we would accept that. We haven't heard yet. We will report to them when we hear and we suggest that we meet at ten o'clock tomorrow morning, and then the Russians come back and say we're only going to do it if you can get the bases out of Turkey, and then we come in and we talk to them and say, "Now this is what our suggestion is, what do *you* want to do," and they say, "We want to hold fast," and then on Tuesday we go in. I think if we indicate tomorrow . . . .

THOMPSON: It'll become public.

. . . .

JFK: All right does anybody—uh—Mr. Secretary, what do you think of that?

RUSK: No, I think that's all right.

JFK: Mac, you can draw the—

BUNDY: Yes, sir.

JFK: You and Ted draw the instructions based on what Bobby said.

[More discussion follows concerning what will be said at the NATO briefing and which heads of state should receive which messages, before the conversation returns again specifically to Turkey. The question arises as to what Ambassador Hare is to be told.]

JFK: Let's just say, it seems to me that on Hare if we don't want to—we try to get the Russians off the Turkish trade—then we probably don't want to do anything with Hare for twenty-four hours till we get some sort of an answer.

THOMPSON: This is Hare's telegram. I don't know if you saw it or not.

(Mixed voices.)

JFK: Well, let's see—uh—let's give him an explanation of what we're trying to do. We're trying to get it back on the original proposition of last night, and—because we don't want to get into this trade. If we're unsuccessful, then we—it's *possible* that we may have to get back on the Jupiter thing. If we *do*, then we would of course want it to come from the Turks themselves and NATO, rather than just the United States. We're hopeful, however, that that won't come. If he does, his judgment on how should it be handled (words unclear) we're prepared to do the Polaris and others, does he think this thing can be made? We'll be in touch with him in twenty-four hours when we find out if we're successful in putting the Russians back on the original track. . . .

THOMPSON: All right, we'll get that.

[The meeting begins to break up amid discussion of possible leaks from NATO ministers and about whether or not the U.S. should send fighter aircraft after the MiGs in Cuba, if they fire on U.S. aircraft. The President and McNamara agree to postpone the decision until the following day.]

VOICE: What time did we decide on tomorrow morning?

(Mixed voices and laughter and more mixed voices.)

RFK: How are you doing, Bob?

MCNAMARA: Well, hard to tell. You have any doubts?

RFK: Well, I think we're doing the only thing we can do and well, you know.

. . . .

**MCNAMARA:** I think . . . . Bobby . . . . we need to have two things ready, a government for Cuba, because we're going to need one . . . . and secondly, plans for how to respond to the Soviet Union in Europe, because sure as hell they're going to do something there.

. . . .

**VOICE:** Suppose we make Bobby mayor of Havana.