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Origins of the Cuban Missile Crisis

The last major foreign crisis of Kennedy's presidency was the October 1962 confrontation with the Soviets over their deployment of strategic nuclear missiles in Cuba. By then, Kennedy had replaced the military advisors he inherited from Eisenhower with people of his own choosing. Two of these personnel changes came on October 1, when General Earle G. Wheeler replaced Decker as Army Chief of Staff and Maxwell Taylor returned to active duty, succeeding Lemnitzer as Chairman. Earlier, Anderson had replaced Burke as CNO and General Curtis E. LeMay had succeeded Thomas D. White as Air Force Chief of Staff. In Taylor's view, LeMay was a superb operational commander, as demonstrated by his accomplishments in World War II and during the years he ran the Strategic Air Command. But his appointment as Air Force Chief of Staff was a "big mistake." Kennedy, on the other hand, felt he had no choice. Though he found LeMay coarse, rude, and overbearing, he felt he had to promote him in view of the general's seniority and strong popular and congressional following.⁶²

In contrast, President Kennedy regarded Taylor as "absolutely first-class." Indeed, he was one of the few military professionals he respected and felt comfortable with.⁶³ To his JCS colleagues, however, Taylor's return to the Pentagon was less than welcome owing to the political overtones surrounding his appointment, his identification with administration policies, and his criticism of the Joint Chiefs following the Bay of Pigs. As Chairman, he saw himself mainly as the agent of his civilian superiors and tried to craft military recommendations that

harmonized with civilian views and administration programs. Aware that the JCS were losing influence, he attributed this situation in part to the Joint Staff, which he characterized as only “marginally effective” because of its “inherent slowness” in addressing issues and providing timely responses.⁶⁴ Some of the Service chiefs believed they could not always count on Taylor to convey their views fairly and accurately to the President. Nor could they rely on him to report precisely what the President or other senior officials said, a problem that Taylor’s hearing difficulties may have exacerbated.⁶⁵

Taylor was still in the White House as the President’s military representative when the Cuban missile crisis unfolded. Its origins went back to the spring of 1961, in the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs episode, when the Kennedy administration resolved to isolate Castro’s Cuba and to undermine its authority and influence. The Joint Chiefs’ contribution was a set of plans for a swift and powerful U.S. invasion of Cuba to overthrow Castro’s government in an 8-day campaign.⁶⁶

Meeting with Secretary McNamara and Admiral Burke on April 29, 1961, President Kennedy concurred in the general outline of the plan.⁶⁷ But after further review, the NSC decided against military intervention at that point and elected to put pressure on Castro through diplomatic and economic means and a covert operations program known as MONGOOSE. To coordinate the effort, the President turned to his brother, Robert, who preferred to draw on Taylor—a family friend—rather than the JCS for military advice.⁶⁸

Like the struggle for Laos, the Kennedy administration’s growing obsession with Cuba reflected a fundamental shift in the focus of Cold War politics. During the late 1940s and 1950s, Europe and Northeast Asia had been at the center of the Cold War. But by the early 1960s, despite occasional flare-ups over Berlin and along the demilitarized zone between North and

South Korea, the contest for control in these areas was essentially over and a stalemate had settled in. Realizing that further gains in the industrialized world were unlikely, the Soviets turned their attention to the emerging Third World countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America where Khrushchev in a celebrated speech of January 6, 1961, proposed to unleash a wave of Communist-directed “liberation wars.” President Kennedy referred to Khrushchev’s speech often and considered it clear evidence that the United States needed to pay more attention to the Third World. In particular, he stressed the development of aid programs to improve living conditions and the acquisition of more effective tools for counterinsurgency warfare.⁶⁹

Khrushchev found the temptation of establishing a strong Soviet presence in Cuba, 90 miles from the southern coast of the United States, irresistible. Not only would these weapons counterbalance the deployment of American forces in Europe and the Near East, but Cuba would also serve as a hub for spreading Communism throughout Latin America. Less clear is why Khrushchev risked losing his foothold in Cuba by placing strategic nuclear missiles there, a provocation that was almost certain to draw a sharp U.S. response. In his memoirs, Khrushchev justified his actions as providing Castro with deterrence against American attack. “Without our missiles in Cuba, the island would have been in the position of a weak man threatened by a strong man.”⁷⁰ The missiles in question, however, were strategic offensive weapons, not defensive ones, which would have afforded Cuba better protection. Though there may also have been a handful of Soviet tactical nuclear weapons in Cuba at the time, the evidence of their presence is sketchy and has never been positively confirmed. Nor is it clear who, if anyone, had authority to use them.⁷¹ The most plausible explanation for Khrushchev’s actions is that he was trying to bolster the Soviet Union’s strategic posture and overplayed his hand. The consensus among Kennedy loyalists like diplomat George Ball was that Khrushchev was a “crude” thinker

who miscalculated that he could push the President around with impunity. According to Ball, Khrushchev's decision to place offensive missiles in Cuba resulted from his desire to "bring the U.S. down a peg, strengthen his own position with respect to China, and improve his standing in the Politburo with one bold stroke."⁷²

Whatever the reasons, Khrushchev was adept at refining and carrying out his plan. The decision to deploy missiles in Cuba emerged from an informal meeting in the spring of 1962 between Khrushchev and Marshal Rodion Malinovskiy, the minister of defense, at Khrushchev's *dacha* in the Crimea. Malinovskiy complained about the presence of 15 U.S. Jupiter medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) in Turkey and the need to redress this situation. The Jupiters had been operational for about a year. While not in Malinovskiy's view a serious military threat, they were an irritant requiring a diversion of resources. One thing led to another and it was from these conversations that Khrushchev seized on the idea of putting strategic missiles in Cuba.⁷³

To implement his policy, Khrushchev relied on the Soviet General Staff to concoct an elaborate deception scheme. Code-named ANADYR, the operation involved assembling and outfitting in total secrecy over 50,000 soldiers, airmen, and sailors, calculating the weapons, equipment, supplies, and support they would need for a prolonged stay in Cuba, finding 85 freighters for transportation, and completing the mission in 5 months.⁷⁴ Apparently, senior members of the Soviet Defense Council initially resisted the idea, but as a practiced expert in bullying people, Khrushchev got his way.⁷⁵ Toward the end of May, a high-level Soviet military delegation, posing as engineers, visited Havana and secured Castro's agreement to the plan. Preparations continued over the summer, and on September 8, 1962, the first SS-4 MRBMs were unloaded in Cuba. Their nuclear warheads began arriving a month later, though their presence went undetected by U.S. intelligence.⁷⁶

Despite tight security and elaborate deception measures, the Soviets could not fully conceal their activities. By summer, rumors were rife within intelligence circles and the Cuban exile community in south Florida that the Soviets were up to something. Attention focused on an apparent buildup of conventional arms, which the CIA confirmed in July and August through U-2 photographs, HUMINT sources, and NSA surveillance of Soviet ships passing through the Dardanelles.⁷⁷ The CIA also detected increased construction activity for SA-2 antiaircraft missile installations (the same weapon used to shoot down Gary Powers's U-2 in 1960) and a partially finished surface-to-surface missile complex at the Cuban coastal town of Banes, reported to President Kennedy on September 7. The Banes installation was for short-range anti-ship cruise missiles and did not pose a serious threat to U.S. vessels, but the discovery caused President Kennedy to impose tight compartmentalization on all intelligence dealing with offensive weapons. Earlier, he had imposed similar constraints on the dissemination of SA-2 surface-to-air missile (SAM) information. These precautions severely limited the distribution of intelligence data, even among high-level officials and senior intelligence analysts. Whether they prevented critical intelligence from reaching the JCS is unclear.⁷⁸

As part of the deception operation, the Soviets maintained that they had no plans to deploy offensive nuclear missiles in Cuba. Until U-2 pictures proved otherwise, the Intelligence Community accepted these assurances at face value.⁷⁹ Monthly U-2 overflights of Cuba had been routine since the Bay of Pigs and by September 1962, with reports of increased Soviet activity, the Kennedy administration fell under growing pressure to step up surveillance. But as more SA-2 sites became operational, the U-2s were increasingly vulnerable, raising fears of a repetition of the Powers incident.

Over CIA objections, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy and Secretary of State Dean Rusk persuaded President Kennedy in mid-September to suspend U-2 flights across Cuba and to approve new routes along the periphery of the island. To gloss over the loss of coverage, the White House termed these “additional” flights, which technically they were. But the overall result, as one CIA analyst characterized it, was “a dysfunctional surveillance regime in a dynamic situation.”⁸⁰

These procedural changes took place at the very time Soviet offensive missiles were starting to arrive in Cuba and delayed their discovery by a full month. As late as September 24, however, General Lemnitzer still considered U.S. surveillance of Cuba to be “adequate” in light of current policy and military requirements.⁸¹ Though the JCS were well aware of the danger posed by the growing Soviet presence in Cuba, it was Castro’s stubborn hold on power despite ongoing economic, diplomatic, and covert efforts to loosen his grip that concerned them even more. Convinced that the time was fast approaching when only a military solution would suffice, the JCS continued to focus on various contingency plans to cripple or topple Castro’s regime.

By the end of September, their attention had settled on three concepts: a large-scale air attack (OPLAN-312-62); an all-out combined arms invasion (OPLAN-314-61) that would take approximately 18 days to organize; and a quick reaction version of the invasion plan (OPLAN-316-61) that could be launched with immediately available forces in 5 days.⁸² Also on the table was a Joint Strategic Survey Council proposal to impose a naval blockade of Cuba. However, the JCS paid less attention to this option than the others because there was no guarantee it would assure Castro’s downfall.⁸³

Treating these plans as exceedingly sensitive, the Joint Chiefs did not discuss them in any detail with senior administration figures outside the Pentagon. Consequently, their possible

political and diplomatic impact remained unassessed. The President's views, insofar as they were known to the JCS, favored continuing surveillance of the island and avoidance of a military confrontation.⁸⁴ As a concession to preparedness, Kennedy asked Congress in September for authority to call up 150,000 Reservists, and in early October he and McNamara discussed the possibility of an air strike to take out the SA-2 sites.⁸⁵ But before taking further action, the President wanted better information. On October 12, with the SA-2 threat still his uppermost concern, he transferred operational command and control of U-2 flights over Cuba from the CIA to the Strategic Air Command and authorized the resumption of direct overflights, limited to the western tip of the island for the time being. Two days later, SAC's first U-2 mission confirmed that the Soviets were deploying SS-4 medium-range surface-to-surface missiles on the island. Subsequent flights revealed that the Soviets were also constructing SS-5 intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM) sites.⁸⁶

Showdown over Cuba

The discovery that the Soviets were deploying offensive strategic missiles in Cuba and that the weapons were on the verge of activation presented Kennedy with the most serious foreign policy crisis of his Presidency. Militarily, the MRBMs and IRBMs the Soviets were deploying in Cuba were comparable to the Thor and Jupiter missiles the United States had deployed to Britain, Italy, and Turkey the previous few years. With ranges of up to 1,200 miles for the MRBMs and 2,500 miles for the IRBMs, the Soviets could threaten most of the eastern half of the United States with nuclear destruction. By themselves, these weapons may have done little or nothing to change the overall strategic balance since the United States continued to hold a substantial lead in ICBMs and long-range strategic bombers. All the same, the threat was much

too large and close to home to ignore. With the congressional mid-term elections looming, a decisive response became all the more certain.

To manage the crisis, Kennedy improvised through an ad hoc body known as the Executive Committee, or ExCom. Hurriedly assembled, ExCom operated for security reasons with no pre-set agenda and initially consisted of Cabinet-level officials, a handful of their close aides, and a few outside advisors.⁸⁷ As time passed, the list of attendees steadily grew to more than seventy people, mostly civilians. Even though the Joint Chiefs were actively engaged in contingency planning throughout the crisis, they were not directly privy to ExCom's deliberations or even much of the information that passed through it. General Taylor was the sole JCS member on the ExCom and one of its few members with significant military experience. During the crisis, the Joint Chiefs met privately with the President only once—on October 19. The rest of the time, Taylor or McNamara acted as intermediary. In his memoirs, Taylor acknowledged that some of the chiefs distrusted him. He added, however, that over the course of the crisis he repeatedly volunteered to arrange more meetings with the President, but that none of the Service chiefs showed any interest.⁸⁸

The main advantage of a larger and more conspicuous JCS presence in the ExCom would have been closer coordination. Policymakers would have had a clearer understanding of the military options and the Joint Chiefs a fuller appreciation of the political and diplomatic dimensions of the problem.⁸⁹ In the JCS view, the deployment of offensive missiles in Cuba was a serious provocation that more than justified Castro's removal from power by force if necessary. Thus, from the onset of the crisis, the JCS (including Taylor) favored a direct and unequivocal military response to eliminate all Soviet missiles from Cuba and, in the process, to "get rid" of Castro.⁹⁰ It was a position Kennedy found both too extreme and too risky. During the Bay of

Pigs, he had wanted the Joint Chiefs to speak out more. By the time of the Cuban missile crisis, he had little interest in what they had to say. By keeping them at arm's length, he could acknowledge their suggestions but ignore them as well. "The first advice I'm going to give my successor," he later observed, "is to watch the generals and to avoid feeling that just because they are military men their opinions on military matters are worth a damn."⁹¹

The Joint Chiefs came to their position during the early days of the crisis and stuck to it. Throughout their deliberations, there was little repetition of the squabbling that had exposed their disunity and marred their effectiveness during the Berlin and Laos episodes. Treating military action as inevitable, their initial preference was for a strong air attack to take out all known IR/MRBM sites, SA-2 installations, and other key military facilities, followed by implementation of the quick-reaction invasion plan (OPLAN-316). From mid-October on, the JCS carried out a steady buildup of airpower in Florida, reaching a strength of over 600 planes, and positioned supplies and ammunition for an invasion. They also designated Admiral Robert L. Dennison, Commander in Chief, Atlantic, a unified command, to exercise primary responsibility for Cuban contingencies. Facing a shortage of conventional munitions, McNamara authorized U.S. combat aircraft to fly with nuclear weapons.⁹²

While treating an invasion as unavoidable, the Joint Chiefs accepted McNamara's advice and confined their presentation to the President on October 19 to the air attack phase. Predictably, the most ardent advocate of this course was LeMay, the Air Force chief, who doubted whether a naval blockade or lesser measures would permanently neutralize the missile threat. Kennedy seemed to like the idea of a "surgical" air strike against the IR/MRBM sites alone. However, a large-scale air campaign (especially one that might involve tactical nuclear weapons) was another matter, and in exploring options with the JCS, he expressed concern that it

might invite Soviet reprisals against Berlin. “We would be regarded,” he said, “as the trigger-happy Americans who lost Berlin.” And, he added: “We would have no support among our allies.” Kennedy also feared that an American attack of any sort on Cuba with the Soviets there could escalate into a nuclear exchange. “If we listen to them and do what they want us to do,” Kennedy later said of the Joint Chiefs, probably with LeMay in mind more than any of the others, “none of us will be alive later to tell them that they were wrong.”⁹³

If it resolved anything, the President’s meeting with the Joint Chiefs left Kennedy more convinced than ever that he urgently needed to find an alternative to direct military action. The next day, after a rambling 2-hour ExCom session, the President decided to put both an air campaign and an invasion on hold and to impose a blockade, or “quarantine” as he publicly called it since a blockade amounted to a declaration of war in international law. During the ExCom debate, General Taylor strenuously defended the JCS position in favor of air strikes and played down the possibility that the use of nuclear weapons against Cuban targets would invite nuclear retaliation from the Soviets.⁹⁴ Afterwards Taylor returned to the Pentagon to brief his JCS colleagues. “This was not,” he told them, “one of our better days.” In explaining the President’s blockade decision, Taylor said that the decisive votes had come from McNamara, Rusk, and UN Ambassador Adlai E. Stevenson, all of whom strongly opposed air attacks. Pulling Taylor aside as the meeting broke up, the President had added: “I know that you and your colleagues are unhappy with the decision, but I trust that you will support me in this decision.” The Chairman assured him that the JCS would back him completely.⁹⁵

Kennedy and the Joint Chiefs were not, in fact, as far apart as it seemed. Even though the President preferred the quarantine, he had not categorically ruled out either an air attack or an invasion, and over the next several days, while the Navy was organizing the quarantine, he

directed the Joint Chiefs to proceed with the military buildup opposite Cuba. As part of the show of force, the Joint Chiefs ordered the Commander in Chief, Strategic Air Command, to begin generating his forces toward DEFCON 2 (maximum alert) and to launch SAC bombers up to the “radar line” where the Soviets would detect them. Shelving OPLAN–314 for a large-scale invasion, the Joint Chiefs instructed Admiral Dennison on October 26 to concentrate his preparations on OPLAN–316, which he could execute on shorter notice. By leaving the invasion and other military options open, McNamara told the ExCom, the United States would “keep the heat on” the Russians. Kennedy thus found military power indispensable, even if at times he felt events were taking over. But to go beyond a show of force, as he demonstrated time and again during the crisis, was out of the question without the most extreme provocation.⁹⁶

As the showdown approached, the accompanying tensions further exacerbated the already strained relationship between the Joint Chiefs and their civilian superiors. The most serious clash was between McNamara and Chief of Naval Operations Admiral George Anderson. Though Anderson professed the utmost respect for civilian authority, he vehemently objected to the intrusion of civilians into the management of naval operations, as evidenced by the run-in he had with McNamara on October 24. The night before, the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) had received unconfirmed reports that, rather than risk inspections under the quarantine, many Soviet merchant ships heading for Cuba, including some suspected of carrying missiles, had slowed, changed course, or turned back. However, ONI insisted on visual verification from U.S. warships and reconnaissance aircraft before giving the information wide distribution. As a result, it was not until noon the next day that Secretary McNamara and the White House finally received the information. Furious at the delay, McNamara confronted Anderson that evening in the Navy’s Flag Plot command center in the Pentagon where, according to one account, he delivered “an

abusive tirade.” Anderson declined to explain why it had taken so long for the information to reach McNamara and took umbrage at the Secretary’s manner. Tempers flared and the Secretary of Defense stalked out, resolving as he left to be rid of Anderson at the earliest convenient opportunity.⁹⁷

A similar communications lapse took place a few days later, on October 27, during the height of the crisis, as chances for a negotiated settlement seemed to dwindle. At issue was a truculent letter from Khrushchev linking the removal of the U.S. Jupiter MRBMs from Turkey to the removal of Soviet offensive missiles from Cuba.⁹⁸ Deployed above ground at “soft” fixed sites, the Jupiters were vulnerable to a preemptive attack and had a low level of readiness because they used nonstorable liquid fuel. Kennedy had never attached much military value to them and, treating them as “obsolete,” was inclined to deal. But there was little support in the ExCom, where the prevailing opinion held that such a trade could seriously harm U.S. relations with Turkey and perhaps drive a wedge between the United States and NATO.⁹⁹ That evening back at the Pentagon, Taylor briefed the chiefs on the stalemate regarding the Jupiters and added: “The President has a feeling that time is running out.” At this point the Joint Chiefs began making preparations to go to the White House the next morning to bring the President up to date on the status of war plans and to secure his approval to initiate direct military action.¹⁰⁰

Unknown to Taylor and the Service chiefs, Secretary of State Rusk had come up with a scheme to break the impasse, and early that evening he and the President held a short meeting in the Oval Office. Others present were McGeorge Bundy, Mc-Namara, Gilpatric, Robert Kennedy, George Ball, Theodore Sorensen, and Llewellyn E. Thompson, the former U.S. Ambassador to Moscow. It was at this gathering that Kennedy approved a secret initiative, which his brother Robert conveyed to Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin a short while later.¹⁰¹

The offer was in two parts. The first was a pledge by the United States not to invade Cuba or to overthrow Castro in exchange for removal of the Soviet missiles; the second, at Rusk's instigation, was an informal assurance that in the not-too-distant future the United States would quietly remove its Jupiter missiles from Turkey. The concession on the Jupiters appears to have been unnecessary since an offer to discuss the matter at a later date probably would have sufficed. But in his eagerness to avoid coming to blows, Kennedy chose to sweeten the deal and give Khrushchev fewer grounds for objecting.¹⁰²

The Joint Chiefs were never consulted, nor were they given an opportunity to comment on the strategic implications of this settlement. General LeMay was disappointed that the President, with a preponderance of strategic and tactical nuclear power on his side, had not demanded more concessions from the Soviets. "We could have gotten not only the missiles out of Cuba," LeMay insisted, "we could have gotten the Communists out of Cuba at that time."¹⁰³ The first inkling the chiefs had of the deal ending the Cuban missile crisis came the next morning from a ticker tape news summary announcing Moscow's acceptance of the American no-invasion pledge in exchange for the withdrawal of Soviet offensive missiles.¹⁰⁴ Little by little over the next few days the Joint Chiefs learned more about the deal and about "a proposal" to withdraw the Jupiters from Turkey and to assign Polaris boats in their place. The consensus on the Joint Staff was that the United States had come out on the poorer end of the bargain. Not only did the Jupiters make up one-third of SACEUR's Quick Reaction Alert Force, they also carried a much larger payload than Polaris and were more reliable and accurate. Believing withdrawal of the Jupiters to be ill-advised, the Joint Chiefs considered sending the Secretary of Defense a memorandum recommending against it. But upon discovering that it was a done deal, they let the

matter drop. Kennedy had what he wanted most of all—removal of the Soviet missiles from Cuba—and the crisis was winding down.¹⁰⁵

Aftermath: The Nuclear Test Ban

By the time the Cuban missile crisis ended, relations between the Kennedy administration and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Taylor excepted) were at an all-time low. In contrast, Kennedy's public stature and esteem had never been higher. Lauded by his admirers and critics alike for showing exemplary statesmanship, fortitude, and wisdom in steering the country through the most dangerous confrontation in history, the President emerged with his credibility and prestige measurably enhanced. But to end the crisis he made compromises and concessions that his military advisors considered in many ways unnecessary and excessive. Worst of all, in the chiefs' view, the United States had left Castro's regime in place. The presence of an outpost of communism in the Western Hemisphere left the JCS no choice but to continue allocating substantial military and intelligence resources for containment purposes. Looking back, McGeorge Bundy acknowledged that Kennedy had kept the Joint Chiefs "at a distance" throughout the crisis, sensing that their perception of the problem "was not well connected with his own real concerns." "The result," Bundy added, "was an increased skepticism in his view of military advice which only increased the difficulty of exercising his powers as commander in chief."¹⁰⁶

Despite the estrangement between Kennedy and his military advisors, the only member of the Joint Chiefs to become a casualty of the episode was Admiral Anderson, whose 2-year term as Chief of Naval Operations expired in August 1963 and was not extended. Sending Anderson to Portugal as U.S. Ambassador, Kennedy selected the more even-tempered David L. McDonald to be CNO. Well liked and highly respected among his peers, McDonald was serving

with NATO at the time of his selection and would have preferred to stay in London.¹⁰⁷ Kennedy and McNamara might have gone further in purging the chiefs, but they knew that LeMay, the other candidate for removal, had strong support in Congress and was virtually untouchable. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the missile crisis, the administration's foreign policy agenda began to move away from the confrontational approach that had characterized its first 2 years, toward a rapprochement with the Soviets based on the negotiation of outstanding differences. The Cuban missile crisis settlement was the opening wedge.

To realize his policy goals, Kennedy knew he would need the agreement if not the outright support of the JCS. Central to Kennedy's quest to improve relations with the Soviet Union was the nuclear test ban, a measure that had been on the back burner since the waning days of the Eisenhower administration. Before winning the White House, Kennedy had spoken in favor of curbs on nuclear testing and in his inaugural address he listed "the inspection and control of [nuclear] arms" as a major objective of his Presidency.¹⁰⁸ But at his meeting with Khrushchev in Vienna in June 1961, he had been unsuccessful in enlisting the Soviet leader's cooperation. The United States was then observing a voluntary moratorium on nuclear testing both above and below ground that Eisenhower had introduced in October 1958. Without progress in negotiations, however, Kennedy knew that at some point he would face concerted pressure from Congress, the Atomic Energy Commission, and the JCS to resume testing.

The Joint Chiefs had been urging Kennedy to resume testing almost from the moment he took office, if not in the atmosphere then underground, underwater, and in outer space. Some of their arguments were highly technical, but their overall position was relatively simple and straightforward: without testing they could neither verify the effectiveness of the existing nuclear deterrent nor be assured of new weapons to protect future security.¹⁰⁹ After the Soviets resumed

atmospheric testing in September 1961, Kennedy gave in.¹¹⁰ One of the experiments the Soviets conducted, on October 30, 1961, was a colossal “super bomb” nicknamed *Tsar Bomba* (King of Bombs) that had an explosive yield of 58 megatons, the largest nuclear device ever detonated. Seeing no practical military requirement for a bomb that size, the Joint Chiefs dismissed the test as a stunt, designed for propaganda purposes and to intimidate other countries.¹¹¹

The U.S. testing program resumed in a less flamboyant fashion, getting off to a shaky and slower start. Owing to the moratorium, U.S. expertise in conducting nuclear experiments had “gone to pot,” as one of those in charge put it, causing delays and difficulties during the first round of underground tests (Operation *Nougat*) in Nevada during the fall of 1961. Problems persisted into the spring of 1962, when the AEC and the Defense Atomic Support Agency (DASA), the organization in charge of proof-testing weapons, resumed atmospheric testing in the Pacific (Operation *Dominic*). Near the outset of the series, several important experiments connected to the development of an antiballistic missile system went awry. Subsequent tests were notably more successful. For the first time, a Polaris submarine launched one of its missiles and detonated the nuclear warhead. Other experiments demonstrated the feasibility of increasing the yield-to-weight ratio and the shelf life of warheads. From these data eventually emerged a new generation of more advanced nuclear weapons.¹¹²

Ending in November 1962, with its final experiments carried out during the Cuban missile crisis, *Dominic* was the last series of atmospheric tests the United States conducted. As the missile crisis wound down, Kennedy and Khrushchev expressed interest in reducing international tensions, starting with a renewed effort to reach a nuclear test ban. A major stumbling block then and for years to come was the need for reliable and effective verification. Khrushchev’s agreement to permit aerial inspections by the United Nations to verify the removal

of the missiles from Cuba was for some in the Kennedy administration a promising sign that the Soviets were becoming more open-minded about accepting reliable verification measures.¹¹³ The Joint Chiefs were less optimistic, and in formulating a negotiating position they raised numerous objections.¹¹⁴ While he went along with his colleagues' recommendations, Taylor felt increasingly frustrated and wanted to do more to further the President's agenda. Seeking to put a positive face on the chiefs' approach to the problem, he asked the Joint Staff what would constitute an "acceptable" agreement to the JCS. But to his disappointment, the Joint Staff found each option to contain shortcomings "of major military significance."¹¹⁵

Uncertain whether the Joint Chiefs would support a test ban, Kennedy worked around them as he did during the Cuban missile crisis. Conspicuously absent from the 13-member U.S. delegation that went to Moscow in July 1963 to do the negotiating was a JCS representative.¹¹⁶ Kennedy would have preferred a comprehensive agreement barring all forms of testing. But he realized that there was insufficient support for such an accord either at home or in the Kremlin. A complete ban would have been tantamount to proscribing new nuclear weapons. Curbing his expectations, he authorized his chief negotiator, W. Averell Harriman, to pursue a treaty banning atmospheric, outer space, and underwater explosions.¹¹⁷ With the negotiations entering their final stage, Kennedy summoned the Joint Chiefs to the White House on July 24, 1963, to urge their cooperation. As Taylor recalled, the Service chiefs reacted with "controlled enthusiasm."¹¹⁸ At the time, the Joint Chiefs were considering a draft memorandum to the Secretary of Defense urging rejection of the accord unless "overriding nonmilitary considerations" dictated otherwise. Yielding to pressure from Taylor and the President, the chiefs shelved their objections and during Senate review of the treaty they grudgingly endorsed it.¹¹⁹

Signed in Moscow on August 5, 1963, the Limited Test Ban Treaty entered into force the following October. A major breakthrough in arms control, it helped set the stage for the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) later in the decade. Weak as it was, JCS support was crucial to the treaty's passage and rested on acceptance by Congress and the President of four safeguards: an aggressive program of underground testing; maintenance of up-to-date research and development facilities; preservation of a residual capability to conduct atmospheric testing; and improved detection capabilities to guard against Soviet cheating. Had the Joint Chiefs opposed the treaty, it almost certainly would have failed of adoption.¹²⁰ Taylor's role, both personally and as Chairman, was crucial to the treaty's approval. Without his persistence in nudging the Service chiefs along and keeping them in line, the outcome almost certainly would have been different. Institutionally, the test ban episode demonstrated that power and influence within the JCS organization were moving slowly but surely into the hands of the Chairman, as Eisenhower's 1958 amendments had largely intended. No longer merely a presiding officer or spokesman, the Chairman emerged from the treaty debate as a key figure in interpreting the chiefs' views and in shaping their advice and recommendations. Henceforth, the Chairman would become more and more the personification of the military point of view, and thus his interpretation of his colleagues' advice would be the final word.

In contrast, the overall authority, prestige, and influence of the Joint Chiefs of Staff as a corporate advisory body had never been lower than by the time the test ban debate drew to a close. Though JCS views still carried considerable weight on Capitol Hill, the same was not true at the White House and elsewhere in the executive branch. Having lost faith in the Joint Chiefs after the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy never regained confidence in his military advisors. Except for Taylor, a trusted personal friend, he kept the JCS at arm's length. Rarely ever openly critical of

their superiors, the Joint Chiefs accepted these ups and downs in their fortunes as part of the job. Reared in a tradition that stressed civilian control of the military, they instinctively deferred to the Commander in Chief's lead and were not inclined to challenge his decisions lest it appear they were impugning his authority. But in so doing, it became increasingly difficult for them to maintain their credibility and to provide reliable professional advice.

Notes

- 62 Taylor quoted in Dino A. Brugioni, *Eyeball to Eyeball: The Inside Story of the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Robert F. McCort, ed. (New York: Random House, 1990), 266; Reeves, 182–183.
- 63 Benjamin C. Bradlee, *Conversations with Kennedy* (New York: Pocket Books, 1976), 117.
- 64 Letter, Taylor to McNamara, July 1, 1964, *FRUS, 1964–68*, X, 97–98.
- 65 Betts, *Soldiers, Statesmen, and Cold War Crises*, 68–69; and McMaster, 22–23. Jeffrey G. Barlow, “President John F. Kennedy and His Joint Chiefs of Staff” (Ph.D. Diss., University of South Carolina, 1981), 202, points out Taylor’s hearing problems.
- 66 Memo, SECDEF to CJCS, April 20, 1961, no subject, JCS 2304/29; JCSM-278-61 to SECDEF, April 26, 1961, “Cuba,” JCS 2304/30.
- 67 Memo, SECDEF to JCS, May 1, 1961, “Cuba Contingency Plans,” JCS 2304/34.
- 68 Memo, SECDEF to SecArmy et al., May 9, 1961, “U.S. Policy Toward Cuba,” JCS 2304/36; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1978), 476–477.
- 69 Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 302–304.
- 70 Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament*, trans. and ed. by Strobe Talbott (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), 511.
- 71 The notion that the Soviets had tactical nuclear weapons in Cuba comes from General Anatoli I. Gribkov, head of the operations directorate of the Soviet General Staff in 1962, speaking at a 1992 conference in Havana. For an elaboration of his views, see Anatoli I. Gribkov and William Y. Smith, *Operations ANADYR: U.S. and Soviet Generals Recount the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Chicago: Edition Q, Inc., 1994), 4–7, 63–68. Mark Kramer, “Tactical Nuclear Weapons, Soviet Command Authority, and the Cuban Missile Crisis,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, no. 3 (Fall 1993), 40–46, debunks the notion that the Soviets were preparing to use tactical nuclear weapons. Other than Gribkov, no Soviet official ever mentioned the presence of these weapons in Cuba. Nor do the documents Gribkov cites confirm that tactical nuclear weapons had actually reached Cuba at the time of the crisis.
- 72 James G. Blight and David A. Welch, eds., *On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2d ed. (New York: Noonday Press, 1990), 33–34.
- 73 Steven Zaloga, “The Missiles of October: Soviet Ballistic Missile Forces During the Cuban Crisis,” *Journal of Soviet Military Studies* 3 (June 1990), 307–308. Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, “One Hell of a Gamble”: *Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958–1964* (New York: Norton, 1997), 171, suggest that the idea of putting missiles in Cuba was Khrushchev’s all along.
- 74 Gribkov and Smith, 23–24. Anadyr was the name of a river in the extreme northeastern Soviet Union.
- 75 Fursenko and Naftali, 180–182.
- 76 James H. Hansen, “Soviet Deception in the Cuban Missile Crisis,” *Studies in Intelligence* 46, no. 1 (2002), 49–58 (unclassified edition).
- 77 Matthew M. Aid, *The Secret Sentry: The Untold History of the National Security Agency* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009), 65.
- 78 Pedlow and Welzenbach, *CIA and the U-2 Program*, 200–201; Current Intelligence Memorandum, September 13, 1962, “Analysis of the Suspect Missile Site at Banes, Cuba,” in Mary S. McAuliffe, ed., *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962* (Washington, DC: History Staff, Central Intelligence Agency, 1992), 71–73; Dino A. Brugioni, *Eyeball to Eyeball: The Inside Story of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Random House, 1990), 120–126.
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- 80 Max Holland, "The 'Photo Gap' that Delayed Discovery of Missiles in Cuba," *Studies in Intelligence* 49, no. 4 (2005), 21 (unclassified edition).
- 81 CM-977-62 to SECDEF, September 24, 1962, "A U.S. Position for Presentation to the Foreign Ministers of the American States," JCS 2304/61.
- 82 Report by J3 to the JCS, October 14, 1962, "Cuba," JCS 2304/69.
- 83 Memo, JSSC to JCS, September 19, 1962, "Cuban Situation," JCS 2304/58; 1st N/H to JCS 2304/58, October 3, 1962. Also see Poole, *JCS and National Policy, 1961-64*, Pt. II, 231-232.
- 84 JCS Meeting, October 15, 1962, Notes Taken by Walter S. Poole on Transcripts of Meetings of the JCS, October-November 1962, dealing with the Cuban Missile Crisis, JHO 07-0035 (declassified and released 1996), hereafter cited as "Poole Notes." Why the President specified 3 months is unknown, but it would have taken him beyond the November elections and into the new Congress.
- 85 Letter to President of the Senate and Speaker of the House Transmitting Bill Authorizing Mobilization of Ready Reserve, September 7, 1962, *Kennedy Public Papers, 1962*, 665; Memo, McNamara to Kennedy, October 4, 1962, "Presidential Interest in SA-2 Missile System and Contingency Planning for Cuba," Kennedy Papers, National Security File, Kennedy Library.
- 86 Pedlow and Welzenbach, *CIA and the U-2 Program*, 207-208.
- 87 NSAM 196, October 22, 1962, "Establishment of an Executive Committee of the National Security Council," Kennedy Papers, National Security Files, JFK Library. Though not officially constituted until October 22, 1962, ExCom began functioning on October 16.
- 88 Taylor, 269.
- 89 See the roundtable discussion of this issue in Blight and Welch, eds., *On the Brink*, 85-86.
- 90 See JCSM-828-62 to SECDEF, October 26, 1962, "Nuclear-Free or Missile-Free Zones," JCS 2422/1, a good overall summary of the JCS position.
- 91 Quoted in Bradlee, *Conversations with Kennedy*, 117.
- 92 Kaplan et al., 206 and 582, fn. 48; Bernard C. Nalty, "The Air Force Role in Five Crises, 1958-1965" (Study done for USAF Historical Division Liaison Office, June 1968), 39-40 (declassified).
- 93 "Meeting with the JCS on the Cuban Missile Crisis," October 19, 1962, in Timothy Naftali and Philip Zelikow, eds., *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy—The Great Crises, Volume Two* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co.: 2001), II, 580-599; Reeves, 379.
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- 99 Memo by Bromley Smith, "Summary Record of NSC Executive Committee Meeting No. 7, October 27, 1962, 10:00 AM," Kennedy Papers, National Security File, Kennedy Library.
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- 101 Memo, Robert F. Kennedy to Rusk, October 30, 1962, *FRUS 1961-63*, XI, 270-271.
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- 106 Bundy, 458.
- 107 Interview with McDonald by Harold Joiner, June 1, 1963, for *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, available at <http://victorianmaysville.com/history/notables/dlm/1963_story.htm>.
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