

The  
Saturday  
Evening  
**POST**  
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*A. M. S. M.*

# IN TIME OF CRISIS

Two top reporters  
combine forces to  
reveal the drama  
and struggle out  
of which emerged  
a turning point  
in the Cold War.

By STEWART ALSOP  
and CHARLES BARTLETT

*Alone in his office, the President  
makes the final, fateful decisions.*



## “There wasn’t one of us who wasn’t pretty sure that we’d have to sink a Russian ship.”

*“We’re eyeball to eyeball, and I think the other fellow just blinked.”*

Those words, spoken in a casual aside by Secretary of State Dean Rusk at the climactic moment of the Cuban crisis, deserve to rank with such immortal phrases as “Don’t fire till you see the whites of their eyes,” and “We have met the enemy and they are ours.” For Rusk’s words epitomize a great moment in American history.

President Kennedy, on November 14, said that the Cuban crisis might well mark “an important turning point in the history of relations between East and West.” At the moment Rusk spoke, the turning point had come, and the essential nature of the Cold War was changed in a way that will affect all our lives.

For some days a handful of men, operating largely in secret, held our destinies in their hands. The roles these men played—and especially the yet unreported role played by United Nations Ambassador Adlai Stevenson—make a fascinating story. But what follows is not another day-to-day recapitulation of the Cuban crisis, which has not yet completely run its course. It is, instead, an attempt to extract from the high drama of the crisis its inner meaning, as that meaning is understood by the men who steered the course of the United States in the shadow of nuclear war.

The best way to understand the crisis is to concentrate on certain untold episodes of the drama which illuminate its true significance. Let us start with that moment when Dean Rusk made his memorable remark.

The blockade of Cuba which President Kennedy had announced in his historic speech on Monday night, October 22, went into effect at 10 A.M. on Wednesday, October 24. At that hour the members of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council filed into the Cabinet Room of the White House.

### Nine Men Around the Table

The Executive Committee had been officially created only a few days before by the President, but it had already achieved the Washington distinction of an abbreviation—ExComm. Nine men sat around the table that Wednesday morning.

The President, his lips compressed and his manner more absorbed than usual, sat at the head of the table. Insistently he asked questions, and when the answers were slow in coming, he tapped his front teeth impatiently with his forefinger, a characteristic gesture. John McCone, chief of the Central Intelligence Agency, started the meeting, as he started all the ExComm meetings, with an intelligence briefing.

Others around the table were Rusk, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, Treasury Secretary Douglas Dillon, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, General Maxwell Taylor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Presidential Assistant McGeorge Bundy, and the President’s speech writer and sounding board, Theodore Sorensen. These are

the nine men who made—and who in the future will make—the live-or-die decisions when the chips are down.

The atmosphere in the Cabinet Room that morning was calm but somber. The President had said that the blockade was only a first step, and that, if the Soviet missiles were not removed, “further action” would be taken. Further action might be a total blockade, air strikes against the missile bases, or even an invasion of Cuba. Given such action, few in that room had any doubt that the Soviets would react violently, in Berlin or elsewhere. Already, the world was on a lower rung of the ladder that might lead to nuclear war.

That morning, about two dozen Soviet ships were steaming toward Cuba. Khrushchev had denounced the blockade as an “act of piracy,” and in the UN, Zorin had said that no Russian ship would submit to search. One of the ExComm members recalls: “There wasn’t one of us in that room who wasn’t pretty sure that in a few hours we’d have to sink one of those Russian ships.”

### “Send That Order in the Clear”

Before that happened, the President was determined to give his opposite number time to think. He ordered that the Navy screen around Cuba should not intercept a Russian ship until absolutely necessary. “Send that order in the clear,” he said, perhaps recalling his own troubles as a junior naval officer with complex code forms. “I want it to go through without delay.”

The day wore on. Reports came in which indicated that some of the Soviet ships appeared to have changed course, and that others had gone dead in the ocean. No one recalls a precise and jubilant moment when it became apparent that Khrushchev’s ships were not going to challenge the American blockade after all. But at some point that afternoon Dean Rusk expressed the growing conviction of the group when he nudged McGeorge Bundy and made his “eyeball to eyeball” remark.

The blink was then no more than a mere dip of the Soviet eyelash, and for four more days the two great nuclear powers remained “eyeball to eyeball.” But that first small Soviet blink was a great moment in history all the same.

Its meaning was later summed up by the President’s brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy: “We all agreed in the end that if the Russians were ready to go to nuclear war over Cuba, they were ready to go to nuclear war, and that was that. So we might as well have the showdown then as six months later.” But Khrushchev’s final and unmistakable blink did not come until the next Sunday. One of the ExComm members calls that day “Sunny Sunday” and, the day before, “Black Saturday.”

On Saturday morning, October 27, the evidence of Soviet intentions pointed both ways. The Soviet ships had indeed turned back. But U-2 reconnaissance planes over Cuba had shown work on the Soviet missile sites proceeding on a

crash basis. The night before, the famous, still-secret Friday-night letter from Khrushchev to Kennedy had arrived. It was a curious document, which also pointed both ways.

The letter, in four sections, began arriving at the State Department toward 11 o’clock in the evening. The first and third parts came first. The President read them, remarked that he saw nothing new in them, and went to bed, leaving instructions not to be awakened unless there was something really new in the other two parts.

The President was not awakened. The letter was long, rambling, emotional and contradictory. For the first time Khrushchev officially acknowledged the existence of his strategic missile sites in Cuba. But a missile, he said, was like a pistol—it could be used to defend or attack, depending on the intentions of the user. His intentions, he piously maintained, were purely defensive, the missiles were under his control alone, and they would be used only in defense against aggression.

In a passage which bore the unmistakable Khrushchev imprint, he compared the President and himself to two men tugging on a rope with a knot in the middle. If both went on tugging, the knot could only be cut “with a sword,” Khrushchev warned. “Mr. President,” he wrote in effect, “if you will stop tugging on your end, I will stop tugging on mine.”

This sounded hopeful—but what did it really mean? The letter was purposely Delphic. It could be read as a veiled offer to remove the Cuban missiles in exchange for an American commitment not to invade Cuba. It could also be read as a not-very-veiled threat of nuclear retaliation against any American attack on Cuba.

### U-2 Pictures Show Red Missiles

Thus, when ExComm met at 10 on Black Saturday, the evidence was mixed. Khrushchev might be looking for a way out. But he might also have decided to play it rough, by seeking to confront the United States with an accomplished fact. The U-2 pictures showed that the missiles would be fully operational in a few days. If Khrushchev could delay a showdown for those few days, we would be looking down the gun barrel of a fully operational Soviet missile complex 90 miles from our shores.

On the morning of Black Saturday two pieces of evidence came in to suggest that Khrushchev had decided to play it rough. At 10 o’clock still another Khrushchev letter was broadcast over Moscow radio. In it Khrushchev upped the ante, demanding the dismantlement of the American-controlled missile bases in Turkey in exchange for the removal of the Cuban missiles. This was bad news. It suggested that Khrushchev was trying to play for time, against the approaching day when his missiles would be in place.

Worse news followed soon. Shortly after 10 A.M. one of our U-2’s was shot down over eastern Cuba by one of the newly installed Soviet surface-to-air missiles, known as the SA-2. This

## PRESIDENT KENNEDY'S CRISIS CABINET

The men pictured on this page are important to all Americans. They are the key advisers to whom President Kennedy turned when the Cuban crisis unfolded. The President will turn to them again with each new challenge in the Cold War. U. S. Presidents have often created special advisory committees in times of national emergency. Many Presidents have also relied heavily on trusted confidants who were not official members of their Cabinets. President Roosevelt had his Harry Hopkins, President Wilson his Colonel House. A President's formal Cabinet can be an unwieldy instrument. It is big; it is overly diverse; it is political. In forming his own personal "Crisis Cabinet," Kennedy moved coldly and decisively. He turned to men he knew and trusted—reaching outside the official bureaucracy of the Cabinet and the National Security Council. Although Attorney General Robert Kennedy, the President's brother, is a member of the Cabinet, he is not by law a member of the National Security Council. One of the President's main motives in forming ExComm, as the Crisis Cabinet came to be called, was to bring his brother into the center of the policy-forming process. This done, he added Theodore Sorensen, his speech writer and "alter ego" and several others—men like John McCone and General Maxwell Taylor—who also lack National Security Council membership. Among other advisers to whom the president turned for consultation and special assignments during the crisis were three "elder statesmen." These three were: Dean Acheson, who was Secretary of State under Truman; Robert Lovett, who served as Secretary of Defense in the Truman Cabinet; and John J. McCloy, former U.S. High Commissioner for Germany. But the eight members of ExComm are the real Crisis Cabinet. They had, and still have, a unique responsibility.



*Gen. Maxwell Taylor and Secretary of State Dean Rusk.*



*Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara.*



*Attorney General Bob Kennedy played a major role in crisis.*



*Special Aide McGeorge Bundy.*



*Treasury Secy. Douglas Dillon.*



*Special Counsel Ted Sorensen.*



*CIA Director John McCone.*

## An opponent charges, "Adlai wanted a Munich. He wanted to trade U.S. bases for Cuban bases."

was the first time an SA-2 had been fired in Cuba. These sophisticated weapons were certainly under Soviet control. They could be used to blind the eyes of the American intelligence while Khrushchev played for time.

One of those present at that Saturday-morning meeting recalls it as "the worst meeting we ever had." For the first time there were signs of short tempers and frayed nerves. The meeting broke up for a late lunch. At four P.M. ExComm reconvened, this time in the elegant Oval Room of the White House. The President presided in his rocker, while his advisers sat uncomfortably about on the white-and-gold French furniture.

Again the news was bad. McNamara reported that two low-flying reconnaissance planes had been fired on, seemingly confirming Khrushchev's intention to play it rough. The moment of decision had arrived.

On one point all present agreed. The Soviet missiles had to be removed or destroyed before they were operational. The next Tuesday, only three days away, was fixed as the latest date for destroying Khrushchev's missiles and antiaircraft rockets with an air strike. The strike might have to come even earlier. An air strike against Cuba would clearly be the next rung on the ladder to nuclear war. Russians as well as Cubans would be killed, and a violent reaction from Khrushchev seemed certain. Perhaps there was still time to avoid that next rung on the ladder.

### The Attorney General's Suggestion

It was Bobby Kennedy who suggested what has since been dubbed "the Trollope ploy." The Victorian novelist, Anthony Trollope, had a standard scene: a young man with no marital intentions makes some imprudent gesture toward a marriage-hungry maiden—he squeezes her hand, even kisses her. The lady instantly seizes the opportunity by shyly accepting what she chooses to interpret as a proposal of marriage.

Robert Kennedy suggested that the President simply interpret the Friday-night letter as a proposal for an acceptable deal, ignoring all the other implications. The President agreed.

"If I understand you correctly, . . ." he wrote, then the deal was on. If Khrushchev would remove his offensive weapons from Cuba, under suitable conditions, the blockade would end, and Cuba would not be invaded.

The letter was sent at eight P.M. At the same time other means, which are still secret, were used to make abundantly plain to Khrushchev the nature of the choice he faced. "K had not very many hours to make up his mind," says one ExComm member, "and he knew it."

As the meeting broke up near midnight, the President remarked that "now it could go either way." All those present knew that if it went the wrong way, we might be close to nuclear war. Not one of them really expected what happened on Sunny Sunday. John McCone heard of Khrushchev's Sunday-morning offer—to remove the

bases on the terms stated by the President—while he was driving back from nine-o'clock Mass. "I could hardly believe my ears," he recalls.

This was, of course, the final, unmistakable blink. It proved once and for all that Khrushchev was *not* "ready to go to nuclear war over Cuba." He is still not ready to do so. It is important to understand what this means—and what it does not mean.

### Khrushchev: Zigzags and Retreats

It does not mean that all danger of nuclear war has passed. Nor does it mean that a show-down policy will always force Khrushchev to retreat—on this point the President, in his post-mortems with his advisers, has been insistent. It *does* mean that Khrushchev is a good Leninist—that he has what Lenin called the "ability to make all necessary practical compromises . . . zigzags and retreats." In short, if we respond firmly where our vital interests are threatened, Khrushchev will choose "zigzags and retreats" rather than nuclear war. This we now know and in this way the essential pattern of the cold war has been altered.

What, then, did Khrushchev hope to achieve in Cuba? How did he hope to achieve it, and why did he fail? Two small but significant scenes in the drama throw a useful light on the answers to these questions. Scene One is played in low key, and unless you understand its meaning, it is a rather dull little scene, which any good director would cut out of a play.

McGeorge Bundy is dining quietly in his pleasant house in the northwest section of Washington. The telephone rings, and when Bundy picks it up he recognizes the familiar voice of Ray Cline, chief of intelligence for the CIA. The carefully cryptic conversation that ensues goes about like this:

CLINE: "Those things we've been worrying about—it looks as though we've really got something."

BUNDY: "You're sure?"

CLINE: "Yes. It looks like we're around seven hundred miles, maybe more."

BUNDY: "OK. I'll handle it at my end."

Early the next morning, October 16, Bundy is in the President's bedroom to give him the most disturbing information any President has received since Pearl Harbor.

Scene Two occurs the same day, when Nikita Khrushchev receives the newly arrived American ambassador, Foy Kohler, in his Kremlin office. Khrushchev is genial, and on the subject of Cuba warmly reassuring.

The announcement of the establishment of a Russian fishing port in Cuba, he says, seems to have caused the President some sort of political trouble. He was furious when he heard about the announcement, he insists. He was vacationing in the Crimea at the time—if he had been in

Moscow, the announcement would never have been made. Soviet purposes in Cuba are, of course, wholly defensive, and the last thing in the world he wants to do is to embarrass the President on the eve of the elections.

The brilliant, gnome-like Kohler listens impassively, then returns to the embassy to report the substance of the conversation to the President, as Khrushchev knew he would do. Thanks to Bundy's bedroom report, the President already knows that the Soviets are placing missiles in Cuba capable of destroying American cities.

The meaning of these two small scenes can be summarized in two sentences. First, the Soviets tried to lay a trap for the United States in Cuba, using maximum duplicity to that end, in order to achieve maximum surprise. Second, we caught them at it.

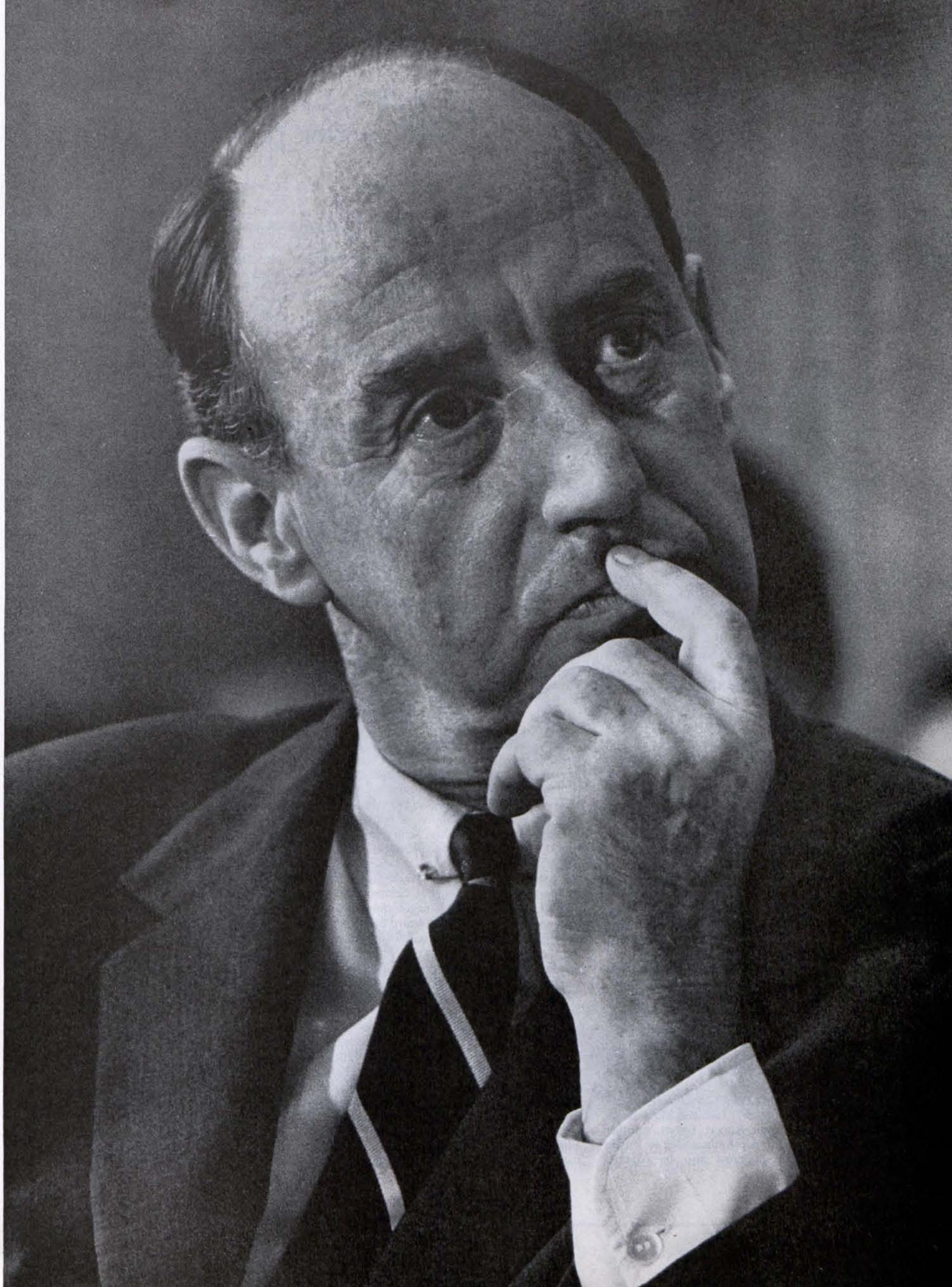
The objective of the trap was both political and strategic. If the trap had been successful, our missile warning system would have been by-passed, and the whole strategic balance overturned. But the President and most of his advisers put the main emphasis on the political objective. "If they'd got away with this one," says one member of ExComm, "we'd have been a paper tiger, a second-class power."

### Costly Attempt to Dupe U.S.

The laying of the trap represented a huge Soviet investment—175 ships, more than 6,000 men and upward of three quarters of a billion dollars. Planning for the operation started last spring, at the latest. There were two essential elements in the plan. One was a systematic attempt to dupe the American leaders into believing that the Soviets had no intention of doing what they intended to do.

Khrushchev's assurance to Kohler was only one in a series of attempts to deceive. The most elaborate attempt came in early October, when Khrushchev and Mikoyan called in Georgi Bolshakov, a subordinate officer in the Soviet Embassy in Washington, who had arranged for Khrushchev's son-in-law, Aleksei Adzhubei, to interview the President. Khrushchev told Bolshakov that his only intention was to give Cuba defensive weapons. Mikoyan interrupted to say emphatically that it was important for the President to understand that only air-defense missiles, incapable of reaching American targets, were being provided. Bolshakov took all this down in pencil in a little blue notebook. But by the time the contents of Bolshakov's notebook reached the President, the President already knew that Mikoyan's promise was false.

Bolshakov was by no means the only instrument of duplicity. In early October Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin flatly assured a Cabinet officer that no missiles capable of reaching the U.S. would be placed in Cuba. He gave the same assurance on October 13 to Chester Bowles. Similar assurances were conveyed in an official statement of the Soviet Government, and by



## “Khrushchev was under heavy pressure to take the risk. He is still under pressure.”

Andrei Gromyko to the President on October 18, two days after Bundy's bedroom report.

In short, an essential part of the Soviet plan was to mislead the President of the United States. The attempt failed for two reasons.

First, the Soviet assurances were not wholly believed. In the intelligence community the majority view was that the Soviets would not risk placing strategic missiles in Cuba. The only major dissenter was CIA Director John McCone. In an “in-house” paper for the CIA, written on his honeymoon in September, McCone stated his conviction that the Russians planned to put long-range missiles in Cuba. But even those in the majority had no inclination to trust the Russians' word.

Second, the U-2 flights continued over Cuba, weather permitting, on a biweekly basis, and on October 14 a U-2 took the photographs which caused Cline's cryptic call to Bundy. Here we come to the great mystery of the drama. Why wasn't that U-2 shot down?

One essential element in Khrushchev's plan was to have his anti-aircraft rockets ready to shoot down our U-2's *before* his missiles were in place. A U-2 was actually shot down on October 27. But that was two weeks too late—the plot had already been discovered. Why weren't the Russian anti-aircraft rockets operational two weeks earlier?

No one really knows. “Somehow the Soviet operation got out of phase,” the CIA men say. We Americans can thank God that it did, for otherwise there would have been no reason for Bundy's report to the President, and the outcome might have been unthinkable.

The five harried, secret days which intervened between Bundy's bedroom report and the President's speech to the nation on Monday, October 22, were best summed up by one of the actors in the drama: “At first we divided into hawks and doves, but by the end a rolling consensus had developed, and except for Adlai, we had all ended up as dawks or hoves.”

### Debate: Air Strike or Blockade?

The hawks favored an air strike to eliminate the Cuban missile bases, either with or without warning. At first the hawks were in a majority. Their number included McCone, Dillon, former Secretary of State Dean Acheson, who was brought in as an elder statesman, General Taylor, all the service chiefs, and eventually Bundy. Secretary Rusk's position does not come through loud and clear—he appears to have been a dawk or a hove from the start. By this the insiders meant that the hawks became less bellicose and the doves became tougher, and they merged as something in between.

The doves opposed the air strike and favored a blockade. Their number included McNamara, Robert Kennedy and Robert Lovett, another elder statesman. Former Ambassador to Russia Llewellyn Thompson must also be counted

among the doves, for he warned that Khrushchev must not suddenly be faced with precipitate action to which he might respond on impulse.

Robert Kennedy, surprisingly, was the leading dove. He argued passionately that an air strike against Cuba would be a Pearl Harbor in reverse and contrary to all American traditions. Acheson was the most hawklike of the hawks. He argued that the Pearl Harbor analogy was totally inexact, since the President had repeatedly given warning that the United States would not permit an offensive-weapons buildup in Cuba.

By Saturday, October 20, the rolling consensus had developed. Secretary McNamara, who gave a “brilliant architectural presentation” at the ExComm meeting on Saturday, was the chief instrument of the consensus. The United States, he argued, must “maintain the options”—a favorite McNamara phrase. The blockade would be a first step. The option of destroying the missiles, and even of invading Cuba, would definitely be maintained. If the blockade did not cause Khrushchev to back down, then the missiles could and would be destroyed before they became operational.

### Stevenson's Dissenting View

Only Adlai Stevenson, who flew down from New York on Saturday, dissented from the ExComm consensus. There is disagreement in retrospect about what Stevenson really wanted. “Adlai wanted a Munich,” says a nonadmiring official who learned of his proposal. “He wanted to trade the Turkish, Italian and British missile bases for the Cuban bases.”

The Stevenson camp maintains that Stevenson was only willing to discuss Guantánamo and the European bases with the Communists after a neutralization of the Cuban missiles. But there seems to be no doubt that he preferred political negotiation to the alternative of military action. White House aide Arthur Schlesinger was assigned to write the uncompromising speech which Stevenson delivered at the UN on Tuesday, and tough-minded John McCloy was summoned from a business conference in Germany to work with Stevenson in the UN negotiations.

In any case, the President heard Stevenson out politely, and then gave his semifinal approval to the McNamara plan. He gave his final approval Sunday. That night, while the issue was still being debated, the President made a prediction: “Whatever way the decision goes, those who were against it will be the lucky ones.”

Happily the President's prediction was inaccurate. Dean Acheson has generously said that in retrospect the final decision was the right one, and the other ex-hawks agree. By Sunny Sunday, when Khrushchev finally blinked, we were in a far better position to strike at the Cuban bases than we would have been a week before. The Organization of American States and the NATO allies were solidly behind us and, above all, the record of Soviet duplicity was plain for all to see.

The real meaning of that duplicity was summed up this way by one of the members of ExComm: “Now we know where we stand with these people. They're gangsters—and you can't trust a word they say.”

As this suggests, none of the men around the President—least of all the President himself—believes that the “important turning point” of which the President spoke means that the Communist tiger is about to change his stripes.

“You've got to remember,” one of the wisest Presidential advisers says, “Khrushchev must have been under very heavy pressure, to take the risk he took. He is still under that pressure, and it may become heavier.” Yet if you add up all the pluses of the Cuban affair—the unanimous support of the Latin Americans, the stanchness of our European allies, the disillusionment of the neutrals, the exposure of Communist duplicity—they heavily outweigh the minuses.

Some of the pluses are intangible. One is the inner sense of confidence among the handful of men with the next-to-ultimate responsibility. “The Bay of Pigs thing was badly planned and never really thought out,” says one of them. “This was different. We knew the facts, knew each other and we thought it through, right to the end.”

As always, the ultimate responsibility was the President's. John F. Kennedy is not an outwardly emotional man, and in the bad days there were few signs that he was passing through the loneliest moments of his lonely job. Once he astonished his wife when he called her at midday and asked her to join him for a walk. Another time he insisted, uncharacteristically, that the children be brought back from Virginia to join him in the White House. But he never lost his sense of humor. On the Sunday of Khrushchev's big blink, he made a wry remark to his brother Bobby: “Perhaps this is the night I should go to the theater.” No doubt he had Ford's Theater in mind.

### “He Never Lost His Nerve”

There was something else he never lost. “Once or twice,” an ExComm member recalls, “the President lost his temper on minor matters. But he never lost his nerve.” This must be counted a huge intangible plus. A President's nerve is the essential factor when the two great nuclear powers are “eyeball to eyeball.”

There is one final plus. We now know that Khrushchev is a realist as well as a Communist, that when doctrine conflicts with realities, the realities will govern his conduct. This knowledge holds out hope. The hope is not for a lasting, peaceful world settlement, for that will not happen so long as Communists are Communists. The hope is, instead, that somehow the world will rock along without the kind of war that might destroy us all. That is, after all, a good deal to hope for, and that was the real meaning of Nikita Khrushchev's blink. **THE END**

## "WE'LL SHOW THE AMERICANS WE'RE SERIOUS."

**H**ow do Soviet citizens react to a crisis? As the world hovered on the brink of conflict, Russian-speaking photographer Jerry Cooke wandered the streets of Moscow recording reaction to the crisis for *The Saturday Evening Post*. The people he questioned were deeply concerned about the threat of annihilation. They showed that anxiety in different ways.

Some were brash and angry. "You Americans are pigs," a small boy said, waving a sign over his head. An elderly woman nodded her head. "Your friend Kennedy is lucky he's not here. We'd tear him to pieces."

Others were quietly determined. An invalid hobbled up to Cooke, wagged his finger for emphasis and said, "I'll go to war tomorrow, on my crutches if necessary." An old man on a pension agreed. "We have to stand by Cuba come what may. We have to show the Americans we're serious."

Some Russians reacted with a very human indifference—"Who cares about Cuba?" Many were frankly fearful, not just for themselves but for their families. "I don't care what happens to me," said ballerina Mariana Andreiva. "I just don't want my little son to die."

Few Russians thought Cooke would tell the truth about them. "You may be honest, but back in the United States they'll change it all anyway."



*Cabbie: "War? I've been there. I am used to fighting."*



*Office worker: "It's all the fault of that little bunch of American millionaires. You better get rid of them."*



*Laborer: "Tell me why you don't elect someone who doesn't always feel like going to war."*



*Grandmother: "These demonstrations are very stupid. What are all these children doing?"*



*Siberian visitor in Red Square: "We work very hard on the land. We came to see Moscow. Here everyone talks about Cuba. We do not understand this. War is bad for people everywhere."*