

KENNEDY AND THE CRISIS PRESIDENCY

For an organization that did not adapt easily to change, John F. Kennedy's Presidency was one of the most formidable challenges ever to face the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Representing youth, enthusiasm, and fresh ideas, Kennedy entered the White House in January 1961 committed to blazing a "New Frontier" in science, space, and the "unresolved problems of peace and war."¹ As a Senator and Presidential candidate, Kennedy had been highly critical of the Eisenhower administration's defense program, faulting it for allowing the country to lag behind the Soviet Union in missile development and for failing to develop a credible conventional alternative to nuclear war. "We have been driving ourselves into a corner," Kennedy insisted, "where the only choice is all or nothing at all, world devastation or submission—a choice that necessarily causes us to hesitate on the brink and leaves the initiative in the hands of our enemies."² Instead of threatening an all-out nuclear response, Kennedy advocated graduated levels of conflict tailored to the needs of the situation and the degree of provocation, in line with the "flexible response" doctrine put forward by retired General Maxwell Taylor, former Secretary of State Dean Acheson, and others.

Refining and implementing the President's concepts fell mainly to the new Secretary of Defense, Robert S. McNamara, who served both Kennedy and his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson. President of the Ford Motor Company before coming to Washington, McNamara had no prior experience in defense affairs other than his service as a "statistical control" officer in the Army Air Forces during World War II. Applying an active management style, McNamara soon became famous for his aggressive, centralized administrative methods and sophisticated approach toward evaluating military programs and requirements. To assist him, McNamara installed a management team that mixed experienced officials with younger "whiz kids" adept at "systems analysis," a relatively new science based on complex, computerized quantitative models. The net effect by the time McNamara stepped down in 1968 was a veritable revolution in defense management and acquisition and an unprecedented degree of civilian intrusion into military planning and decision-making. "I'm here to originate and stimulate new ideas and programs," McNamara declared, "not just to referee arguments and harmonize interests."³

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As the McNamara revolution unfolded, the Joint Chiefs looked on with a mixture of awe and apprehension. Made up initially of holdovers appointed by Eisenhower, the JCS were generally older than McNamara and his entourage and skeptical of making abrupt changes to practices and procedures built on years of experience, painstaking compromise, and meticulous planning. To the incoming Kennedy administration, the JCS seemed overly cautious, tradition-bound, and impervious to new ideas. Inclined to give McNamara the benefit of the doubt, Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Admiral Arleigh A. Burke at first lauded the Secretary's "sharp, decisive" style and expected him to be "extremely good." By the time he retired as CNO in August 1961, however, Burke saw McNamara and the JCS as working at cross purposes. Air Force Chief of Staff General Thomas D. White agreed. In White's opinion, McNamara and his staff were "amateurs" who had little or no appreciation of military affairs. Most uneasy of all was the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Lyman L. Lemnitzer, USA, an Eisenhower appointee steeped in "old school" ways. Though McNamara promised not to act on important matters without consulting his military advisors, he offered no assurances that he would heed their views. All too often, Lemnitzer recalled, the JCS would deliberate "long and hard" to resolve a problem and reach a consensus, only to have McNamara turn their recommendations over to a systems analysis team "with no military experience" to reshape their advice.⁴

In addition to their difficulties with McNamara, the JCS faced an uphill struggle to retain influence at the White House. Believing the National Security Council system had become unwieldy and unresponsive under Eisenhower, Kennedy opted for a simplified organization and a streamlined NSC Staff with enhanced powers. The principal architect of the new system was Kennedy's assistant for national security affairs McGeorge Bundy, who believed that simplified methods would give the President a broader range of views. "[T]he more advice you get," he assured the President, "the better off you will be."⁵ Soon to go were the Planning Board, the Operations Coordinating Board, and the other support machinery created by Eisenhower that had given the JCS direct and continuous access to the top echelons of the policy process. As one sign of their diminished role, the Joint Chiefs closed their office of special assistant for national security affairs, which they had maintained in the White House since the early 1950s, and conducted business with the NSC through a small liaison office located next door in the Old Executive Office Building.⁶

Under Kennedy, the NSC became a shadow of its former self. Cutting staff by one-third, he abandoned the practice of developing broad, long-range policies in the NSC and used it primarily for addressing current problems and crisis management. Meetings followed an irregular schedule and were informal compared with the two previous administrations. In addition to the statutory members, regular

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participants at NSC meetings came to include the President's brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, and White House political consultant Theodore C. Sorensen. By law, the JCS remained advisors to the council, but under the new structure and procedures they were further removed than ever from the President's "inner circle." Still, whatever problems or weaknesses Kennedy's deconstruction of the NSC may have introduced, there was no rush to correct them under the succeeding Johnson administration, which seemed content with the status quo.⁷

A further blow to the Joint Chiefs' influence was Kennedy's decision in the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs fiasco in April 1961 to give retired Army Chief of Staff General Maxwell D. Taylor an office in the White House as the President's Military Representative (MILREP). The President originally had Taylor in mind to succeed Allen Dulles as Director of Central Intelligence, but after the Bay of Pigs embarrassment, Kennedy wanted an experienced military advisor close at hand to avoid another "dumb mistake."⁸ Taylor's position was analogous in some ways to Admiral Leahy's during World War II, though Taylor did not participate in the Joint Chiefs' deliberations or represent their views. Upon taking the job as the President's MILREP, Taylor assured Lemnitzer that he did not intend to act as a White House "roadblock" to JCS recommendations.⁹ His assigned tasks were to provide the President with an alternative source of military advice, to review recommendations from the Pentagon before they went to the Oval Office, and to serve as the President's liaison for covert operations.¹⁰ Taylor's appointment actually worked out better than the JCS expected because they now had someone between McNamara and the President. According to Henry E. Glass, who served as special assistant to the Secretary of Defense, McNamara resented having his advice second-guessed and eventually persuaded Kennedy that Taylor would be more valuable at the Pentagon as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs (where McNamara would have control over him) than at the White House. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., historian-in-residence at the White House, had a different view. He characterized Taylor's appointment as a temporary measure until General Lemnitzer's term expired and Kennedy could move Taylor to the Pentagon as CJCS. In any event, on October 1, 1962, Taylor became Chairman, replacing Lemnitzer, who went to Europe as NATO Supreme Commander.¹¹

THE BAY OF PIGS

Kennedy's early months in office were the formative period in his relationship with the Joint Chiefs and left an indelible impression on all involved. His primary aim in defense policy was to move away from Eisenhower's heavy reliance on nuclear weapons by developing a more balanced and flexible force posture. Most of the JCS at the

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time—the Army and Navy especially—agreed with Kennedy’s basic objective and welcomed his efforts to make changes. However, the JCS soon found McNamara’s methods of carrying out the President’s orders heavy-handed and counterproductive to the development of smooth and efficient civil-military relations. Efforts to convince McNamara and his staff that it would take time and patience to implement the changes the President wanted initially met with strong quizzical objections. The honeymoon between the administration and the JCS was brief. Rumors of growing tensions and discontent at the Pentagon surfaced within weeks after the inauguration.

No episode more aptly captured these difficulties of adjustment than the Joint Chiefs’ role in the Bay of Pigs operation, the ill-fated attempt by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), using Cuban expatriates, to invade Cuba and overthrow Fidel Castro in the spring of 1961. By the time Kennedy took office, the Bay of Pigs invasion had been in gestation for nearly a year, though few outside the CIA knew of the program’s existence. Not until early January 1961 did the Joint Chiefs officially become privy to the details, though even then, by Admiral Burke’s account, they were “kept pretty ignorant” and told only “partial truths.” All the same, what the CIA revealed of its preparations up to that point was far from reassuring and left the Joint Chiefs and their special operations staff decidedly uneasy over achieving stated goals.¹²

Similar misgivings had raced through President-elect Kennedy’s mind when he first learned of the operation during a CIA briefing on November 18, 1960.¹³ On the eve of the inauguration, realizing that Kennedy had doubts, Eisenhower assured him that nothing was firm and that it would be up to the new administration to decide whether to proceed. Taking Eisenhower at his word, Kennedy gave the matter top priority and during his early days in office he held a round of meetings with the Director of Central Intelligence, Allen Dulles, the Joint Chiefs, and other senior advisors to examine the details and explore options. Much to the President’s surprise, the CIA described plans and preparations that were substantially farther along than Eisenhower had let on, leaving the distinct impression that it might be too late to turn back.¹⁴

Indications are that, at this stage, Kennedy looked to the Joint Chiefs to provide him with ongoing analysis of the invasion plans and to apply a brake on any ill-conceived actions by the CIA. With the new administration still organizing itself, Kennedy had practically nowhere to turn other than the JCS for the professional expertise and insights he needed. Somewhere along the way, however, lines of communication broke down. Having had limited involvement in the operation from its inception and knowing only what the CIA chose to disclose to them about the invasion force, the Joint Chiefs were uncomfortable offering much more than a general assessment. Weighting one thing against another, Joint Staff planners (J-5) rated the chances of success as “very doubtful.”¹⁵ But in their formal submission to the Secretary of Defense and the

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President, the JCS appeared to offer a more upbeat evaluation and suggested that the operation as originally conceived stood a “fair chance of ultimate success.” The chiefs neglected to mention, however, that “fair chance” meant one in three.¹⁶

Perhaps sensing his military advisors’ uneasiness over the operation, Kennedy continued to evince misgivings. The initial plan presented to him by the CIA called for the exiles to land in force near the town of Trinidad, a popular seaside resort on Cuba’s south-central coast. But at the State Department’s urging, the President agreed to tone down the operation lest it provoke adverse reactions in Latin America and the United Nations. Terming the Trinidad plan too “spectacular,” he directed the CIA to find a “quiet” site for the landing. The upshot was the selection of the Bay of Pigs, a swampy but relatively secluded area in Cuba’s Zapata region to the west.¹⁷ After examining the amended plan, Admiral Burke upped the odds for success slightly and told the President he thought they were about fifty-fifty. Burke, however, was offering a personal opinion. Later, Kennedy complained that the JCS had let him down by not giving him better warning of the risks and pitfalls.¹⁸

The landing, which took place on April 17, 1961, was probably doomed before the invaders hit the shore. Inadequately equipped, ill-trained, and ineptly led, the 1,400 Cuban expatriates in the invasion force were no match for Castro’s larger veteran army. Poorly coordinated air attacks launched from bases in Central America failed to suppress the Cuban air force. The action was over in 3 days. Whether a more hospitable landing site and/or stronger air support would have changed the outcome is a matter of conjecture. The Joint Chiefs had taken a dim view of moving the landing from Trinidad to the Bay of Pigs and had considered effective air support the key to the entire operation. But they had never pressed their views in the face of the President’s obvious determination to minimize overt U.S. involvement. Nor had McNamara, still new to dealing with the military, insisted that the JCS be more forthcoming and specific. Never again would he hesitate to second-guess the chiefs or to offer an opinion on their advice.

To sort out what went wrong, President Kennedy persuaded General Taylor to oversee an investigation. Assisting him were Attorney General Kennedy, Director of Central Intelligence Dulles, and Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Burke. During the inquiry, General Taylor and Robert Kennedy developed a close and lasting friendship. Taylor and the study group took extensive testimony from those who had been in on the planning and decisionmaking. On June 13, 1961, they presented their findings to the President. Written almost exclusively by Taylor, the group’s final report took the Joint Chiefs to task for not critiquing the CIA’s plan more closely and for not being more forthcoming in offering the President options. “Piecing all the evidence together,” Taylor recalled, “we concluded that whatever reservations the Chiefs had about the Zapata plan . . . they never expressed their concern to the President in

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such a way as to lead him to consider seriously a cancellation of the enterprise or the alternative of backing it up with U.S. forces.”¹⁹

Despite the study group’s findings, Kennedy never publicly blamed anyone other than himself for the debacle. Seeking to avoid similar incidents, he told the chiefs that in the future he expected them to provide “direct and unfiltered” advice and to act like “more than military men.”²⁰ All the same, it was Taylor’s impression that the whole experience “hung like a cloud” over Kennedy’s relations with the JCS. Attempting to clear the air, Kennedy met with them in the Pentagon on May 27, 1961. Though no detailed records of the meeting survived, Kennedy at one point apparently lectured the chiefs on their responsibility for providing him with unalloyed advice, drawing on a paper Taylor wrote earlier. But the response he got was “icy silence.”²¹ Henceforth, Kennedy remained respectful but skeptical of JCS advice. “They always give you their bullshit about their instant reaction and their split-second timing,” he later remarked, “but it never works out. No wonder it’s so hard to win a war.”²²

BERLIN UNDER SIEGE

No sooner had the fallout from the Bay of Pigs begun to settle when a more ominous crisis arose over access rights to Berlin. Kennedy knew that the city was a frequent flashpoint and had named former Secretary of State Dean Acheson as his special advisor on NATO affairs in February 1961, with the Berlin question part of his mandate.²³ Existing plans for defending Western access rights to the city rested on NATO doctrine of the 1950s, stressing the early use of nuclear weapons, and bore the strong imprint of the NATO Supreme Commander General Lauris Norstad, USAF, a leading proponent of deterrence through the threat of massive retaliation. In a preliminary assessment that reached the Oval Office in early April 1961, Acheson dismissed these plans as dangerous and ineffectual and urged Kennedy to call the Soviets’ bluff by pursuing a combination of diplomatic initiatives and nonnuclear military options that involved, among other things, sending a heavily armed convoy down the Autobahn to Berlin.²⁴

The Joint Chiefs recommended a more cautious response. Given the limitations of U.S. conventional forces at the time, they would not rule out possible recourse to nuclear weapons if the crisis escalated, though as a practical matter they seemed to feel that with skillful diplomacy the situation need not go that far. Treating Acheson’s proposals as overly provocative, they assured the President that they had already explored the convoy idea and similar military actions and had reached the conclusion that the use of substantial ground forces “even if adequately supported by air is not militarily feasible.” A smaller probe, they argued, would serve just as well as a test of

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Soviet intentions and would be far less confrontational than a heavily armed convoy. Two years earlier, with strengthening deterrence their main objective, the JCS had recommended a large-scale conventional buildup in Europe, both to impress the Soviets with the West's resolve and to be better prepared if a showdown did occur. This continued to be the Joint Chiefs' preferred approach to addressing the crisis.²⁵

To be effective, the Joint Chiefs' recommended strategy would have required a mobilization of forces, increased defense spending, and an acceptance that, should all else fail, recourse to nuclear weapons might be unavoidable. As yet, President Kennedy was unprepared to go quite that far. With memories of the Bay of Pigs still fresh, he was doubly cautious in listening to JCS advice or endorsing a course of military action. But after his disastrous Vienna summit meeting with Khrushchev in early June, he steadily revised his thinking. Hoping the Vienna meeting would lay the groundwork for a peaceful settlement, Kennedy was instead taken aback by Khrushchev's bullying and refusal to engage in serious negotiations. When Khrushchev finished brow-beating Kennedy, he placed another ultimatum on the table, threatening to sign a treaty with the East Germans by the end of the year. "I've got a terrible problem," Kennedy observed afterwards. "If [Khrushchev] thinks I'm inexperienced and have no guts, until we remove those ideas we won't get anywhere with him."²⁶ In late June 1961, convinced that a showdown was coming, Kennedy created an interdepartmental Berlin Task Force to coordinate overall policy and directed McNamara to take a closer look at military preparations to counter Khrushchev's ultimatum.²⁷

The ensuing review confirmed that the United States had yet to achieve a credible flexible-response force posture. In a rough estimate of requirements, the Joint Chiefs recommended a supplemental appropriation of \$18 billion, mobilization of Reserve units, and an increase in the size of the Armed Forces by 860,000. Yet even with these increases in strength, "main reliance" would still come down to a nuclear response.²⁸ Meeting with McNamara, Lemnitzer, Taylor, and Secretary of State Dean Rusk at his Hyannis Port home on July 8, Kennedy declared the chiefs' recommendations to be unacceptable and said he wanted a "political program" backed by enhanced conventional military power "on a scale sufficient both to indicate our determination and to provide the communists time for second thoughts and negotiation."²⁹ With the President's goals further clarified, the Joint Staff assembled revised estimates that became part of the discussion at a series of ad hoc meetings involving McNamara, Acheson, Rusk, and senior White House staff.³⁰ The upshot was the President's nationally televised speech on July 25 warning of grave dangers over Berlin and calling for a supplemental budget increase of \$3.2 billion to augment the Armed Forces by 217,000, with most of the increase in ground troops.³¹

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Congress acted quickly to give the President practically everything he wanted. But the need to develop an agreed position with U.S. allies and problems associated with mobilizing the Reserves posed unexpected delays. Moreover, from conversations between McNamara and Norstad in Paris in late July, it was clear that SACEUR lacked a workable plan for assuring access to Berlin using solely or even primarily conventional forces.³² Until these problems were resolved, the administration had no choice but to fall back on the nuclear-oriented posture it inherited from Eisenhower, a decision that became almost automatic after the increase in tensions precipitated by erection of the Berlin Wall on August 13. Seeing the wall as a major escalation of the crisis, Kennedy resolved to meet the challenge head on, telling McNamara that the time had come to adopt “a harder military posture.”³³

Behind the President’s decision to toughen his stance over Berlin was a growing body of credible evidence debunking the missile gap and the artificial constraints it imposed on the administration’s behavior. As early as February, a skeptical McNamara had acknowledged that the missile gap was probably more myth than reality during a background briefing for reporters. But he retracted his statement under pressure from the White House.³⁴ Based on information provided by Colonel Oleg Penkovskiy, the CIA’s “mole” inside the Soviet General Staff, and photos from the Discoverer satellite program, it became apparent over the summer that earlier intelligence estimates had overstated Soviet long-range missile capabilities and that the United States retained overall strategic nuclear superiority. Though Kennedy refused to treat the new evidence as conclusive, there was no denying that the gap, if it existed at all, was far less extreme than previously assumed.³⁵

On September 13, 1961, the Joint Chiefs gave President Kennedy his first formal briefing on SIOP-62, the current war plan for strategic bombardment of the Sino-Soviet bloc. Afterwards proclaiming the plan to be overly rigid, he ordered changes (already initiated by McNamara) that would allow greater choice in the selection of targets and the timing and sequence of attacks.³⁶ At the same time, however, knowing that the United States retained the edge in strategic power, Kennedy and key aides adopted a significantly tougher line toward the Berlin crisis, both to reassure U.S. allies and to pressure the Soviets. Thus, in the weeks following the SIOP briefing, McNamara, Rusk, and Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell L. Gilpatric all made high-profile public appearances in support of administration policy. Echoing the policies of the previous 8 years, they reaffirmed the President’s determination to stand fast and their certainty that the United States had the resources to prevail. “Our nuclear stockpile,” McNamara confirmed, “is several times that of the Soviet Union and we will use either tactical weapons or strategic weapons in whatever quantities wherever, whenever it’s necessary to protect this nation and its interests.”³⁷

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The blueprint for carrying out these declarations was National Security Decision Memorandum (NSDM) 109, a compendium of phased responses for the defense of Western rights to Berlin, also known as the “poodle blanket” paper. The first three phases involved pressure through diplomatic channels, economic sanctions, and maritime harassment, followed by or in conjunction with military pressures and escalation to the full use of nuclear weapons. Adopted by the NSC in late October 1961, NSDM 109 was largely the product of the Office of International Security Affairs in OSD, headed by Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul H. Nitze. “In case one response failed,” Nitze recalled, “we would go to the next and then the next, and so on.” Many of the proposed measures in the “preferred sequence,” such as the use of diplomatic protests, small unit probes, and the coercion of Soviet shipping in retaliation for obstruction of access to Berlin, resembled the options compiled the year before by Norstad’s Live Oak planners in Paris. But as far as Nitze and his staff were concerned, Live Oak had barely scratched the surface. Early drafts of NSDM 109 listed so many possible courses of action that the joke around Nitze’s office was that it would take a piece of paper the size of a horse blanket to list them all. A condensed version reduced the horse blanket to the size of a “poodle blanket.” Hence the paper’s nickname.³⁸

Although the Joint Chiefs belatedly offered their own “preferred sequence” paper, it was almost entirely oriented toward military sanctions and too detailed, in the opinion of Deputy Secretary Gilpatric, to serve as policy guidance.³⁹ Moreover, during a meeting with the President on October 20, it slipped out that the JCS had yet to reach full agreement on how their preferred sequence plan should be implemented. In a scene reminiscent of their internal quarrels over Laos (see below), Lemnitzer and Army Chief of Staff General George H. Decker wanted to move quickly with the deployment of forces once mobilization reached its peak, while Air Force Chief of Staff General Curtis LeMay and Chief of Naval Operations Admiral George W. Anderson, Jr., urged patience and delay. Assured by McNamara that a final decision need not be taken until November, Kennedy politely shrugged off the matter as an honest difference of professional opinion.⁴⁰

A week later, on October 27–28, the crisis peaked with the dramatic confrontation between U.S. and Soviet tanks at “Checkpoint Charlie,” a key transit point between the Soviet and U.S. sectors in Berlin. Anticipating trouble, the Joint Chiefs had taken steps to bolster the city’s garrison but had warned the President that there was little chance allied forces could hold against a determined Soviet attack. Taylor agreed, describing it as “a hell of a bad idea” to try to defend the city.⁴¹ Despite the face-off, however, neither side seemed eager for a fight and the incident ended peacefully, with Soviet tanks the first to withdraw. From that point on, though the wall remained, tensions gradually relaxed.

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Exactly why the Soviets backed down may never be known. But thanks to the limited opening of Soviet and East European archives following the end of the Cold War, the explanation that suggests itself is that the Warsaw Pact high command lacked confidence in the ability of its forces to prevail in a showdown. On September 25, 1961, with the crisis gathering momentum, the Warsaw Pact announced that over the next few weeks it would conduct a command post exercise called BURIA. The Warsaw Pact's largest exercise to date, BURIA simulated a military conflict arising from ongoing tensions over Berlin and tested the Eastern Bloc's ability to conduct unified operations. With the exercise under way, the CIA assessed BURIA's purpose as two-fold: to convince the West of the Soviet bloc's military strength, readiness, and determination in the current crisis, and to increase pressure on the West to make concessions or to acquiesce to Communist demands.⁴²

BURIA lasted from September 28 to October 10, 1961, and proved a disappointment to the Warsaw Pact high command. Once fighting erupted, the Soviets and their East European allies were supposed to shift quickly from a defensive to an offensive posture. Using tactical nuclear weapons and fast-moving tank divisions to spearhead the assault, Warsaw Pact forces planned to smash through NATO defenses and occupy Paris within a fortnight. But as the exercise unfolded, it encountered unexpected command and control, mobilization, transportation, and logistical problems. Assuming nuclear retaliation by the West, Soviet army doctors reckoned a 50 percent loss of strength in front line units. A shortage of interpreters and faulty radio equipment crippled coordination among East German, Soviet, Polish, and Czech commanders. Communications between land and sea forces off the north German coast were practically nonexistent. Soviet maps provided to East European forces proved largely useless because they were written in Russian.⁴³

Whether Kennedy and the Joint Chiefs paid much attention to BURIA is unclear. Even though Western intelligence monitored the exercise, there are few references to it in subsequent estimates. Still, those in Washington with access to the intelligence on BURIA knew that Warsaw Pact forces were poorly organized and in a relatively weak position to risk a military confrontation with the West. About their only option would have been to use nuclear weapons, a dangerous course that the Joint Chiefs expected the Soviets to avoid unless they felt seriously threatened. Precipitating a nuclear conflict was never the U.S. intention in any event. Despite their differences over the scale and scope of the Western military buildup, Kennedy and the JCS agreed that its fundamental purpose was to pressure the Soviets into respecting the status quo. With the exception of the Berlin Wall, which remained in place for nearly three decades, they by and large succeeded. "It's not a very nice solution," Kennedy conceded, "but a wall is a hell of a lot better than a war."⁴⁴

LAOS

At the same time President Kennedy and the Joint Chiefs were wrestling with Soviet threats to Berlin, there loomed an equally grave crisis on the other side of the world, in the small, remote kingdom of Laos, formerly part of French Indochina. Like Cuba and Berlin, Laos was another of the unresolved problems passed from Eisenhower to Kennedy. At issue was a steadily escalating political and military conflict between the Communist Pathet Lao, supported by neighboring North Vietnam, Communist China, and the Soviet Union, and the U.S.-backed Royal Lao Government (RLG) dominated by General Phoumi Nosavan. By the beginning of 1961, the two sides were locked in a see-saw battle for control of the Laotian administrative capital of Vientiane. In alerting Kennedy to the situation as he was leaving office, Eisenhower warned of larger implications: "If Laos is lost to the Free World, in the long run we will lose all of Southeast Asia." By comparison, the gathering conflict in neighboring South Vietnam was a mere sideshow.⁴⁵

The Joint Chiefs initially advised the incoming administration to do all it could to keep Laos from going Communist, up to and including unilateral U.S. intervention with "sizable" military forces.⁴⁶ Even though the Laotian army (Forces Armées de Laos, or FAL) had seldom made effective use of U.S. assistance, Kennedy agreed to consider increasing American help. But he strongly opposed the go-it-alone approach and leaned toward a negotiated settlement that would neutralize the country under a coalition government. Above all, he wanted it understood that intervention with U.S. combat troops was a last resort. Apparently not expecting the President to take such a firm stand, General Lemnitzer assured him that the JCS did not advocate the deployment of "major U.S. forces" and that their main concern was to bolster "indigenous" capabilities. Guarding his options, Kennedy directed the JCS to continue to study U.S. intervention but indicated he would hold a decision in abeyance until efforts to reach a diplomatic solution ran their course.⁴⁷

Throughout the crisis, the Joint Chiefs and their superiors had less than reliable intelligence on the situation inside Laos. SIGINT was virtually nonexistent and U-2s had limited applicability.⁴⁸ The information the JCS received came mainly from the U.S. Embassy in Vientiane and U.S. military advisors working with the FAL. In early March 1961, with the military balance tipping in favor of the Communists, the President approved an interagency plan (MILL POND) for limited overt and covert assistance to the RLG and its allies.⁴⁹ Over the next several weeks, Pacific Theater Commander (CINCPAC) Admiral Harry D. Felt stepped up the delivery of arms and equipment to the FAL. At the same time, he began assembling a command staff and earmarking U.S. units for a joint task force (JTF 116) that would

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form the nucleus of a Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) Field Force should he be ordered to intervene. Estimates assembled by the Joint Staff projected an intervention force of some 60,000 U.S. troops, augmented by token units from nearby SEATO countries. Anything smaller, JCS planners insisted, would fail to impress or pressure either the Soviets or North Vietnamese and could draw the United States into an open-ended war on the Asian mainland.⁵⁰

Despite preparations to intervene, the preferred U.S. solution remained a diplomatic settlement. As Secretary of State Dean Rusk described the administration's strategy, "Even if we move in, the object is not to fight a big war but to lay the foundation for negotiation."⁵¹ During talks with British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan toward the end of March, Kennedy acknowledged that he did not accord much strategic importance to Laos and was prepared to accept "anything short of the whole of Laos being overrun." Should intervention become unavoidable, he was thinking of deploying four or five U.S. battalions to hold Vientiane and a few bridges across the Mekong River long enough to reach an agreement. But he had yet to settle on a specific course of action and looked to the British to help find a solution through diplomacy.⁵²

Convinced that the President was underestimating the seriousness of the situation and Laos' importance, the Joint Chiefs of Staff continued to favor a strong show of force as the only way of avoiding a larger conflict. But as time passed with no new decisions from the White House and as the FAL suffered one setback after another, the JCS saw the opportunity for effective action slipping away. With large-scale intervention appearing unlikely, they advised staying out. At a pivotal meeting on April 29 with the Secretary of Defense and Attorney General Kennedy, they made their concerns known and urged shelving plans for intervention, provoking McNamara to remark snidely that "we had missed having government troops who were willing to fight." Most cautious of all was Army Chief of Staff Decker, who considered a conventional war in Southeast Asia a losing cause. Decker offered one reason after another why going into Laos at this point had drawbacks. Ultimately, in his view, it came down to a question of whether the results would be worth the cost. "[I]f we go in," he said, "we should go in to win, and that means bombing Hanoi, China, and maybe even using nuclear bombs."⁵³

Decker's reference to the use of nuclear weapons was not the first time the subject came up with respect to Laos, but it put the potential consequences of an escalating and widening conflict in Southeast Asia into sharper focus than ever before. Whether the JCS had a specific plan for mounting nuclear operations in Laos is unclear. Detailed planning for a Laotian operation was a function of Admiral Felt's staff, which produced several operational and concept plans during the crisis, none involving nuclear weapons other than against the threat of large-scale Chinese

intervention.⁵⁴ But in light of the nuclear-oriented tactics and strategy introduced during the Eisenhower years, it was practically routine for the use of nuclear weapons to be considered at one point or another in the planning process. The Kennedy administration had vowed to change that practice, but its preferences had yet to affect the planning guidance employed by the Joint Staff and the combatant commanders.⁵⁵

The use of nuclear weapons was thus present, if not explicit, in policymakers' and military planners' minds throughout the Laos crisis. Yet the decisive factors that steered Kennedy away from military intervention were the absence of congressional support for military action and his own concern, in the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs, about the quality and soundness of JCS advice. In early May, Kennedy polled the chiefs for their views. All, to one degree or another, still favored the application of some form of military power, but speaking individually, they offered no coherent courses. Instead, they described a series of separate measures which, taken together, might invite a full-scale war with North Vietnam and Communist China.⁵⁶ With the Joint Chiefs unable to offer a credible military option, Kennedy continued to rely on diplomacy to yield a settlement. "Thank God the Bay of Pigs happened when it did," he later remarked. "Otherwise we'd be in Laos by now—and that would be a hundred times worse."⁵⁷

Meanwhile, a fragile ceasefire descended on Laos, opening the way by mid-May for the 14-nation Geneva Conference to reconvene work on a negotiated settlement. Without the continuing threat of U.S. and/or SEATO military intervention, the Joint Chiefs doubted that there could ever be an agreement that did not favor the absorption of Laos into the Sino-Soviet bloc. W. Averell Harriman, the senior U.S. representative to the Geneva talks and, in President Kennedy's eyes, a highly respected authority on negotiating with the Communists, took a similar view.⁵⁸ Consequently, as the talks went forward, the Joint Staff, with White House approval, continued to review plans and preparations to insert U.S. or SEATO forces into Laos. But by September, the administration's preoccupation with Berlin and the diversion of military assets to meet the crisis there left the Joint Chiefs skeptical of achieving a favorable outcome at the bargaining table. JCS efforts to interest senior policymakers in a limited SEATO buildup in the region, backed by U.S. air, sea, and logistical support, met with the cold rebuff from OSD that such actions might "dilute other deployments."⁵⁹

The Laotian situation heated up again in the spring of 1962. Blatantly disregarding the ceasefire, Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese troops laid siege to the provincial capital of Nam Tha. As the crisis unfolded, General Lemnitzer and Secretary McNamara were in Athens for a NATO ministerial meeting. Ordered by Kennedy to take a first-hand look at the situation, they arrived in Southeast Asia soon after Nam Tha had fallen to the Communists, with the remnants of the FAL in full retreat. An aerial inspection confirmed that the Mekong River offered little

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or no defense against a Communist invasion of either Thailand or South Vietnam. Arriving back in Washington on May 12, McNamara and Lemnitzer immediately debriefed the President and the NSC and urged a prompt but restrained show of force in line with “precautionary steps” recommended by Admiral Felt. This time Kennedy agreed, giving CINCPAC the go-ahead to move a Marine battalion with its helicopters and other air support to Thailand and to shift a U.S. Army battle group already there for maneuvers to the strategically important town of Ubon.⁶⁰ Should the Communist advance fail to stop, Kennedy sanctioned planning for a larger intervention, mainly to protect South Vietnam. The JCS and CINCPAC were still working out the details when, in mid-June 1962, the warring parties in Laos announced agreement on a coalition government, ending the crisis but leaving Laos effectively partitioned along lines that gave the North Vietnamese avenues to infiltrate troops and weapons into South Vietnam and to threaten Thailand as well.⁶¹

The battle for Laos was essentially over, and for all practical purposes the Communists had won. Gaining what they had wanted all along, they now had unfettered access into South Vietnam and beyond. Once again, the Joint Chiefs and President Kennedy had failed to see eye-to-eye on a crucial issue. After the Bay of Pigs Kennedy never fully trusted JCS advice. As a result, JCS efforts to persuade Kennedy to take a strong stand on Laos fell largely on deaf ears until it was too late. Unlike the President, the JCS never regarded Laos as expendable. Rather, they saw it as a small but strategically important country whose fate would determine that of its neighbors. In the chiefs’ view, once Laos was lost it was only a matter of time before the United States faced larger conflicts in South Vietnam, Thailand, and beyond.

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,

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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, McNamara, 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

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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

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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

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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

- 1 Kennedy first used the phrase "New Frontier" in his acceptance speech at the 1960 Democratic National Convention. See Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Bantam Books, 1966), 187–189.
- 2 John F. Kennedy in Allan Nevins, ed., *The Strategy of Peace* (New York: Harper, 1960), 184.
- 3 Quoted in Joseph Kraft, "McNamara and His Enemies," *Harper's Magazine* (August 1961), 42.

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- 5 Andrew Preston, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 41.
- 6 Steven L. Rearden, "The Secretary of Defense and Foreign Affairs, 1947–1989" (MS, Study Prepared for the Historical Office, Office of the Secretary of Defense, December 1995), chap. IV, 3–5; *Chronology of JCS Organization, 1945–1984* (Historical Division, Joint Secretariat, Joint Chiefs of Staff, December 1984), 178.
- 7 Sorensen, 284; John Prados, *Keepers of the Keys: A History of the National Security Council from Truman to Bush* (New York: William Morrow, 1991), 102; and Stanley L. Falk, "The National Security Council Under Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy," *Political Science Quarterly* 79 (September 1964), 428–433.
- 8 Edgar F. Raines, Jr., and David R. Campbell, *The Army and the Joint Chiefs of Staff* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1986), 106–108; H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1997), 8–9.
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- 10 Memo, Bundy to CJCS, June 28, 1961, "Functions of the Military Representative to the President," and Letter, Kennedy to Taylor, June 26, 1961, both attached to JCS 1977/141. See also Maxwell D. Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1972), 195–203.
- 11 Interview with Henry E. Glass by Maurice Matloff et al., October 28, 1987, OSD Historical Office, cited in Kaplan et al., 6, 556 (note no. 18); Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Cambridge, MA: Houghton, Mifflin, 1965), 297.
- 12 Memo of ADM Burke's Conversation with CDR Wilhide, April 18, 1961, in Mark J. White, ed., *The Kennedys and Cuba: The Declassified Documentary History* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999), 33; Walter S. Poole, *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy, 1961–1964* (Washington, DC: Office of Joint History, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2011), 109–111.
- 13 Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 232–233. Also see *An Analysis of the Cuban Operation* (Study prepared by the Deputy Director [Plans], Central Intelligence Agency, January 18, 1962), sec. IV, 4 (declassified).
- 14 Sorensen, 331; Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower: The President* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 615; Kaplan et al., 176.
- 15 Enclosure C to Report by the DJS to JCS, January 24, 1961, "U.S. Plan of Action in Cuba," JCS 2304/19.
- 16 JCSM-57-61 to SECDEF, February 3, 1961, "Military Evaluation of the CIA Para-Military Plan, Cuba," *FRUS, 1961-63, X*, 67–78; Peter Wyden, *Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 89.

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- 17 Haynes Johnson, *The Bay of Pigs* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1964), 65–66; “Narrative of the Anti–Castro Operation Zapata,” June 13, 1961, 8–10, JHO 16–0061, JHO Collection.
- 18 Kaplan et al., 176–177, 183; Sorensen, 341–342; Taylor, 189.
- 19 Taylor, 188.
- 20 NSAM 55, June 28, 1961, “Relations of the JCS to the President in Cold War Operations,” Kennedy Papers, National Security Files, JFK Library.
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- 24 Memo, Acheson to Kennedy, April 3, 1961, “Berlin,” JCS 1907/293.
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- 26 Kennedy quoted in John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 146.
- 27 Note by Secretaries to JCS, July 1, 1961, “Berlin Planning,” JCS 1907/315; Report by J5 to JCS, July 9, 1961, “Berlin Contingency Planning,” JCS 1907/318; Paul H. Nitze, with Ann M. Smith and Steven L. Rearden, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost: At the Center of Decision—A Memoir* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1989), 196–202.
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- 45 Memo, McNamara to Kennedy, January 24, 1961, [Meeting with Eisenhower, January 19, 1961], *FRUS 1961–63*, XXIV, 41–42. Eisenhower may also have advised intervention with ground troops, but the various records of the meeting are unclear on this point. See Fred I. Greenstein and Richard H. Immerman, “What Did Eisenhower Tell Kennedy about Indochina? The Politics of Misperception,” *Journal of American History* 79 (September 1992), 568–587.
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- 57 Quoted in Sorensen, 726.
- 58 See Kaplan et al., 243.
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- 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.
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- 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.
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- 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.
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