

The Lessons of Personal Diplomacy

Fedor Burlatskiy

THE personal and confidential correspondence between President John F. Kennedy and Chairman Nikita S. Khrushchev played a vital role in preventing further escalation of the Cuban Missile Crisis and in bringing about a solution through compromise. It was also a significant factor in overcoming the distrust that had arisen between the two leaders as a result of their meeting in Vienna in June 1961, and in establishing an atmosphere of mutual understanding and even personal goodwill. In this sense, their correspondence—as a direct channel of communication between the leaders of the world's two largest nuclear powers—is a landmark of personal diplomacy. This correspondence subsequently led to the establishment of a direct telephone "hot line" between Soviet and American leaders. This line, which was also used by Leonid Brezhnev and Jimmy Carter, came to be used regularly in the course

*Fedor Burlatskiy has had a long and varied career in Moscow. After receiving a candidate's degree at the Institute of State and Law in the USSR Academy of Sciences in 1951, he worked on the staff of *Kommunist*, the theoretical journal of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, from 1953 to 1960. In the early 1960's, he managed a group of advisers in the Central Committee International Department's section on socialist countries. During this period, he also accompanied Nikita S. Khrushchev on six trips abroad as a speechwriter and adviser. In 1983, he became a political observer for *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (Moscow), and in 1990–91, he was editor of that newspaper. He is currently President of the International Center of Federalism and Constitutional Rights (Moscow). Among his many books are *Khrushchev* (1992), and *Novoye myshleniye* (New Thinking, 1987).*

of relations between Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan, as well as between Boris Yel'tsin and George Bush.

Although Kennedy initiated the correspondence with his letter of October 22, 1962, Khrushchev embraced the practice with great enthusiasm. This was due both to the nature of the crisis—the resolution of which required quick action at the highest level—and to the personal characteristics of Khrushchev himself. He liked to resolve the most difficult problems on his own, consulting with only a very limited number of people. He was not afraid of risk or of assuming personal responsibility. His actions during the Cuban Missile Crisis and his letters to Kennedy can be compared to his report on the crimes of Stalin at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In both cases, boldness was intertwined with adventurism. In each case, reason and sober decision-making won out over emotion and political gamesmanship.

At the October 1964 Plenum of the Central Committee, and at a prior meeting of the Presidium, Khrushchev was faulted for having scorned the opinions of the majority of the members of the Presidium during the crisis. (Indeed, this played a significant role in deciding his fate.) Only a limited circle of people took part in the preparation and discussion of Khrushchev's letters. Most often he consulted with Anastas Mikoyan, Andrey Gromyko, Yuriy Andropov (who "oversaw" Cuba for the CPSU Central Committee), and Leonid Ilich'yev. Frequently, Khrushchev's assistants Grigoriy Shuyskiy and Oleg Troyanovskiy took part in the editing of his "dictations" (this is what they called the texts of his speeches and letters, which Khrushchev first dictated to stenographers). As far as my participation is concerned, I had access to these materials mainly through Andropov, and I took a particularly active part in preparing Khrushchev's speech to the USSR Supreme Soviet after the crisis had ended.

The majority of Khrushchev's letters to Kennedy bear a personal stamp, having been dictated and edited by Khrushchev himself. I base this conclusion on my own personal recollections and on a content-analysis of the correspondence. It is easy to discern in the letters those texts that were personally authored by Khrushchev. They are distinguished by their conversational style, abundance of questions, use of imagery, a tendency toward ideological reasoning, repetition, and a certain confidentiality of tone. Their sincerity is accompanied by deception, which Khrushchev considered perfectly normal in his dealings, especially those he had with partners from the "imperialist camp."

An exception to this is Khrushchev's first letter, dated October 23, 1962. It seems likely that this letter was drafted in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, possibly by Gromyko and one of his assistants. It is short, curt, and defiant in tone. In addition, it contains the false assertion that Gromyko made to Kennedy during a meeting with him in mid-October 1962. The letter claims that the weapons being deployed in Cuba, regardless of the class of weapons to which they belonged (this is a new formulation which probably came directly from Khrushchev himself), were intended exclusively for defensive purposes. Khrushchev had to repeat this false assertion throughout the course of his correspondence, which put him in a rather ridiculous position when he was finally compelled to dismantle and remove the missiles from Cuba.

Among the most personal of Khrushchev's letters is undoubtedly the one of October 30, 1962, which reflects quite fully his position on the world's most important international issues. This letter was first dictated by Khrushchev and then edited by Khrushchev himself with the help of, most likely, Gromyko. The text at the end of the letter, which is handwritten, is Khrushchev's own.¹

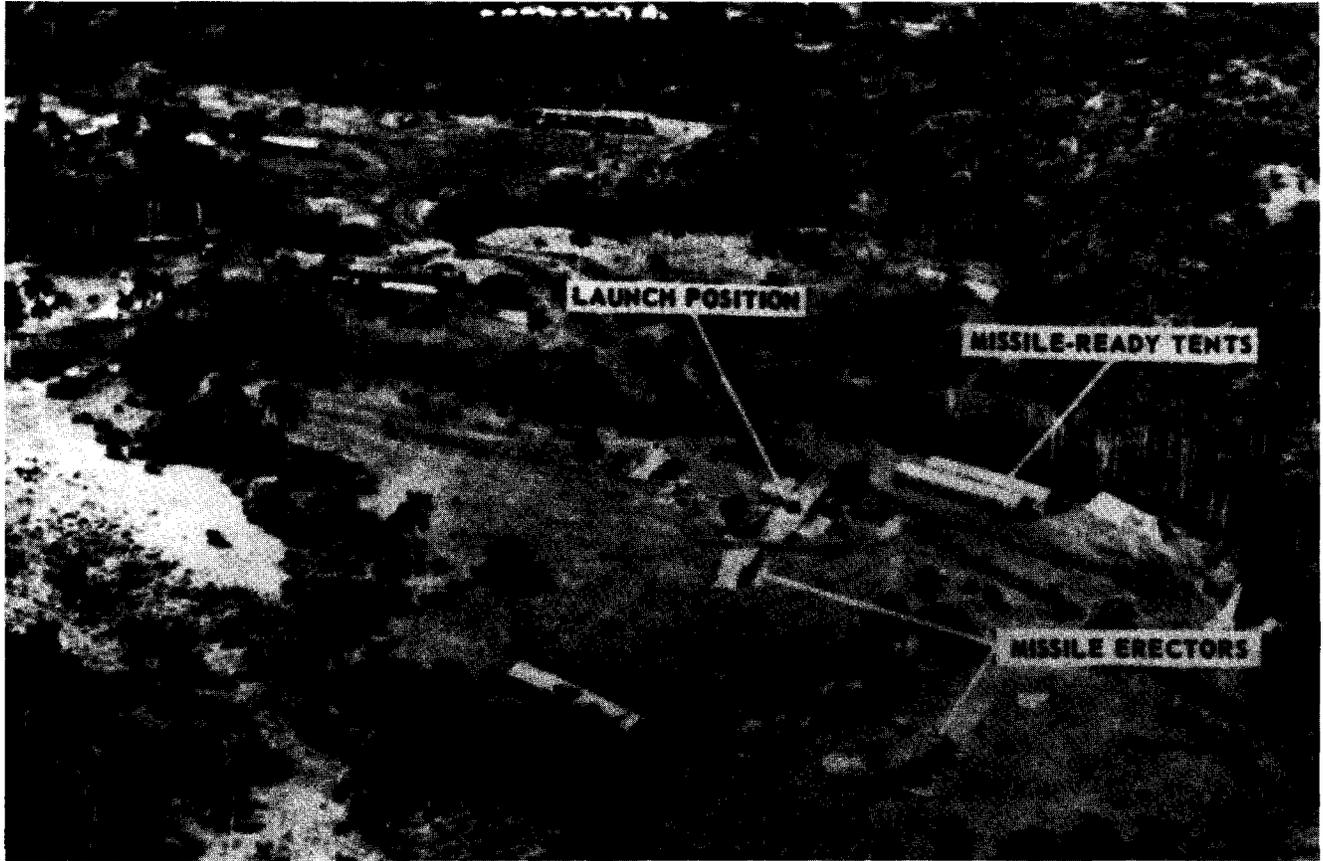
I would like to draw attention to the writing style and the content of the questions that are raised in this letter. We find simple, non-bureaucratic, "human" phrases such as: "That would be very reasonable on your part," "This should all be withdrawn from consideration," "That is simply ridiculous," "The President has understood me correctly" (the word "understanding" appears in letter after letter), "Your role had a restraining effect," "We assume so," "We have taken note of and value this," "We have liquidated," "We are satisfied," "We, the Soviet people," etc.

¹An analysis of the handwriting should be able to determine whether it is Khrushchev's. He may have dictated the letter; he was hesitant about writing anything himself because he often made spelling errors.

There are also attempts at humor: "I understand that I have raised a great number of questions. Therefore, if we were to begin after breakfast, we probably would not be able to resolve all of these issues before lunch." This is typical of Khrushchev's style.

As far as the content of the letter is concerned, I would draw attention to three issues: the question of US military bases, the question of monitoring disarmament, and the question of Germany. Khrushchev raises the issue of liquidating the American military base at Guantanamo and closing down "all military bases in general." In this connection, I would also like to draw attention to Khrushchev's letter to Fidel Castro (which I had occasion to edit after the Cuban Missile Crisis while Khrushchev was attending the congress of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany in East Berlin). In this letter, which has still not yet been published, Khrushchev, once again in the style of an intimate conversation, explains to Castro how and when the idea of deploying missiles in Cuba was born. He describes a visit to Bulgaria, where he was walking along the beach at Varna on the Black Sea with USSR Minister of Defense Roman Malinovskiy, who pointed out to him that American military bases with nuclear warheads capable of wiping out the cities of Kiev, Mensk, and Moscow in a matter of minutes were located on the opposite shore. Khrushchev then relates to Castro that he asked Malinovskiy, "And why then can we not have bases close to America? What's the reason for such imparity?" And right then and there Khrushchev told Castro that he began to question Malinovskiy about whether or not it would be possible to deploy missiles secretly in Cuba and whether or not Castro would agree. Malinovskiy assured him that the missiles could be deployed without detection (this of course turned out to be incorrect). Khrushchev notes in his letter that Castro reacted negatively to the plan at the beginning of the negotiations, but he subsequently gave it his full support. Finally, Khrushchev gives Castro a detailed, but unconvincing, explanation of why the missiles had to be removed, making reference to the US guarantee not to invade Cuba, a promise that Castro did not believe.

From this letter it is clear what motivated Khrushchev. The defense of Cuba did have some significance, but it was not the main consideration. The primary objective was to achieve a balance of power vis-à-vis the US. Kennedy, ever astute, made note of precisely this factor in his letter of October 22, 1962: "The United States could not tolerate any action on your part which in a major way disturbed the existing over-all balance of power in the world." It is thus clear why Khrushchev attached such significance to the liquidation of the American bases in Turkey.



A US Department of Defense aerial reconnaissance photo shows a Soviet missile base at San Cristobal, Cuba, in late October 1962.

—UPI/Bettmann.

A second important point contained in Khrushchev's October 30, 1962, letter is his refusal to allow outside monitoring of underground testing and in general his refusal to agree to on-site inspections on Soviet territory. Khrushchev stood firm on this issue right up to the very end, and only under Gorbachev did we see a fundamental change in the USSR's position on this matter.

A third point in the letter concerns the link between the German question and the Cuban Missile Crisis. Throughout all of 1962 (and even before), Khrushchev was extremely annoyed by the American unwillingness to recognize the German Democratic Republic. He considered recognition of the GDR to be a key factor in achieving international stability and in ensuring peaceful coexistence. He could not understand the reasons for America's inflexibility on this issue. And the demonstration of military might in Cuba was a means to obtain concessions from the US in Europe, first and foremost with regard to Germany and, more broadly, with regard to the possible liquidation of military blocs—NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Here, we can also see how times have changed and how Moscow's foreign policy from

Khrushchev, to Gorbachev, to Yel'tsin has also evolved. The former Soviet Union lost its position in Eastern Europe. By contrast, Germany has won and overall world stability has been strengthened. This change has come at a price that Khrushchev would never have agreed to pay.

THE mood of the people on the Soviet side who were directly involved in the events in Cuba quickly went through a series of stages—from defiance and self-assuredness to apprehension bordering on panic. I remember a conversation I had with a colleague who worked in the International Department of the CPSU Central Committee. It took place on October 27, 1962, a day that Robert Kennedy would later call "Black Saturday." That morning my colleague and I had both been called into work at the Central Committee, and we happened to meet outside the building where we both lived. "Did you send your family into the countryside?" my colleague asked. "And why should I have done that?" I wondered. "You mean you don't know?" he asked, adding, "Today we're expecting an American

nuclear strike on Moscow and other Soviet cities."

These words astounded me. Throughout the entire crisis I never permitted myself to think that a nuclear war was possible. Such a war seemed to me to be absolutely senseless. But the problem of escalation somehow did not enter into my thinking at the time. And only later did I understand how close we had come to catastrophe, because each side's ideology led it to consider the other capable of irrational decisions. In all of Khrushchev's letters there is an ideological motif: He refers to the "folly of degenerate imperialism" (October 24) and to American sympathy for "the Cuban counter-revolutionary emigrants" (October 27). In Kennedy's letters one finds a similar view of the Soviet Union. He writes about the goals of "the ideology to which you adhere" (Kennedy's letter to Khrushchev of October 22, 1962). The mutual fear, misunderstanding, and mistrust between the two countries stemmed from views such as these.

At the high point of the crisis, on Sunday, October 28, Khrushchev was at his country dacha on Rublevskiy-Uspenskiy Boulevard together with a small group of his advisers. They were working on an urgent response to Kennedy's ultimatum to dismantle the missiles in Cuba or face having them bombed by American warplanes. Khrushchev was under the impression that an answer had to be received by 3:00 p.m. that same day. Drafting the letter, which ended up turning into a statement, took longer than anyone had expected. When it was completed, Ilich'yev took it at breakneck speed to the USSR State Radio Committee in Moscow, where it was to be broadcast to the Soviet people. However, he got stuck in a traffic jam and became terribly nervous. Even more nervous was the representative of the Radio Committee who was waiting for him on the street in front of the building where the organization was located. Ilich'yev finally arrived, jumped out of his car, and handed him the text of the statement. Someone immediately ran it to the studio and gave it to an announcer. They barely managed to get it on the air before the 3:00 p.m. deadline. But later it was learned that the panic had not really been necessary.

The Soviet people knew virtually nothing of what was going on. Therefore, they did not even have the opportunity to be afraid. Moreover, throughout the entire crisis, Khrushchev did not encounter any opposition from other members of the CPSU Presidium. Party traditions prevented military officials, even though they might well have held opposing views, from having the power to influence events.² The only pressure on Khrushchev came from Castro—who did not believe the American guarantees and who came out resolutely against removing the missiles from his island—and from China,

which was sternly critical of Khrushchev's position.³ But in general, Khrushchev had a free hand and an opportunity to maneuver that allowed him to yield to the unheard-of "humiliation" of having to remove the missiles and other offensive weapons from Cuba. Khrushchev thus was able to deal with the problem in a calmer atmosphere than was Kennedy, but in the end even Khrushchev's nerves began to give out.

THE correspondence between Khrushchev and Kennedy is of particular importance because it turned out to be the most effective means through which the crisis could have been resolved. But in addition to the normal diplomatic channels of communication, the two countries had an additional channel through their respective intelligence services. By Kennedy's own admission, a KGB operative working in the US, Georgiy Bol'shakov, made a significant contribution to the resolution of the crisis (Kennedy's letter to Khrushchev of December 14, 1962). There was another KGB agent who, although less famous, may also have played a significant role. In the Soviet embassy in Washington he went by the name of Fokin. I was able to discover his real name later—Aleksandr Feoktistov. I managed to invite him to a conference on the Cuban Missile Crisis that was held in Moscow in 1989, and I arranged for him to meet the journalist John Scali, who had had direct contacts with President Kennedy in 1962. Fokin/Feoktistov told us that Scali, acting on Kennedy's behalf, passed on to Khrushchev the message that the US would agree to close down its bases in Turkey. Fokin/Feoktistov notified Moscow of this decision by telegram, although, he said, Ambassador Anatoliy Dobrynin had refused to sign it.⁴

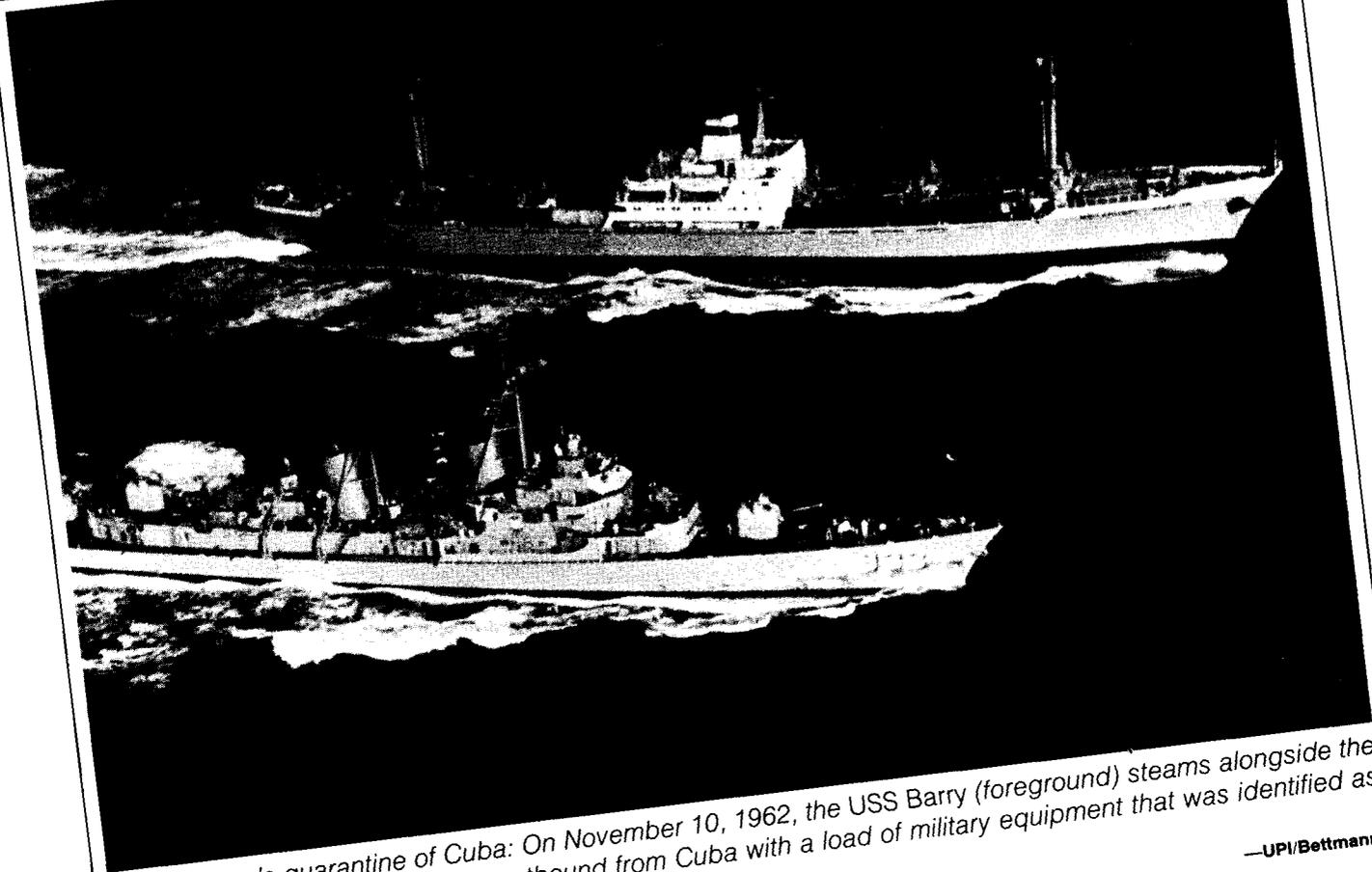
In addition, a primary role was also played by Robert Kennedy, who maintained contact with Ambassador Dobrynin. But the correspondence of the two leaders rises above all of these other contacts like Mont Blanc. The fact that it allowed direct communication between the two leaders that, in turn, allowed them to make decisions quickly and effectively is of enormous historical significance. In addition, it opened the way for a compromise without anyone "losing face" and without backing either side into a corner. Finally, through this correspondence, in a rather short time, mutual sus-

²Nonetheless, the fact that military officials located in Cuba made the decision to shoot down the American U-2 plane is indicative of how their views differed from the approach taken by Khrushchev.

³Khrushchev had the support of the leaders of the Warsaw Pact countries, even though they were not receiving complete information about the events in Cuba.

⁴This version of the facts offered by Fokin/Feoktistov must still be verified.

Back from the Brink



The US Navy's quarantine of Cuba: On November 10, 1962, the USS Barry (foreground) steams alongside the Soviet freighter Anosov, which is outbound from Cuba with a load of military equipment that was identified as Soviet missiles.

—UPI/Bettmann.

pictions were dissipated and for the first time since World War II, a foundation of trust was laid between the leaders of the two nuclear giants.

The Cuban Missile Crisis was the culmination of the history of the 20th century, and perhaps of all world history. For the first time, humanity stood face to face with the possibility of self-destruction. Two very different people—the one the son of a Russian peasant burdened with the prejudices both of an authoritarian, patriarchal political culture and of communist ideology, and the other a representative of Western civilization—held the fate of the entire planet in their hands. And both demonstrated genuine greatness in resolving a problem the likes of which no one had ever encountered before.

Kennedy's wisest and most successful step was his decision to establish a quarantine around Cuba. This was a minimal action, a demonstration of his firm resolve to achieve the dismantling of the Soviet bases in Cuba. At the same time, it left Khrushchev with some

choice concerning a response. Another important decision was the American guarantee not to attack Cuba. As far as the US military bases in Turkey were concerned, that question had already been decided even before the missile crisis.

The crisis required from Khrushchev a great deal of wisdom and courage. He could have dragged it out, taken his time withdrawing the missiles, and continued to bargain. But he did not. The reason was not only the fear of an escalation of the conflict, but also the hope for a fundamental change in US-Soviet relations as a result of the removal of the missiles and the resolution of the crisis. And this is why in his letter of October 30, 1962, he unveiled an entire program designed to ease tensions and limit the arms race, and to find solutions to a number of other serious international problems.

The compromise and mutual understanding that was achieved between Kennedy and Khrushchev thus laid the groundwork for a shift away from the cold war and

the arms race to arms limitation and enhanced security. The death of Kennedy and the removal from office of Khrushchev interrupted that process, and an historical chance was missed. The missed chance may have been an error on the part of their successors or a cruel joke played by history, but it would take a quarter of a century before we again returned to these initial positions. Nevertheless, the foundation for today's relations between the US and Russia, and for today's international security regime, was indeed laid back then. New letters and documents that are becoming accessible in Moscow and Washington will certainly reveal a number of previous unknown details. But even that which we already know is enough to be able to appreciate the significance both of the magnitude of the fears and concerns of that period and of the result that was achieved. Many sharp conflicts arose after the Cuban Missile Crisis. But humanity never again went to the brink of the Apocalypse.

If we were to summarize the political lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis, we would point to the following:

- The crisis showed that neither the US nor the USSR wanted a nuclear war. But at the same time, there was a danger of escalation resulting from irrational actions taken when tensions were at a peak.
- The issues of trust and of the monitoring of compliance, which had become possible thanks to the development of satellite surveillance and on-site inspection, were significant. Especially important was the establishment of trust between the two leaders and their willingness to develop a personal relationship with each other.
- The crisis brought to the forefront the question of how many nuclear weapons were sufficient for deterrence. Even then, US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and we in the USSR had come to advocate strategic forces on the order of 100–200 missiles. However, this idea was subsequently rejected by both sides. Particularly senseless was the arms race involving intermediate-range SS–20's, which played no role whatsoever in the balance of power between the USSR and the US.
- The crisis set in motion a process whereby foreign policy was no longer inextricably linked to ideology. This is clear from the change in Khrushchev's approach between the beginning of his correspondence with Kennedy and the end. This approach subsequently became the basis upon which Gorbachev's "new thinking" was built.

The Correspondence: Khrushchev's Motives and His Views of Kennedy

William Taubman

OF the 25 letters exchanged between President John F. Kennedy and Chairman Nikita S. Khrushchev during the Cuban Missile Crisis, more than half remained classified for 30 years. These letters were released to the public only in January 1992, and we now, as a result, have a fuller perspective on the thinking of the two leaders during the crisis. The first new letter, Khrushchev's of October 28, 1962, was sent the very day the two leaders agreed on the main outlines of a settlement. The last, Khrushchev's letter of December 14, was dispatched five days before his previously published December 19 missive, which conveyed his view that the crisis was now over.

My comments, however, will not concern the course of the crisis itself or the terms of the settlement that ended it. Rather, I emphasize what the new correspondence reveals about Khrushchev's pre- and post-crisis agenda, and what that agenda suggests about his motives for putting missiles in Cuba in the first place. In addition, the new letters illuminate another puzzling question: What led Khrushchev to think that the stationing of missiles in Cuba could actually advance his cause rather than produce the humiliating defeat that he ultimately endured?

Khrushchev's pre-crisis motives and calculations have been much debated, both at the time of the crisis

William Taubman is Bertrand Snell Professor of Political Science at Amherst College (Amherst, MA) and a Fellow of the Russian Research Center at Harvard University (Cambridge, MA). He is the author of Stalin's American Policy (1982), co-author (with Jane A. Taubman) of Moscow Spring (1989), and editor and translator of Sergey N. Khrushchev's book about his father, Khrushchev on Khrushchev (1990). He is currently writing a biography of Nikita S. Khrushchev.

and since. Soviet spokesmen in particular have insisted that the main motive was to deter a likely American attack on Cuba. Americans, supported by some Russians, have stressed Khrushchev's desire to rectify the strategic nuclear balance that was overwhelmingly in Washington's favor. A third explanation has it that the missiles were preparing the way for a grand East-West bargain that would have denied nuclear weapons to both Germany and China.¹ And still another (which has been less popular in recent years than it was in the early and mid-1960's) is that Khrushchev's real aim in Cuba was to force Washington to back down on Berlin.²

¹Initial Kennedy administration speculation about Khrushchev's motives is analyzed in Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision*, Boston, MA, Little, Brown, 1971, pp. 42-56. Khrushchev himself emphasized the defense of Cuba in his memoirs, but also noted that "in addition to protecting Cuba, our missiles would have equalized what the West likes to call 'the balance of power.'" See Nikita S. Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, translated and edited by Strobe Talbott, Boston, MA, Little, Brown, 1970, p. 494. Soviet observers who took part in conferences on the crisis in Cambridge and Moscow mentioned both the defense of Cuba and the desire to rectify the strategic balance, but their emphases differed. On the Cambridge conference, as well as on an earlier conference attended by American scholars specializing on the crisis and by former Kennedy administration policy-makers, see James G. Blight and David Welch, Eds., *On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis*, New York, Hill and Wang, 1989, and on the Moscow conference, see Bruce J. Allyn, James G. Blight, and David A. Welch, "Essence of Revision," *International Security* (Cambridge, MA), Winter 1989/90, pp. 136-72. Raymond L. Garthoff summarizes previous Soviet and American views and expresses his own in *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, revised edition, Washington, DC, Brookings, 1989, pp. 23-24. The idea of a grand East-West bargain is put forward by Adam Ulam in *Expansion and Coexistence*, revised edition, New York, Praeger, 1974, p. 669. The latest participant in the crisis to weigh in with a view of Khrushchev's motives is Fidel Castro, who told a January 1992 Havana conference on the crisis: "Had we known then what we know now about the balance of power, we would have realized that the emplacement changed intermediate-range missiles into strategic weapons. In the light of what we know today, this must have been the real Soviet motive—not the defense of Cuba." See Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "Four Days with Fidel: A Havana Diary," *The New York Review of Books*, Mar. 26, 1992, p. 25.