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Fifty Years On: The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited and Reinterpreted

Mark White

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Professor John Dumbrell of Durham University served as outside reader for Mark White's essay, which is based on the Harry Allen Memorial Lecture he delivered at the Institute for the Study of the Americas on 10 May 2012.

About the author

Mark White is Professor of History at Queen Mary, University of London. He is the author of seven books, including *The Cuban Missile Crisis* (1996), *Against the President: Dissent and Decision-Making in the White House* (2007) and (ed.) *The Presidency of Bill Clinton: The Legacy of a New Domestic and Foreign Policy* (2012). He is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society.

In 1996 my first book, *The Cuban Missile Crisis*, was published. A reworking of my doctoral dissertation, it examined the roles played by a number of key figures in the coming and handling of the October 1962 crisis. It was followed a year later by *Missiles in Cuba*, which was aimed at the undergraduate market. In both these works, I utilised the available primary sources, including the transcripts of the meetings of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm) that had been secretly taped by John F. Kennedy using concealed microphones. For my 1996 book, these transcripts were available only for the ExComm meetings held on 16 October 1962, the opening day of the missile crisis, and on 27 October, the penultimate day. For my 1997 study, I was able to use the very rough transcripts that had become available for a couple of additional ExComm meetings. For other ExComm discussions, myself and other scholars were dependent on the laconic minutes that had been taken.¹

In 1997, however, Ernest May and Philip Zelikow's *The Kennedy Tapes* was published. Employing the services of a team of court reporters, an audio-forensics expert and some Kennedy administration officials, they were able to convert the sometimes-muffled Kennedy Library ExComm recordings (many of which had just been released) into lucid transcripts, and were able to present a complete record of the ExComm meetings, rather than transcripts of just a select few of these discussions. In 2001, with the assistance of Timothy Naftali, May and Zelikow provided revised and improved ExComm transcripts as part of the Miller Center presidential recordings project. This paper aims to utilise these transcripts to reflect on the Kennedy administration's handling of the most dangerous episode in the Cold War era, an appropriate endeavour in 2012, the 50th anniversary of the Cuban missile crisis. In doing so, I will make use of a good deal of primary source material that was not available when I wrote my two books on this subject.²

- 1 Mark J. White, *The Cuban Missile Crisis* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1996); Mark J. White, *Missiles in Cuba: Kennedy, Khrushchev, Castro and the 1962 Crisis* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 1997); 'Off-the-Record Meeting on Cuba', 11:50 a.m.–12.57 p.m., 16 October 1962, transcript, presidential recordings, John F. Kennedy Library, Boston, MA; 'Off-the-Record Meeting on Cuba', 6:30 p.m.–7.55 p.m., 16 October 1962, transcript, presidential recordings, Kennedy Library; Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings, 27 October 1962, transcript, presidential recordings, Kennedy Library.
- 2 Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House during the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), hereafter cited as *Kennedy Tapes*; Timothy Naftali and Philip Zelikow (eds.), *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy: The Great Crises* (New York and London: Norton, 2001), vol. II —

The full ExComm transcripts enable historians to gauge with greater precision than used to be possible the contributions made by John Kennedy and his advisers. Much of what scholars have said on this subject has been influenced by Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy's posthumously-published memoir of the missile crisis, *Thirteen Days*, which — it was later revealed — had been edited by JFK's speechwriter Theodore C. Sorensen. What *Thirteen Days* claimed was that, along with his elder brother, Robert Kennedy was the hero of the missile crisis. He was the man who had the courage to oppose the administration hawks, who were recklessly recommending a US attack on Cuba, by proposing the more moderate strategy of imposing a naval blockade around the island to prevent the Russians from deploying any more nuclear weapons. He was the one who conceived the vivid Pearl Harbor metaphor — the idea that a US military strike on Cuba would be repugnant because of its moral equivalence to Japan's assault on America's Pacific outpost in 1941 — that was crucial in making credible the argument that a US blockade was preferable to a strike on Cuba. He was the one, *Thirteen Days* further suggested, who devised the brilliant strategy at the denouement of the missile crisis of accepting the proposals contained in Soviet leader Nikita S. Khrushchev's 26 October letter to JFK, but rejecting the less conciliatory ones articulated in his message the following day — an approach that ended the crisis, thereby moving the world away from the precipice of nuclear destruction.³

From the extravagant criticisms of Thomas Reeves and Seymour Hersh to the measured critiques developed by Herbert Parmet and James Giglio, so much of the general historiography on the Kennedy presidency over the past 40 years has involved scholars attempting to extricate the debate on JFK from the powerful 'Camelot' myths propagated by court historians such as Sorensen and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and the general cult of John Kennedy that emerged in the wake of his tragic assassination. True in general terms, this process of myth identification and eradication is equally essential in the effort to develop a credible perspective on the Cuban missile crisis; and

hereafter cited as *Presidential Recordings: Kennedy*, II; Philip Zelikow and Ernest May (eds.), *The Presidential Recordings: John F. Kennedy: The Great Crises* (New York and London: Norton, 2001), vol. III — hereafter cited as *Presidential Recordings: Kennedy*, III. The transcripts and documents cited in this essay, unless otherwise specified, come from May and Zelikow's *Kennedy Tapes*. If any of the transcriptions from the *Kennedy Tapes* were subsequently refined in the 'Presidential Recordings' project, I have used these updated records and indicated in the footnotes where this has been done. As former Kennedy Library historian Sheldon Stern has used the tapes to provide his own refinements to the ExComm transcripts, I have utilised his work when the textual changes made are significant. In terms of the general literature on the missile crisis, it is vast. The most influential early work was Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: HarperCollins, 1971), and probably the most significant later work has been Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958–1964* (New York and London: Norton, 1997).

3 Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1971, paperback ed.), *passim*; White, *Missiles in Cuba*, p. 138.

the core mythology enveloping and distorting our understanding of the missile crisis has been that produced by the self-serving assertions of Robert Kennedy's *Thirteen Days*, created at a time when the New York senator was gearing up to run for the presidency and was thus keen to do all he could to develop a statesmanlike image.⁴

The ExComm tapes expose the hyperbole surrounding Robert Kennedy's role in the missile crisis, evident in both *Thirteen Days* and in many subsequent histories of the event. The ultimately successful US effort to defuse the missile crisis was a collaborative one in which Robert Kennedy's role was significant but in many instances less so than his ExComm colleagues. The adroit American response to the Soviet challenge in October 1962 was dependent on a number of factors, including the consistent advocacy by influential advisers of the more prudent blockade strategy in opposition to the ExComm hawks; the creation of the striking (if not precisely applicable) Pearl Harbor metaphor that influenced JFK's attitude towards the notion of a military strike on Cuba; an anticipation of the sort of give-and-take negotiations, including a willingness to withdraw from Turkey the American Jupiter missiles that could be seen as analogous to Russian nuclear weapons in Cuba, needed if the establishment of the blockade were to lead to a peaceful settlement; and an effective response to Khrushchev's confusing advancement of two different sets of proposals on 26 and 27 October. In all of these respects, there were ExComm officials whose contributions were more important than Robert Kennedy's.

A qualification to that assertion relates to the fraternal closeness of Robert Kennedy to the president and the correspondingly greater influence he had on JFK's thinking than that exerted by other ExComm officials. Bobby Kennedy was the president's most intimate adviser, and his purview extended far beyond the usual domain of an attorney general. Following the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion in spring 1961, that domain included foreign policy, and — in particular — Cuba. Unquestionably, the ethos of intense familial loyalty promoted by patriarch Joseph P. Kennedy ensured that JFK and RFK's relationship was exceedingly close. Indeed, there was no closer relationship between president and adviser in 20th-century American history.⁵

In that sense, Robert Kennedy's views were more important than other advisers' because his access to and potential influence over the president were greater. Director of the Office of Emergency Planning Edward A. McDermott recalled that, when on

4 Thomas C. Reeves, *A Question of Character: A Life of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Free Press, 1991); Seymour M. Hersh, *The Dark Side of Camelot* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1997); Herbert S. Parmet, *JFK: The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Dial, 1983); James N. Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1991); Theodore C. Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper, 1965); Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (London: Mayflower-Dell reprint, 1967).

5 For useful general works on Robert Kennedy, that provide coverage of his relationship with JFK, see James W. Hilty, *Robert Kennedy: Brother Protector* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1997), and Ronald Steel, *In Love with Night: The American Romance with Robert Kennedy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999).

occasion JFK would leave an ExComm meeting and walk on to the porch overlooking the South Lawn of the White House, Bobby would join him; and when they rejoined their colleagues JFK would announce that a particular decision had been made. However, the ExComm records raise the issue of whether Bobby Kennedy's views were largely dependent on the ideas expressed by other officials.⁶

Comparing the roles played by Robert Kennedy and Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara in the early days of the missile crisis, as revealed by the ExComm tapes, sheds light on the attorney general's role and its limits, as well as the importance of McNamara in managing the missile crisis. As with JFK and most other senior US officials, McNamara and Bobby Kennedy were informed of the Soviet missile deployment in Cuba on Tuesday 16 October 1962. Both participated in the first two ExComm meetings, convened that day by JFK to frame his administration's initial response to the Russian challenge. Shocked by the reality of Soviet nuclear weapons 90 miles off the coast of Florida, most US officials, including the president himself, advocated a retaliatory American attack on Cuba.

The supporters of that approach focused on the idea of a US air strike on the Caribbean island that would destroy the Soviet missile sites. There was also a 'super-hawk' position of proposing a full-scale invasion of Cuba. Contrary to his reputation as always being central to the ExComm discussions, Robert Kennedy was generally taciturn in those first two meetings held on 16 October. When he did speak, however, he revealed that his initial views in the missile crisis were those of a 'super-hawk'. A good deal of the discussion that day was about whether a strike on the missile sites in Cuba, or a more general strike, would be the more appropriate response. The thrust of Robert Kennedy's comments was that his brother should probably plump for the more drastic alternative of an invasion of the island. In the first ExComm meeting, which convened in the late morning, he added to his brother's enumeration of four options and issues to be mulled over:

We have the fifth one, really, which is the invasion. I would say that you're dropping bombs all over Cuba ... dropping it on all their missiles. You're covering most of Cuba. You're going to kill an awful lot of people, and we're going to take an awful lot of heat on it ... you're going to announce the reason that you're doing it is because they're sending in these kind of missiles.

Well, I would think it's almost incumbent upon the Russians, then, to say, "Well, we're going to send them in again. And if you do it [bomb] again, we're going to do the same thing to Turkey. And we're going to do the same thing to Iran."

Robert Kennedy was suggesting that because Khrushchev could respond to an American air strike on missiles in Cuba by sending in more nuclear weapons, it would be better to invade the island and replace the Castro regime with a pro-US government that would not accept further Soviet missile deployments. Later in the

6 Oral history of Edward A. McDermott, p. 44, document no. 3205, 'The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962' collection, National Security Archive, Washington, DC.

same meeting, Robert Kennedy asked Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Maxwell D. Taylor to clarify how long it would take to carry out an invasion of Cuba and take control of the island.⁷

In the evening ExComm meeting of 16 October, the attorney general continued to focus on the invasion option. When the president reduced the alternatives for the US to an air strike on the missile sites in Cuba or a more general strike, Bobby Kennedy reminded his brother of the invasion alternative. He proceeded to make the case that “if you’re going to get into it [Cuba] at all, whether we should just get into it, and get it over with, and take our losses.” He also speculated on pretexts that could be used to justify a US invasion, on “whether there is some other way we can get involved in this, through Guantanamo Bay or something. Or whether there’s some ship that ... you know, sink the *Maine* again or something.” In other words, a similar incident to the one that led to the Spanish-American War in 1898 would help make another invasion of Cuba seem necessary in 1962.⁸

There were probably two reasons why Robert Kennedy’s views were so hardline on 16 October. One was the anger he felt at the way Khrushchev had deceived JFK by giving assurances that he would not send offensive missiles to Cuba whilst secretly doing precisely the opposite. On learning of the Russian missile deployment in Cuba the attorney general expressed that anger in no uncertain terms: “Oh shit! Shit! Shit! Those sons of bitches Russians.” For Robert Kennedy, it was a case of Khrushchev damaging not only American national security interests but his family as well. Moreover, from the inception of JFK’s anti-Castro covert programme Operation Mongoose in November 1961, in which Robert Kennedy was assigned a leading role, his basic aim was to fashion a truculent US policy towards Cuba that would lead to Castro’s overthrow. At the start of 1962, in fact, he had told other US officials that ousting the Cuban leader was the Kennedy administration’s top objective. Once the missile crisis began those hardline sentiments continued to shape Robert Kennedy’s thinking, at least initially.⁹

McNamara’s assessment of the situation on the opening day of the missile crisis was more wide-ranging and impressive than Robert Kennedy’s. He discussed the issue of the location and storage of Soviet warheads in Cuba, encouraged JFK to sanction more extensive surveillance of the island, and speculated that Republican and Democratic politicians, and perhaps the press, would find out about the missiles in Cuba within a week.¹⁰

7 Transcript, ExComm meeting, 11:50 a.m.–1 p.m., 16 October 1962, *Presidential Recordings: Kennedy*, II, p. 416; transcript, ExComm meeting, 11:50 a.m., 16 October 1962, *Kennedy Tapes*, p. 74.

8 Transcript, ExComm meeting, 6:30 p.m., 16 October 1962, *Kennedy Tapes*, pp. 94, 99, 100–1.

9 Quoted in White, *Missiles in Cuba*, p. 78; memorandum for the record, 22 November 1961, and memorandum from Richard Helms to John McCone, 19 January 1962, in *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1961–1963*, vol. X, *Cuba, January 1961–September 1962* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1997), <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v10/d275> [accessed on 22 May 2012].

10 ExComm transcript, 11:50 a.m., 16 October 1962, pp. 49–52, 64.

Crucially, McNamara — and not Robert Kennedy — introduced into ExComm's discussions the idea of blockading Cuba, independent of any US military action against the island. In the evening ExComm meeting, he outlined three options: one was to mount any of the various types of attack on Cuba that had been discussed that day; one was to embark on a political strategy, explored earlier by Secretary of State Dean Rusk (whose influence on the Kennedy White House never matched his status), such as a diplomatic approach to Castro or Khrushchev; and one was to undertake a

course of action we haven't discussed, but lies in between the military course we began discussing a moment ago and the political course of action, is a course of action that would involve declaration of open surveillance: A statement that we would immediately impose a blockade against offensive weapons entering Cuba in the future and an indication that, with our open surveillance reconnaissance which we would plan to maintain indefinitely into the future, we would be prepared to immediately attack the Soviet Union in the event that Cuba made any offensive move against this country.

Later in the meeting he reminded his colleagues of the blockade alternative, though he made clear he was not yet endorsing it.¹¹

By introducing the idea of a blockade of Cuba into ExComm's deliberations, McNamara made a vital contribution to the Kennedy administration's successful management of the missile crisis. Prior to that point, the ExComm debate had been, for the most part, over different ways of attacking Cuba. McNamara converted the discussion from an evaluation of the military alternatives to an assessment of the potential effectiveness of those military options in comparison to a naval blockade. That was crucial because the prospect of a severe, military Soviet response, one that could bring about war, was less likely with a blockade than with a US air strike on or invasion of Cuba.

The rest of what McNamara said on 16 October strengthened the argument for the blockade and against an attack on Cuba. He maintained that the Russian missiles on the island were of political significance — they were “primarily a domestic political problem” — but had little bearing on the Soviet-American military balance. (He presumably argued this as Khrushchev could already strike the United States with missiles based on Russian soil.) In addition, McNamara implored his colleagues to think about the ramifications of the proposed US responses to the Soviet missile deployment: “I don't believe we have considered the consequences of any of these actions satisfactorily ... I don't know quite what kind of a world we live in after we have struck Cuba, and we've started it.” If Soviet missiles in Cuba had little military significance and if ExComm officials were to compare the probable consequences of a US attack on Cuba

11 Transcript, ExComm meeting, 6:30–8:00 p.m., 16 October 1962, *Presidential Recordings: Kennedy*, II, p. 437; ExComm transcript, 6:30 p.m., 16 October 1962, p. 114.

with a blockade of the island, then the argument for the blockade would clearly be strengthened.¹²

In the ExComm meeting, which convened two days later in the late morning of Thursday 18 October, McNamara again promoted the blockade in a way that Robert Kennedy did not. Towards the end of this discussion, the attorney general agreed with McNamara that the blockade had emerged, along with a military strike, as one of the two main alternatives. However, he did not indicate his unequivocal support for the quarantine. Indeed, at one point he indicated his scepticism towards this approach, telling his brother that “the argument against the blockade is that it’s a very slow death. And it builds up, and it goes over a period of months, and during that period of time you’ve got all these people yelling and screaming about it, you’ve got the examination of Russian ships, shooting down the Russian planes that try to land there. You have to do all those things.” Put another way, a major drawback with the blockade was that it would not bring about a speedy resolution of the crisis.¹³

McNamara, by contrast, made clear where his sympathies lay: “I lean to the blockade.” He did so because “it reduces the very serious risk of large-scale military action from which this country cannot benefit under what I call program two [a direct military strike on Cuba].” Robert Kennedy, though, was not wholly convinced by McNamara’s argument:

ROBERT KENNEDY: What are the chances ... You’ve got to say to him [Khrushchev]: “They [the Soviets] can’t continue to build these missiles. All right then, so you’re going to have people flying over [Cuba] all the time.” Well, at night it looks a little different than it did the next morning [after the Soviets have continued to develop their missile sites].

McNAMARA: Oh, he’s not going to stop building. He’s going to continue to build....

ROBERT KENNEDY: Are you going to let him continue to build the missiles?

McNAMARA: This goes back to what you begin to negotiate. He says: “I’m not going to stop building. You have them [missiles] in Turkey.” At the time you’ve acted by putting the blockade on. That’s done.

ROBERT KENNEDY: All right. Then you let them build the missiles?

McNAMARA: Then you talk.¹⁴

While Robert Kennedy was suggesting that a blockade might be ineffective because it would not remove the missiles already in Cuba, or prevent the Russians from

12 ExComm transcript, 6:30 p.m., 16 October 1962, pp. 89, 114; ExComm transcript, 6:30–8:00 p.m., 16 October 1962, *Presidential Recordings: Kennedy*, II, p. 448.

13 Transcript, ExComm meeting, 11:00 a.m., 18 October 1962, *Kennedy Tapes*, pp. 157–8; transcript, ExComm meeting, 11:10 a.m.–1.15 p.m., 18 October 1962, *Presidential Recordings: Kennedy*, p. 534.

14 ExComm transcript, 11:10 a.m.–1.15 p.m., 18 October 1962, *Presidential Recordings: Kennedy*, II, p. 568.

continuing to develop those missile sites, McNamara was arguing that the advantage of the blockade was that it would lead to a period of negotiations that could result in the removal of the nuclear weapons from Cuba. In this way, McNamara presciently identified the path that led to the ending of the missile crisis.

This emphasis on the importance of negotiations squared with the analysis provided by McNamara just prior to this exchange with Robert Kennedy when he discussed with Dean Rusk and National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy how Khrushchev and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) would respond to either a US blockade of or military strike on Cuba. With the strike option, the secretary of defense argued, Khrushchev would probably retaliate by destroying American missiles in Turkey and Italy, and NATO would fracture over such drastic US action against Cuba. With the blockade, NATO unity would be preserved and the Kennedy administration would need to agree to the removal of its missiles from Turkey and Italy in order to persuade the Soviets to withdraw their nuclear weapons from Cuba. Examining the consequences of the US reaction to the missiles in Cuba — exploring the theme he had introduced in ExComm two days earlier — showed “the potential of the blockade.” A compromise settlement, following the imposition of a blockade, would be, McNamara suggested, an acceptable resolution of the missile crisis. A villain on Vietnam policy, to be sure, the secretary of defense played a vital role in October 1962, one for which he has received insufficient credit.¹⁵

McNamara was not the only Kennedy adviser to extol the virtues of the blockade at an early stage in the ExComm discussions. Former American Ambassador to the Soviet Union Llewellyn E. Thompson expressed his support for it, as did Assistant Secretary of State Edwin M. Martin, at a meeting of senior officials (that JFK did not attend) on 17 October. And in the ExComm session the following morning Thompson declared, “My preference is this blockade plan.... I think it’s very highly doubtful that the Russians would resist a blockade against military weapons, particularly offensive ones, if that’s the way we pitched it before the world.” When JFK asked how to remove the missiles already in Cuba, Thompson replied that the US would need to maintain surveillance of the island and in the end might be compelled to carry out a strike on the missile sites. But, he implied, the blockade at least had the potential to end the crisis peacefully whereas a military strike on Cuba did not.¹⁶

McNamara and Thompson, therefore, played key roles in the first week of the missile crisis. McNamara originated the idea of a blockade, converting a debate on the various military options to a discussion of the pros and cons of military action and a blockade. Thereafter he reiterated his support for the blockade. On 17 and

15 Ibid., p. 567.

16 McCone, memorandum for the file, 17 October 1962, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963*, vol. XI, *Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1997), <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v11/d23> [accessed on 22 May 2012]; ExComm transcript, 11:00 a.m., 18 October 1962, p. 137.

18 October Thompson's backing for the blockade was steadfast, and — as an acknowledged expert on the Soviet Union — his views had credibility. It is clear from meetings and a private recording made by JFK later on 18 October that he and Robert Kennedy changed their views that day: they no longer supported an air strike and invasion respectively and now believed the blockade was the best option. They had been influenced by those few ExComm officials who had championed a blockade from an early stage, notably McNamara but also Thompson.¹⁷

Deputy Director of the CIA Marshall S. Carter and Undersecretary of State George W. Ball also helped convince the Kennedys that a military strike would be an unpalatable US response and that the blockade was the better approach. They did this by bringing into the discussion the Pearl Harbor comparison that served to discredit the military-strike alternative on the grounds that it was akin to the nefarious Japanese attack in 1941. Again because of *Thirteen Days*, it is a line of argument that has been associated with Robert Kennedy. To be sure, the attorney general did come to embrace and articulate in ExComm discussions the Pearl Harbor analogy, and the comparison between that 1941 assault and a prospective US attack on Cuba was important in turning him against the notion of a military strike. However, it was Carter who first used the metaphor in an ExComm debate when, in the second meeting on 16 October, he argued that, "This coming in there, on a Pearl Harbor [kind of surprise attack], just frightens the hell out of me as to what goes beyond ... What happens beyond that. You go in there with a surprise attack. You put out all the missiles. This isn't the end. This is the *beginning*, I think." Perhaps influenced by what Carter had said, Ball noted in a memorandum shortly afterwards that, "We tried Japanese as war criminals because of the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor" and hence a surprise strike on Cuba would diminish America's moral authority in the world.¹⁸

Most significantly, Ball made the Pearl Harbor comparison in the ExComm meeting on the morning of 18 October in a way that struck Robert Kennedy powerfully and so altered his thinking. The undersecretary of state, who would later oppose Lyndon Johnson's decision to go to war in Vietnam, emphasised the disquiet that would be felt amongst NATO countries, and perhaps in Latin America, if JFK were to authorise a strike on Cuba "without warning, without giving Khrushchev some way out." If the US did attack Cuba without warning, that would be "like Pearl Harbor. It's the kind of conduct that one might expect of the Soviet Union. It is not conduct that one expects of the United States."¹⁹

17 *Kennedy Tapes*, pp. 169–72.

18 ExComm transcript, 6:30–8:00 p.m., 16 October 1962, *Presidential Recordings: Kennedy*, II, p. 466; Ball, 'Position of George W. Ball,' 17 October 1962, in Laurence Chang and Peter Kornbluh (eds.), *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962: A National Security Archive Documents Reader* (New York: New Press, 1992), p. 121. For background on Ball, see his *The Past Has Another Pattern: Memoirs* (New York: Norton, 1982), and James A. Bill, *George Ball: Behind the Scenes in U.S. Foreign Policy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

19 ExComm transcript, 11:00 a.m., 18 October 1962, p. 143.

JFK commented that if the US carried out an air strike on the missile sites in Cuba following an announcement about the nuclear weapons on the island, “It isn’t Pearl Harbor in that sense. We’ve told everybody.” Robert Kennedy, however, was more impressed by Ball’s argument: “I think George Ball has a hell of a good point . . . We did this [a strike] against Cuba. We’ve talked for 15 years that the Russians being [planning for] the first strike against us, and we’d never do that. Now, in the interest of time, we do that to a small country. I think it’s a hell of a burden to carry.”²⁰

Two days earlier, on 16 October, Robert Kennedy had famously passed a note to the president, during an ExComm discussion, in which he himself invoked memories of 1941. It read: “I now know how Tojo felt when he was planning Pearl Harbor.” There were two differences between Robert Kennedy’s use of the Pearl Harbor analogy and George Ball’s and Carter’s. Firstly, it was not a comparison that could be considered by other ExComm officials, as it was made in a private note and not a group discussion. Secondly, it was meant literally at a time when Robert Kennedy was proposing an invasion of Cuba and the consensus in ExComm was for military action. It was not, as Ball and Carter had used it, a comparison made to castigate those who were calling for a hasty and dangerous strike on the island.²¹

It was only after reflecting on George Ball’s argument in that 18 October ExComm meeting that Bobby Kennedy began to reject the idea of a military strike on the grounds that its resemblance to Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor would damage America’s moral standing in the world. In particular, he must have worried about the impact of a Pearl Harbor-type strike on his brother’s reputation, both at the time and historically. Thereafter he backed the blockade. In a meeting with JFK, former secretary of defense Robert A. Lovett and a few other officials on the evening of the 18th, Robert Kennedy made clear that he now supported the blockade. He did the same in an ExComm meeting the following day, making the Pearl Harbor comparison to condemn the belligerence of the administration hawks. By the 19th, then, Robert Kennedy was playing the role that he described in *Thirteen Days*. Had it not been for McNamara and Ball, however, it is questionable whether he would have done so. He backed the blockade only after McNamara had introduced and supported (along with Tommy Thompson et al.) the idea in ExComm, and after hearing Ball’s Pearl Harbor argument that he found so powerful and persuasive. Though Robert Kennedy’s contribution was important and generally commendable, it was not as impressive as he himself later claimed.²²

In terms of understanding how negotiations following the establishment of a blockade could end the crisis, McNamara — as argued earlier — grasped that point

20 ExComm transcript, 11:10 a.m.–1:15 p.m., 18 October 1962, *Presidential Recordings: Kennedy*, II, pp. 545, 547.

21 Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, p. 9.

22 *Kennedy Tapes*, p. 170; Leonard C. Meeker, minutes of 11:00 a.m., ExComm meeting, 19 October 1962, document no. 699, ‘The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962’ collection, National Security Archive.

before Bobby Kennedy. JFK's United Nations Ambassador Adlai E. Stevenson, like McNamara, emphasised during the early days of the missile crisis the importance of diplomacy. In a private meeting with the president on 16 October, he warned against the implementation of an air strike "until we have explored the possibilities of a peaceful solution." The following day he furnished JFK with a memorandum in which he again advised against military action, warning that it could lead to nuclear war. He understood the pressure on the president to sanction a strike on Cuba, but argued that "the means adopted have such incalculable consequences that I feel you should have made it clear that the existence of nuclear missile bases anywhere is negotiable before we start anything." This was a clear reference to US Jupiter missiles in Turkey, which — Stevenson pointed out — many nations would view as comparable to Soviet missiles in Cuba. On the second day of the missile crisis, then, Stevenson urged Kennedy to consider the diplomatic possibilities for ending the crisis.²³

Stevenson's thinking evolved during the following days. The position he came to adopt was that JFK should implement a blockade but then move rapidly to a diplomatic settlement in which the US should make concessions to induce Khrushchev to withdraw Soviet missiles from Cuba. This was precisely the argument he made in the ExComm meeting on the afternoon of 20 October, asserting that the US should "offer the Russians a settlement involving the withdrawal of our missiles from Turkey and our evacuation of Guantanamo base." Later in the meeting he also mentioned US missiles in Italy as something Kennedy should be willing to forfeit. Stevenson's point on ceding Guantanamo was unrealistic from a domestic political point of view, as it would have left the president open to charges of appeasement. JFK, unsurprisingly, was quick to refute Stevenson's argument on surrendering the Guantanamo base. But he acknowledged that he would be prepared to discuss the removal of US missiles from Turkey, albeit at a later point in the crisis. Along with McNamara, Stevenson had impressed upon the Kennedys and other ExComm officials the importance of diplomacy and a willingness to compromise in order to bring about the withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Cuba and an end to the crisis.²⁴

John Kennedy's response to Stevenson's recommendations on 20 October demonstrated the change in his views since the opening day of the missile crisis when he had favoured an air strike as the best response to the Soviet challenge, a view he still held the following morning, 17 October, when he spoke with CIA Director John A. McCone. From that point onwards, JFK's views became less hardline. As the missile crisis unfolded, he resolved to implement a blockade rather than an air

23 Elie Abel, *The Missile Crisis* (Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott, 1966), p. 49; Stevenson to JFK, 17 October 1962, Papers of Theodore C. Sorensen, box 49, Kennedy Library.

24 Minutes of the 505th meeting of the National Security Council, 2:30–5:10 p.m., 20 October 1962, in *FRUS, 1961–1963*, XI, <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v11/d34> [accessed on 22 May 2012].

strike that might trigger a superpower war; became more receptive to the idea of negotiations in which US concessions would have to be made; and became more wary of the bellicosity of his military advisers. By the climax of the crisis on 27 October there was no US official more determined to end the confrontation over Cuba by diplomacy rather than force.²⁵

This development is linked to a broader theme of the Kennedy presidency, namely his increasingly progressive outlook, in both domestic and foreign affairs. The John Kennedy of 1961 sanctioned the Bay of Pigs invasion and Operation Mongoose to oust Fidel Castro, authorised an enormous peacetime increase in military spending at a time when the US enjoyed roughly a 17-to-1 advantage over the Soviet Union in nuclear weapons, and was wary about promoting civil rights. The John Kennedy of 1963 delivered the American University speech calling for a more tolerant attitude towards the Soviet Union, signed the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and introduced the landmark civil rights bill to end racial segregation. He may also have begun to develop doubts about America's role in Vietnam. The two addresses he gave on 10–11 June, the first his American University speech, the second his televised address to the nation in which he defined civil rights as a moral issue for America, represented the rhetorical encapsulation of this more progressive Kennedy presidency. JFK had changed as a leader because of his experiences. In particular, the draconian police repression of the Birmingham protests in spring 1963 gave Kennedy a more vivid understanding of the severity of racial oppression in the South, and in foreign affairs it was his responsibility for pulling the United States and the world back from the nuclear precipice in the Cuban missile crisis that impressed upon him the dangers of the Cold War and the concomitant need for him to craft a more conciliatory approach towards the Soviet Union. Hence, the maturation in JFK's thinking during the missile crisis was the start of a longer process in which he reshaped his views on politics and international affairs.²⁶

A shift away from his initial belligerence in the missile crisis was evident on the third day, 18 October. Kennedy can be criticised for his preference at the start of the crisis for a US air strike because if he had felt compelled to make a snap decision, the evidence suggests he would have ordered military action against Cuba — the consequences of which, given the likelihood that Khrushchev would have

25 ExComm transcript, 11:50 a.m., 16 October 1962, pp. 66, 71–2; McCone memorandum, 'Brief Discussion with the President,' 17 October 1962, in Mary S. McAuliffe (ed.), *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis 1962* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 1992), p. 165.

26 JFK, commencement address at American University, 10 June 1963, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=9266#axzz1wRpLCNIE, and radio and television report to the American people on civil rights, 11 June 1963, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=9271&st=&tst1=#axzz1wRpLCNIE [both accessed on 31 May 2012]. For the argument that Kennedy changed and matured as his presidency unfolded, see Giglio, *Presidency of John F. Kennedy*, p. 287, and Mark J. White, 'Introduction: A New Synthesis for the New Frontier,' in White (ed.), *Kennedy: The New Frontier Revisited* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), pp. 12–13.

felt obliged to respond in kind in Berlin or Turkey or elsewhere, could have been catastrophic. On the other hand, JFK's switch from an air strike-advocate to a backer of the blockade merits praise. It showed his open-mindedness, the flexibility of his thinking; and this enabled him to make the sound decision of rejecting the risky military option that he and the majority of his advisers originally espoused, in favour of a blockade alternative that put pressure on Khrushchev whilst furnishing a window of opportunity for the superpowers to negotiate a peaceful settlement. JFK's ability to reflect and change his mind in the Cuban missile crisis stands in stark contrast to the sort of dogmatism exhibited by George W. Bush when considering whether to go to war against Iraq in 2003.²⁷

JFK also impressed by exploring at an early stage how diplomacy could end the missile crisis; and by displaying the resilience needed to stand up to his relentlessly hawkish military advisers. Although speechwriter Theodore C. Sorensen recalled that Stevenson's 17 October memorandum calling for give-and-take negotiations had vexed the president, the following day in ExComm JFK showed an understanding of how diplomacy and mutual concessions might play a role in defusing the crisis. When discussing the air strike option, for instance, he speculated on whether it would be worth warning Khrushchev that a US attack on Cuba was imminent but to use a carrot as well as a stick by saying if he withdrew his missiles from the island, the US would take its Jupiter missiles out of Turkey. Later in the same meeting, he told his colleagues that in a diplomatic effort to end the crisis, "The only offer we would make, it seems to me, that would have any sense ... giving him some out, would be our Turkey missiles."²⁸

There were other indications in this ExComm meeting that JFK was moving away from the hawkish position he had adopted at the start of the crisis. At one point he mapped out a course of action approximating that which he announced to the American people on 22 October in his radio and television address: "We do the message to Khrushchev and tell him that if work continues, et cetera, et cetera. We at the same time launch the blockade. If the work continues, that we go in and take them [the Soviet missiles] out." "We don't declare war," he added, in explaining how the blockade would be initiated. It was clear from this ExComm discussion that Kennedy now viewed the military alternatives as representing but one of two options, the other being a blockade; and later that day it was the blockade that he came to prefer. As he mulled over the situation on the 18th, the issues that were of particular concern to him were maintaining NATO solidarity, decreasing the likelihood of drastic Soviet reprisals against Berlin and preventing a superpower nuclear exchange. Though for a time Kennedy thought Khrushchev would grab Berlin regardless of

27 Transcript of JFK dictation, 18 October 1962, *Kennedy Tapes*, pp. 171–2.

28 Walter Johnson (ed.), *The Papers of Adlai E. Stevenson* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), VIII, p. 299n; Sorensen, *Kennedy*, pp. 695–6; ExComm transcript, 11.10 a.m.–1.15 p.m., 18 October 1962, *Presidential Recordings: Kennedy*, II, pp. 538, 547.

how the US responded to the missiles in Cuba, in the end all of these concerns played a role in converting JFK from an air-strike advocate to a supporter of the blockade.²⁹

The following morning, Friday 19 October, Kennedy's preference for the blockade led to a brutal encounter with the Joint Chiefs who were strongly in favour of military action against Cuba. When Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Maxwell Taylor informed him of their support for an air strike to be carried out on Cuba without warning, JFK explained that his reservations to that approach related to his fear of escalation, particularly in Berlin. "If we attack Cuba, the missiles, or Cuba, in any way," he told Taylor and other military officials, "then it gives them [the Russians] a clear line to take Berlin, as they were able to do in Hungary under the Anglo war in Egypt ... we would be regarded as the trigger-happy Americans who lost Berlin. We would have no support among our allies." The irascible General Curtis E. LeMay disagreed, arguing that a blockade constituted something close to appeasement. Admiral George W. Anderson likewise asserted that the blockade would be ineffective. Kennedy, in robust fashion, countered that if he sanctioned an attack on Cuba, Khrushchev would be compelled to retaliate, and the most likely target would be Berlin. He kept trying to make the Joint Chiefs view the Cuban situation, as he had to as president, in a *broader* context: "You know, as I say, the problem is not really some war against Cuba. But the problem is part of this worldwide struggle where we face the Communists, particularly ... over Berlin." And by stating that, "The argument for the blockade was that what we want to do is to avoid, if we can, nuclear war by escalation or imbalance," Kennedy tried to induce a degree of restraint on the part of his military advisers.³⁰

The dangerous belligerence Kennedy was faced with from his own military was apparent from what the Joint Chiefs said, with the tape still recording, once Kennedy had left the room. In a scene that would not have looked out of place in Stanley Kubrick's 1964 cinematic masterpiece *Dr. Strangelove*, an angry General David Shoup said:

If somebody could keep them [JFK and his civilian advisers] from doing the goddamn thing piecemeal. That's our problem. You go in there and friggin' around with the missiles. You're screwed. You go in and frig around with anything else, you're screwed.

You're screwed, screwed, screwed. And if some goddamn thing, some way, he could say: "Either do this son of a bitch and do it right, and quit friggin' around." That was my conclusion. Don't frig around and go take a missile out.

For all the implausibilities of Oliver Stone's 1991 film *JFK*, one theme it developed that was credible was the tension between Kennedy and his own military. In retrospect, the gung-ho pressure applied by the Joint Chiefs in their discussions with

29 ExComm transcript, 11:00 a.m., 18 October 1962, pp. 144–6; ExComm transcript, 11:10 a.m.–1.15 p.m., 18 October 1962, *Presidential Recordings: Kennedy*, II, pp. 581, 589, 593.

30 Transcript, meeting between JFK and the Joint Chiefs, 9:45 a.m., 19 October 1962, *Kennedy Tapes*, pp. 174–175, 178–179, 183, 186; transcript, meeting between JFK and the Joint Chiefs, 9:45–10:30 a.m., 19 October 1962, *Presidential Recordings: Kennedy*, II, pp. 581, 589, 593.

Kennedy was a bar to a peaceful, diplomatic ending to the missile crisis. Kennedy's ability to withstand that considerable pressure reflected well on his leadership, and was a key part of the campaign he waged within his administration, from 18 October onwards, in favour of the blockade.³¹

That campaign culminated on the afternoon of Saturday 20 October, in Kennedy's announcement to his ExComm colleagues that "he was ready to go ahead with the blockade." While ordering his military advisers to further their plans for an attack on Cuba, in case he subsequently felt obliged to order one, he made clear he was receptive to the idea of negotiations leading to US withdrawal of its Jupiter missiles from Turkey and Italy as part of a final settlement. He did not want to offer their removal — only to be ready to do so if the Russians raised the issue. Along with Stevenson and McNamara, Kennedy explored the notion of trading the Jupiters more thoroughly than any ExComm official during the first week of the missile crisis.³²

Following Kennedy's public announcement of the blockade in his speech on 22 October, and then the initiation of the blockade on the morning of Wednesday 24 October, the focus of JFK and his advisers was on the successful implementation of the quarantine: they hoped that Soviet ships heading towards the blockade zone would stop or turn around, which they did on the 24th, and that a Soviet ship or one under Soviet charter would permit itself to be boarded, which the *Marucla* consented to on the morning of the 26th. Early in the second week of the missile crisis, therefore, Kennedy concentrated on the mechanics of establishing the blockade and, like his advisers, said little on the vital question of what step he should take next if the Russians respected the blockade but did not remove their missiles from Cuba. When he did consider that issue he indicated a preference for the extension of the blockade so as to prohibit petroleum, oil and lubricants (POL) as well as weapons from reaching the island. That would ultimately bring the Cuban economy to a standstill and so increase the pressure on Khrushchev and Castro. He remained preoccupied with Berlin, considering how to respond should the Soviets insist on inspecting US convoys there, deciding to put the hero of the 1948–9 Berlin crisis, General Lucius D. Clay, on standby to be sent to the city, and concluding that any US invasion of Cuba would provoke Soviet seizure of West Berlin.³³

By Thursday 25 October, JFK still viewed the extension of the blockade so as to include POL as his likely next step, as he informed British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in a telephone conversation. But a surprisingly hawkish Robert Kennedy

31 Transcript, meeting between JFK and the Joint Chiefs, 9:45–10:30 a.m., 19 October 1962, *Presidential Recordings: Kennedy*, II, pp. 597–8.

32 Minutes of the 505th meeting of the National Security Council, 2:30–5:10 p.m., 20 October 1962.

33 Don Munton and David A. Welch, *The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Concise History* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 70; transcript, ExComm meeting, 10:00 a.m., 23 October 1962, pp. 293, 309, transcript, ExComm meeting, 6:00 p.m., 23 October 1962, p. 341, transcript, JFK-Macmillan telephone conversation, 7:00 p.m., 24 October 1962, p. 385, transcript, ExComm meeting, 10:00 a.m., 25 October 1962, pp. 412, 417 — all in *Kennedy Tapes*.

challenged his brother's thinking in ExComm that day by claiming an air strike on the missiles in Cuba might be better than a clash with the Soviets at sea. McNamara, to his credit, disagreed, arguing that vigorous US surveillance over Cuba would be sufficient to display American resolve for a few more days. Factoring in Robert Kennedy's analysis, JFK concluded towards the end of this ExComm session that the two options to consider, should Soviet work on the missile sites continue, were the air strike and the extension of the blockade to cover POL. The following morning, however, he spoke in favour of the POL initiative as his next course of action, not the air-strike idea his brother had entertained.³⁴

At that morning's ExComm meeting on Friday 26 October, there was a definite sense, with the US having just boarded the *Marucla*, that the first phase of the second week of the crisis was over, namely that the blockade had been successfully enforced, and that the second phase had begun, one in which the Kennedy administration would need to decide on an additional course of action should the Soviets maintain in Cuba the missiles already deployed. Some hardline sentiments were expressed. Secretary of the Treasury C. Douglas Dillon argued that a US air strike on the missile sites would be better than an intensification of the blockade. But JFK was a force for moderation. When some of his advisers said they were wary about considering a settlement that would leave Castro in power for the foreseeable future, he said that his administration's priority had to be the removal from Cuba of nuclear weapons, and not Castro. In other words, the administration's longstanding objective of ousting Castro should not be allowed to prevent the fashioning of a reasonable settlement to the crisis. Furthermore, when Adlai Stevenson predicted (accurately for the most part) that in any settlement Khrushchev would demand a US no-invasion pledge regarding Cuba, as well as the dismantling of US missiles in Turkey and Italy, JFK defended him from McCone's criticism by suggesting that Stevenson, in emphasising the use of negotiations, had identified one of only two methods that could actually bring about a withdrawal of the missiles from Cuba, the other being military action; the blockade, or an intensification of the blockade to cover POL, would not by itself prove efficacious. "We've only got two ways of removing the weapons," he told his CIA director. "One is to negotiate them out ... the other is to go in and take them out." So Stevenson's analysis was not unreasonable.³⁵

The following day, Saturday 27 October, was of decisive importance in determining the outcome of the Cuban missile crisis. By this point Khrushchev had impaled Kennedy and his advisers on the horns of a dilemma: how to respond to

34 Transcript, JFK-Macmillan telephone conversation, 6:00 p.m., 25 October 1962, p. 428; transcript, ExComm meeting, 5:00 p.m., 25 October 1962, pp. 432–3, 437; transcript, ExComm meeting, 10:00 a.m., 26 October 1962, p. 448 — all in *Kennedy Tapes*.

35 ExComm transcript, 10:00 a.m., 26 October 1962, pp. 448–9, 460–4; transcript, ExComm meeting, 10:10–11.20 a.m., 26 October 1962, *Presidential Recordings: Kennedy*, III, p. 312.

the two different sets of proposals he had advanced in his private message to JFK on the 26th calling for a US pledge not to invade Cuba in return for removal of Soviet missiles from the island, and his public message to the president on the morning of the 27th in which the additional concession of the withdrawal of the Jupiters from Turkey was demanded.³⁶

Famously, after mulling over the issue with his advisers, John Kennedy responded by sending a letter to Khrushchev embracing his proposals of 26 October, not the 27th. He also dispatched Bobby Kennedy to Anatoly F. Dobrynin to tell the Soviet ambassador in Washington that the US would withdraw its Jupiters from Turkey but that this would have to be a clandestine part of the settlement. This approach worked, for on the following day Khrushchev agreed to back down and order the removal of Russian missiles from Cuba.³⁷

Robert Kennedy claimed for himself the lion's share of the credit for devising the wise strategy that ended the most dangerous crisis of the nuclear age, and specifically for hatching the plan to ignore Khrushchev's more hardline message of the 27th and to embrace his more conciliatory letter of 26 October. The transcripts for the ExComm meetings held on 27 October expose that claim as a self-serving chimera. Before Robert Kennedy came to back the approach of ignoring Khrushchev's second proposition and agreeing to his first set of proposals, several ExComm officials voiced their support for that strategy, notably Pentagon official Paul H. Nitze, McGeorge Bundy, Sorensen and Stevenson. As with the advocacy of the blockade and the use of the Pearl Harbor metaphor in the first week of the missile crisis, the administration's response to Khrushchev's proposals on 26–27 October was a collaborative effort — and Robert Kennedy's role was less significant than he later claimed.³⁸

John Kennedy, however, was immensely impressive in ExComm on 27 October. From an early stage in the discussions that day, he made the case that “most people would regard this [27 October Khrushchev offer] as not an unreasonable proposal.” Hence the Kennedy administration would find it “very difficult to explain why we are going to take hostile military action in Cuba, against these sites ... when he's saying, ‘If you'll get yours out of Turkey, we'll get ours out of Cuba’. I think you've got a very tough one here.” Later on he reiterated that the apparent fairness of Khrushchev's

36 Khrushchev to JFK, 7:00 p.m., 26 October 1962, <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v11/d84> [accessed on 22 May 2012], and Khrushchev to JFK, 27 October 1962, <http://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v11/d91> [accessed on 22 May 2012] — both in *FRUS, 1961–1963*, vol. XI.

37 Michael Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and Castro on the Brink of Nuclear War* (London: Hutchinson, 2008), pp. 306–9, 332–5. For Dobrynin's record of his meeting with Robert Kennedy, see his cable to the Soviet Foreign Ministry, 27 October 1962, *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 5 (Spring 1995), www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/cuba_mis_cri/moment.htm [accessed on 25 May 2012].

38 Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, pp. 79–80; transcript, ExComm meeting, 10:00 a.m., 27 October 1962, *Kennedy Tapes*, pp. 497–9, 501–2.

proposed settlement meant that world opinion would be firmly set against a US attack on Cuba, and anyway such an assault would be perilous as it would trigger Soviet retaliation in Berlin.³⁹

JFK depended on advisers such as McGeorge Bundy and Ted Sorensen who grasped that he could write back to the Soviet leader accepting his proposal of the 26th rather than the 27th; and he did initially express reservations about Khrushchev's 26 October offer on the grounds that its provision of a US pledge not to invade Cuba represented a guarantee that Castro would stay in power. However, Kennedy's wariness over the use of American force to end the crisis was commendable, particularly as Maxwell Taylor and other military officials were pushing him towards an air strike on Cuba two days hence, to be followed by an invasion. The decision JFK ultimately made — to accept in writing Khrushchev's 26 October proposal of a US no-invasion pledge in return for removal of the missiles from Cuba, while dispatching his brother to tell Dobrynin of their willingness to withdraw the Jupiters from Turkey as long as it remained a clandestine component of the settlement — was manifestly effective in ending the missile crisis. Moreover, Kennedy's consideration of what has become known as the Cordier ploy, first revealed by Dean Rusk in 1987, suggests that JFK in the final analysis might well have plumped for a publicly-made concession on the Jupiters to end the crisis if Khrushchev had rejected the notion of a secret Jupiter deal.⁴⁰

In addition to the light it sheds on the roles played by leading US officials, the ExComm tapes bring into focus some general themes of importance. One is the interrelatedness of the Cuban crisis and the Berlin situation. It is easy to think of those issues as linked but essentially separate. But in fact the threads of the crisis in Berlin were tied to the strands of the crisis in Cuba to form, from Kennedy's perspective, a single tapestry. Kennedy and his advisers consistently viewed the Cuban missile crisis in a Berlin context. Khrushchev's missile gambit in the Caribbean, ExComm officials concluded, was due in large measure to a desire to strengthen his position in Berlin. The respective merits of a blockade of Cuba and a military strike on the island were to be gauged to a great extent by the sort of Russian reprisals each would provoke in Berlin. By the climax of the crisis on 27 October, JFK was still factoring Berlin into his analysis of the situation. If one believes that Khrushchev's demands on Berlin at the Vienna summit in June 1961 were influenced by an impression of Kennedy weakness created by the failure of

39 Transcript, ExComm meeting, 10:05–11.55 a.m., 27 October 1962, *Presidential Recordings: Kennedy*, III, pp. 364, 381; Sheldon M. Stern, *Averting 'The Final Failure': John F. Kennedy and the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 295.

40 ExComm meeting, 10:00 a.m., 27 October 1962, p. 499; transcript, ExComm meeting, 4:00 p.m., 27 October 1962, p. 563; Mark J. White, 'Dean Rusk's Revelation: New British Evidence on the Cordier Ploy,' *Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations Newsletter* 25 (September 1994): 1–9; Patrick Dean to Foreign Office, 25 October 1962, Foreign Office Records 371/162387, National Archives, Kew, Richmond.

the Bay of Pigs invasion, that Kennedy's determination to prevail in the summer 1961 Berlin crisis was linked to his humiliation at the Bay of Pigs, and that a desire to give himself another card to play in relation to Berlin was one of the factors prompting Khrushchev in 1962 to deploy missiles in Cuba, then it is clear that historians need to think in terms of one ongoing Cuba-Berlin crisis in 1961–2, rather than separate Berlin and Cuban crises.

The ExComm tapes also add to our understanding of the Kennedy administration's policies before the missile crisis as well as during the crisis itself. Those policies were designed to do everything possible, short of a direct attack on Cuba by American forces, to oust Castro. They included the Bay of Pigs invasion, covert pressure in the form of Operation Mongoose, economic sanctions, and diplomatic isolation by engineering Cuba's expulsion from the Organization of American States. Even the assassination of Castro was planned and attempted, though the extent to which JFK and his civilian advisers had been briefed about and endorsed these plots has been disputed. In a brilliant 1990 article in *Diplomatic History*, James Hershberg even presented sufficient evidence to pose the question of whether in the autumn of 1962, prior to the missile crisis, Kennedy was seriously considering an attack on Cuba.⁴¹

The declassified ExComm tapes reinforce the point that US military preparations were underway, even before JFK was informed about the missiles in Cuba, so that Kennedy could sanction an attack on the island at short notice. On the opening day of the missile crisis McNamara reminded the president that, "We have been moving *already*, on a very quiet basis, munitions and POL." On the third day of the crisis there was an exchange among senior Kennedy advisers, albeit with JFK having left the meeting, that decoded refers, in the judgment of this historian, to the assassination of the Cuban leader:

TAYLOR: I thought we were hoping last night that we would get the collapse of Castro...

BUNDY: I believe that Castro is not going to sit still for a blockade and that that's to our advantage. I'm convinced myself that Castro has to go. I always thought ... It never occurred to [me before], I just think, his [Castro's] demon is self-destruction and *we have to help him to that*.

McNAMARA: Well, then you're going to pay a bigger price.

BUNDY: Later.

McNAMARA: Later. And I think that's a possibility.

Arguing that the US should help Castro with his own "self-destruction" seems to be a reference to an effort to assassinate Castro. This supplements other evidence that

41 James G. Hershberg, 'Before "The Missiles of October": Did Kennedy Plan a Military Strike against Cuba?' *Diplomatic History* 14 (Spring 1990): 163–98.

senior US officials, including the president, did know about and backed CIA plans to kill Castro.⁴²

All of this highlights the importance of a continued assessment of the Kennedy administration's policies towards Cuba before the missile crisis. Around two decades ago scholars had added to the ongoing lively debate on the events of October 1962 by examining the origins of the missile crisis. Historians such as Thomas Paterson and Michael Beschloss made the argument that JFK's policies — such as the Bay of Pigs invasion, Operation Mongoose, assassination plots, threatening military manoeuvres in the Caribbean, economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure — influenced Khrushchev's decision in spring 1962 to deploy missiles in Cuba; and that in this way, JFK bore significant responsibility for the onset of the missile crisis, which is not the same thing as saying Khrushchev's missile gambit was justified. A number of works written in the last decade or so have focused, as scholarship did in the 1960s and 1970s, on those 13 days in October 1962 when the world teetered on the nuclear brink. In his 2008 study of the missile crisis *One Minute to Midnight*, for example, Michael Dobbs started his narrative on 16 October 1962. And Sheldon Stern, in *Averting 'The Final Failure': John F. Kennedy and the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings* (2003), devotes very little of his account to the pre-missile crisis period. To skim over the question of causation would be, in a historiographical sense, a regressive step. In future, monographs on the missile crisis should proceed along the twin tracks of the origins of the crisis and the crisis itself, as they tended to in the late 1980s and 1990s. If this occurs, a consensus might crystallise around the idea that, when it came to Cuba, Kennedy's record was something of a curate's egg — unimpressive before October 1962, but commendable during the crisis itself.⁴³

With JFK's handling of the missile crisis, the bottom line is that he succeeded in bringing about the withdrawal of nuclear weapons from Cuba and so ending the crisis without triggering a superpower war and without having to proffer concessions that were excessively generous. What the full ExComm tapes reveal are the precise contributions made by JFK and his advisers. In so doing, they make clear that Robert Kennedy was not the hero of the missile crisis. He did not hatch the plan for the blockade, originate the powerful Pearl Harbor metaphor in ExComm discussions, or devise the plan at the climax of the crisis that dealt effectively with Khrushchev's two different sets of proposals. He did come to embrace all of these approaches

42 ExComm transcript, 11:50 a.m., 16 October 1962, p. 69 (the emphasis is my own); ExComm transcript, 11.10 a.m.–1.15 p.m., 18 October 1962, *Presidential Recordings: Kennedy*, II, p. 568; Stern, *Averting 'The Final Failure'*, p. 115; U.S. Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities, interim report, S.Rept. 94–465, 94th Congress, 1st session, *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders*, *passim*.

43 Thomas G. Paterson, 'The Defense-of-Cuba Theme and the Missile Crisis', *Diplomatic History* 14 (Spring 1990): 249–56; Michael R. Beschloss, *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960–1963* (New York: Edward Burlingame, 1991 paperback ed.), p. 381; Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*; Stern, *Averting 'The Final Failure'*.

and ideas, and had an influence on his brother, but it is not clear that he would have taken any of these positions had it not been for the arguments made by other officials that he found cogent. At the same time JFK, though initially supportive of the air-strike option, grasped at an early stage the necessity for negotiations and mutual concessions, and showed no little fortitude in resisting the trigger-happy proclivities of his military advisers. A number of other officials, notably McNamara, Ball, Stevenson and Thompson, merit considerable praise. They played a key and frequently underestimated role in October 1962. Paradoxically, it was McNamara, forever maligned by association with the Vietnam War, whose contribution to the management of the Cuban missile crisis was the greatest of any of John Kennedy's advisers. Works written on the missile crisis in the past decade, such as those by Michael Dobbs, Sheldon Stern, and Don Munton and David Welch, have failed to highlight McNamara's crucial role. In evaluating the roles played by the Kennedy team, therefore, historians need to shift to a new perspective, one that gives Robert McNamara, and not Robert Kennedy, the greatest credit for guiding John Kennedy along the path to peace in October 1962.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Dobbs, *One Minute to Midnight*; Stern, *Averting 'The Final Failure'*; Munton and Welch, *Cuban Missile Crisis*.



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Cover image: Meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (EXCOMM), 29 October 1962
Cecil Stoughton. White House Photographs.
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