

ExCom meeting, October 18, 1962

The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962
Executive Committee Meeting Excerpts
The Oval Office

Participants:

George Ball	under secretary of state	McGeorge Bundy	assistant to the president for national security affairs	C. Douglas Dillon	secretary of the Treasury
Lyndon B. Johnson	vice president	John F. Kennedy	president	Robert F. Kennedy	attorney general
Arthur Lundahl	director, National Photographic Interpretation Center	Gen. Maxwell Taylor	chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff	John McCone	director, Central Intelligence Agency
Robert McNamara	secretary of defense	Dean Rusk	secretary of state	Llewellyn Thompson	ambassador-at-large and special adviser on Soviet affairs
and other unidentified participants					

October 18, 1962, 11 a.m.

[The committee is discussing aerial reconnaissance photos of Cuba]

Arthur Lundahl: Yes sir. Mr. President, gentlemen, the first and most important item which I would seek to call to your attention is a new area hitherto never seen by us some 21 miles to the southwest of Havana which we have at the moment labeled a probable MRBM/IRBM launch complex. The name of the town nearest is this, it is there. The two sites, sir, Nos. 1 and 2, are 2 1/2 miles apart and enlarging this one we look at it and we see for the first time a pattern of Medium/IRBM sites that looks like the things we have been seeing in the Soviet Union. There are two pads here and here. They are separated by 750 feet. There's a control bunker with cable scars going up to small buildings in board at each of these pads. There is no equipment on the pads yet, they're under construction. The security fence has been superimposed around the place. And on 29 August, the last time we went over this area the ground had just scarcely started to be scratched.

[Further discussion of sights]

We've never identified as irrevocably the signature of a Soviet intermediate medium range ballistic missile, which is estimatedly a 2,000 mile missile. But the elongation of the pads and the location of the control bunkers between each pair of pads has been the thing that has suggested to our hearts, if not our minds, the kind of thing that might accompany an IRBM. So we have, at the moment, labeled it as such and let the guided missile intelligence analysts come up, finally, with the true analysis of what the range of these missiles might be that are eventually accommodated on this set of pads. Let me switch to the next material[?] ... [unintelligible] ... Yes sir.

[Further discussion of sights]

Also earlier, Mr. President, we reported to you a number of what we call cruise missile sites, that's short range coastal defense type missiles. Starting out with the Banes site, with another one

located at Santa Cruz del Norte, up here in the Havana area. At the time of that reporting, there were 2 launchers at this position here and here. Since the coverage of that day, 2 more launching positions have been added upward/up north[?] of those 2 positions. The launcher here is uncovered, you can actually see the launcher itself. And down in this small indentment[?] here appears to be the winged type of air breathing[?] missile which will go on it. The short, stubby winged fellow which conforms to the cruise type of missile that we have seen before. So, our opinion of this thing remains the same, we now would just report two additional launching positions at that complex.

[Discussion of airfields]

John Kennedy: So in other words, from the information we have prior to the development of these new films, you'd say there are how many, ah, different, ah, missile sites, as well as how many different launch pads at each site?

Arthur Lundahl: Well sir, we had not found anything like the MRBM sites in any of the photography up to this 15 October bit. We had found and added to it last night 1 more surface-to-air missile site, so that made a total of 23, as of this location. However, one of them has been pulled up and moved away, at Santa Lucia. We don't know where they pull these things up and move them to, but we have seen 23 surface-to-air missile sites. We've seen 3 of these surface to surface cruise type of missile sites at Banes and up here, we're at del Norte and then down on the Isle of Pines.

[Further discussion of photos]

John McCone?: The uh, the Joint Committee made an estimate that between 16 and 32 missiles would be operational within a week or slightly more. This is an estimate, a ... [unintelligible] ... estimate.

[Further discussion of photos]

Dean Rusk: ... [unintelligible] ... First of all the question that needs an answer really is, is it necessary to take action? And I suppose that there is probable reason to take action here. But the points are taken it looks now as if Cuba is not going to be just an instrumental base for fielding these things, but bases are going to pop out like measles all over the world. It might be an island in ... [unintelligible] ... Cuba could become just part of the goal, a military problem, and any contest we would have with Soviet Union could[?] get tense any other part of the world, and I think our colleagues in Defense will comment on that very carefully, because that's[?] a very important point. But, I do think when the full scope of this becomes known that no action would undermine our alliances all over the world, very promptly.

[Speaks on the effect of no action]

I think also we have to think of the effect on the Soviets, if you would do that. Now suppose that they would consider this a major back down and that this would free their hands for almost any

type of adventure they might want to try out in other parts of the world. If we are unable to face up to the situation in Cuba against this kind of threat then I think they would be greatly encouraged to go adventuring, and would feel they've got it made as far as the ... [unintelligible] ... of the United States. They all know that we have an almost unmanageable problem in this country getting any support for foreign policy that we would need to pursue, if we're going sustain[?] the cause of independence and faith[?] here and in all parts of the world. We've got a million men in uniform outside of the United States, we've got fine programs, we've got a major [cough] major effort we're making in agriculture. It seems to that inaction, in this situation would undermine and undercut the long support we need for the kind of foreign policy that will eventually ensure our survival.

Now action involves very high risks indeed. I think that additional information increases the risk because challenge is much more serious and the, uh, counter action I would suppose would have to be heavier ... [unintelligible] ... talking about. But, we in fact, but, uh, you would have to have in the back of your own mind, whatever decision you take, the, uh, possibility or/not[?] the likelihood of a Soviet reaction somewhere else running all the way from Berlin right around to Korea and the possibility of a reaction against the United States itself. Don't think that you can make this decision under the assumption that this is a free ride or easier in any ... [unintelligible] ... I would suppose that with the first missiles you're talking about that a quick strike, a quick success a matter of a couple of hours time, 50 or 60 Soviet missiles ... [unintelligible]... where it is obvious then the matter is over and finished and that was the purpose of our engagement. That would have much more reduced threats from a military response on the other side. ... [unintelligible] ... these other installations and getting involved in various parts of the island, I think would increase the risk of a military response down there.

The action also has to be thought of in connection with alliance solidarity, there we're faced with conflicting elements. Unless we're in a situation where it is clear that the alliance has worked to understand the problem, then unannounced, unconsulted quick action on our part, could well lead to a kind of odd disunitiveness the Soviets could capitalize upon very strongly. Um, it's one thing for Britain and France get themselves isolated within the alliance over Suez. But it's quite another thing for the alliance for the United States to get itself in the same position, because we are the central bone structure of the alliance and this is a different kind of problem that we have to think very hard about. Now I think that, as far as I am concerned I would have to say to you if we enter upon this path of challenging the Soviets what the Soviets do themselves have to embark[?] tactically dangerous course that no one surely can foresee the outcome. I was prepared to say when I came over here before I got this information ... [unintelligible] ... Soviet strike. Very probably, a move by ... [unintelligible] ... much more general action I think, as far as Cuba is concerned and possibly in other situations

Now there is another ... [unintelligible] ... I think the American people will willingly undertake great danger, if necessary for something. If they have a deep feeling that you've done everything that is reasonably possible to determine whether or not this trip[?] was necessary. Also that they have clear conscience and a good theory of the case. The first point, whether this trip[?] is necessary, we all of course, remember the Guns of August. We're certainly convinced of the general situation. We've got the time now that we've gotten ... [unintelligible] ... and this, this question I think is something that's pretty important. A matter of a clear conscience, in World War II, the Pearl Harbor attack against the background of Hitler's conduct ... [unintelligible] ... In the case in Korea, we had an organized, large-scale aggression from North Korea and we were going in as part of the general United Nations effort. Even with that start the Korean aspect of it ... [unintelligible] ... general support of the American people before it was over.

Now, these are considerations I'm just mentioning ... [unintelligible] ... put military in favor of a, uh, a confrontation with Khrushchev, and the implication because the ... [unintelligible] ... possibility, only a possibility Khrushchev might realize that he's got to back down. We can't be, we have no reason to expect that, as far as we're concerned. It looks very serious nature of on his part. but at least it would take that point out of the way for the historical record and just might plant the seeds of prevention of a great conflict.

[Discussion of the possibility of declaring war on Cuba]

Dean Rusk: I'd like to hear my colleague comment on this, whether the, uh, the actual action we would take, that you have to. No one can guarantee that this can be achieved by diplomatic action, but it seems to be essential that this be challenged and be tested out before military action is employed. And if our decision is firm, and it must be, I can see no danger in communication with Khrushchev privately, worded in such a way that he realizes that we mean business. This I consider an essential first step, no matter what military course ... [unintelligible] ... we determine on, if he replies unsatisfactorily. If the tone and tenor of his reply ... [unintelligible] ... I don't believe the threat of general nuclear war should be ... [unintelligible] ... sole reactive, even if the strike should come first. My chief concern about a strike without a diplomatic effort that it would eventually, that it would immediately lead to war with Cuba and would not be the neat, quick disposal of the bases as was suggested. Furthermore I'm reasonably certain the allied reaction would be very hostile. Especially if the Soviets retaliate locally and take the area beyond Berlin. Communication with Khrushchev would be useful for the record in establishing the record in our case for action. In general, I feel that a declaration of war would be valuable since it would open up every avenue of military action, air strikes, invasion, blockade. But we would have to make a case to our allies to justify such a declaration of war. [Speaks on the possibility of limited action.]

Maxwell Taylor: Mr. President ... [unintelligible] ... There are a series of alternative plans, (papers shuffling) ranging from Roman numeral 1 of about 50 sorties directed against solely against the known MRBMs, known as of last night, to Roman numeral 5, which covers the alternative invasion plans. All of these plans are based on one very important assumption. That we would attack with conventional weapons against an enemy who is not equipped with operational nuclear weapons. If there is any possibility that the enemy is equipped with operational nuclear weapons, I'm certain the plans would have to be changed. Last evening we were discussing the relative merits of these forms of military action, assuming that at some point military action was required. It has been the views of the Chiefs, based on discussions within the last two days, and it was certainly my view, that either Roman numeral 1 or Roman numeral 2, very limited air strikes against very limited targets, would be quite inconclusive, very risky, and almost certainly lead to further military action, prior to which we would have paid an unnecessary price for the gains we achieved.

[Discussion on military tactics]

John Kennedy: Why do you change, why does this information change the recommendation?

Maxwell Taylor: Last evening, it was my personal belief that there were more targets than we knew of, and that it was probable that there would be more targets than we could know of at the start of any one of these strikes. The information of this morning I think simply demonstrates the validity of that conclusion of last evening. Secondly, when we're talking of Roman numeral 1 as a very limited strike against MRBMs only and it leaves in existence IL28s with nuclear weapon-carrying capabilities and a number of other aircraft with nuclear weapon-carrying capability and aircraft with strike capability, which could be exercised during our attack or at any time following our attack on the MRBMs, with great possible risk and loss to either Guantanamo and or the eastern coast of the U.S. I say great loss, I'm not thinking in terms of tens of thousands, but I'm thinking terms of sporadic attacks against our civilian population, which would lead to losses I think we would find it hard to justify in relation to the alternative courses open to us and in relation to the very limited accomplishment of our limited number of strikes.

John Kennedy: What about alternative No. 2 on the basis that you're going against offensive weapons, you're going to go against their missiles and you're going to go against their planes, what is the argument against that? I mean, that would prevent them knocking our population.

Maxwell Taylor: It's much to be preferred over No. 1 in my opinion. It would have to be larger than shown now because of the additional number of targets required and it fits very closely, to alternative 3 in terms of the number of sorties. No. 2 was prepared before we had the additional information of last night. Tonight's interpretation we showed 100 sorties. I think it more likely that No. 2, that the information we now have and the information we're likely to have ... [unintelligible] ... tomorrow merge with/into[?] version No. 3 which is a 200 sortie strike. I doubt very much we could stop there.

Dean Rusk: I would agree with that particular scenario[?], that really 2 is hardly possible now. I mean we're really talking 3 right now. So you'll have to take the sandbags out. If you're going to go for all these from the air, from the airfield strikes, ... [unintelligible] ... other target related ... [unintelligible] ...

[Further discussion on military tactics]

John Kennedy: Well under 2 you don't need to take up the SAM sites before they become operational.

Unidentified voice: Uh, they may be operational at any time.

Robert McNamara: We have almost certainly added two more targets than are indicated here. There are 16 targets shown, we have at least three more targets ... [unintelligible] ... since last night and we will certainly have some more tonight and tomorrow and therefore because 2 merges very directly into 3 if the SAM sites becomes operational 2 becomes 3 because in a very real sense they ... [several voices, unintelligible] ...

John Kennedy: Let me ask you this Bob, when we're talking about 3 vs. 5.

Robert McNamara: Yes sir.

John Kennedy: Uh, then the advantage of 3 is that you would hope to do it in a day?

Robert McNamara: Yes, it could be done in a day.

John Kennedy: And an invasion, 5, would be 7 or 8 or 9 days with all the consequences?

Robert McNamara: That is correct.

John Kennedy: We increase the tension now. If we did 3 would, uh, we would assume that by the end of the day their ability to use planes against this, after all they don't have that much range so they'd have to come back to the field and organize, right?

Robert McNamara: You would assume that by the end of the day their air force could be nearly destroyed, I say nearly because there might be a few sporadic weapons around.

Unidentified voice: Yes I would ... [unintelligible] ... we'll never be guaranteed a 100 percent. ... [unintelligible] ...

John Kennedy: Well, at least as far as their except of nuclear. I would think you have to go under the assumption that they're not going to permit nuclear weapons to be used against the United States from Cuba unless they're going to be using them from every place.

Robert McNamara: Well, maybe. I'm not sure they can stop it. This is why I emphasize a point here, that I don't believe the Soviets would authorize their use against the U.S. but they might nonetheless be used. Therefore, I underline his assumptions that all of these cases are premised on the assumptions there are no operational nuclear weapons there. If there's any possibility of that I would strongly recommend that these plans be modified substantially.

[Further discussion on military tactics]

John Kennedy: Holding the alliance, which is going to strain the alliance more, this tack by us on these, uh, Cuba. Which is, most allies regard as a fixation of the United States and not a serious military threat. I mean you have to apply conditional tactical ... [unintelligible] ... before they would accept or support our action against Cuba because they think that we're slightly demented on this subject. So there isn't any doubt that whatever action we take against Cuba, no matter how good our films are, that will cause Latin America, and a lot of, a lot of people would regard this as a mad act by the United States which is due to a loss of nerve because they will argue that taken at its worst the presence of these missiles really doesn't change the verdict, if you think that ...

[unintelligible] ... Well the Senate will think the other way ... [unintelligible] ... what is anybody else going to think who isn't under this gun?

[Further discussion on military tactics]

John Kennedy: If we gave say this 24-hour notice, get in touch with Khrushchev, taking no action with our allies. I would assume that they would move these mobile missiles into the woods.

[Several voices]

Robert McNamara: Mr. President, I don't believe they're equipped to do that. I say that because if they were equipped to do that they would have been equipped to erect them more quickly. I think it is unlikely they would move them in 24 hours. If they were to move them in 24 hours I think we could keep enough reconnaissance over the island during that period to have some idea of where they've moved. Have every reason to believe we'd know where they were.

Unidentified voice: It would take a little longer though.

Robert McNamara: What?

Unidentified voice: It would take a little longer, to take very careful reconnaissance to know where they are.

Robert Kennedy: I'm not so confident that they couldn't hide them or get them in immediate readiness in 24 hours.

Robert McNamara: I didn't say they could get them in immediate readiness in 24 hours, I don't believe that they, we would lose them with a 24-hour discussion with Khrushchev.

John Kennedy: How quick is our communication with Moscow? Say we sent somebody to see him and he was there at the beginning of the 24-hour period to see Mr. Khrushchev, how long would it be before Khrushchev's answer could get back to us as far as communications?

Llewellyn Thompson?: It would have to go in code probably, what, probably five or six hours. ... [unintelligible] ... You could telephone of course.

Robert Kennedy: Wouldn't really have to go in code, would it?

Llewellyn Thompson?: You could save time by not putting it in a highly confidential ... [unintelligible] ... machine?

John Kennedy: Then it would be a couple of hours?

McGeorge Bundy?: Put it this way, it might be answered ...[unintelligible]... infinite delays on their end ... [unintelligible] ...an actual text could be in here and transmitted and that would get to Khrushchev straight away. Whereas, somebody else might have the problem of ... [unintelligible] ...

Dean Rusk?: I think there is one point we have to bear in mind. [unintelligible] ... So far we know there is no stated relationship that makes these Soviet missiles or Soviet bases. There is the attempts that Castro made to ally himself with the Warsaw Pact or join the Warsaw Pact or even to engage in a bilateral with Moscow, apparently he ... [unintelligible] ... and failed. He sent Raul and Che Guevara to Moscow a few months ago apparently for that purpose, other purposes. Hence, if we were to take action with the present status, the Soviets would have some latitude and might want to respond, if they did at all. On the other hand, as a result of warning or communication with them, they declare these their bases. Then we would have a different kind of problem. Because we would have a problem of committing action against a stated base there. And this might mean a war of different proportions.

John Kennedy: The question is really whether the Soviet reaction [and Cuban resistance?] would be majorly different if they were presented with an accomplished fact in the daytime, I mean one day, not the invasion ... [unintelligible] ... accomplished fact whether their reaction would be different than it would be if they were given a chance to pull 'em out. If we said to Khrushchev that we, we had to take action against it ... [unintelligible] ... pull 'em out and we'll take ours out of Turkey, whether that, whether he would then send back: "If you take these out we're going to take Berlin, and we're going to do something else."

Robert McNamara?: The important factor there is that if you do this first strike you would kill a lot of Russians. That's ... [unintelligible] .. . On the other hand, if you give them notice, the thing I would fear the most is if just Turkey and Italy to take action to cause us to ... [unintelligible] ...

Unidentified voice: You mean if ...

Robert Kennedy: [interrupting] What is your preference Tom?

Llewellyn Thompson: My preference is let's blockade the ... [unintelligible] ... the declaration has already led the steps leading up to it [?]. I think it's very highly doubtful the Russians would resist a blockade against military weapons, particularly offensive ones, if at that point if that's the way we pitched it to the world.

John Kennedy: And what do we do with the weapons already there?

Llewellyn Thompson: Demand their dismantlement and say that we are going to maintain constant surveillance, and if they are armed, we would then take them out, and then maybe do it. I think we should be under no illusions that this would probably in the end lead to the same thing. But we would do it under an entirely different posture and background, and much less danger of getting up into the big war.

The Russians have a curious faculty of wanting a legal basis, despite of all the outrageous things they've done, they attach a lot of importance to this. The fact that you have that declaration of war, they would be running a military blockade, legally established, greatly deterred.[?]

John Kennedy: In other words ...

Robert Kennedy: [interrupting] If you maybe run through, because he hasn't heard the explanation of the blockade.

Llewellyn Thompson: There is a paper there on that, force number 2, there, Mr. President.... [unintelligible] ... It's a concept ... [much rustling of papers] ...

John Kennedy: In other words, under this, take these missiles that are now bad out or the planes that are now bad out.

Llewellyn Thompson: Not at the first stage, I think it would be useful to say if they're made operational, we might or would ...

John Kennedy: Of course then he would say, if you do that, then we will ...

Unidentified voice: Bomb 'em.

Llewellyn Thompson: As Chip says, I agree with you, if they're prepared to say, if you do this, then this is nuclear world war, then you do that anyway. I think he'd make a lot of threatening language, but in very big terms, keeping ...

John Kennedy: [interrupting] I would think it's just more likely he would grab Berlin, that's more likely.

Unidentified voice: I think that already ...

Llewellyn Thompson: [interrupting] If we just made the first strike I think his answer would be, very probably to take out one of our bases in Turkey, and make a quick tune[?], and then sit down and talk. I think the whole purpose of this exercise is to build up to talk with you, in which we try to negotiate out the bases. There are a lot of things that point to that, one thing that struck me very much is that it is so easy to camouflage these things or to hide them in the woods, why didn't they do it in the first place? They surely expected us to see it at some stage. The point of fact, the purpose was for preparations for negotiations.

Robert Kennedy: Maybe they had something?

Unidentified voice: They may.

Maxwell Taylor: May I ask whether military moves in these five, five days period would be acceptable in some point of view to the State Department?

Dean Rusk?: Oh yeah, certainly

Dean Rusk?: Certainly it would be helpful.

Unidentified voice: Now of course, Mr. President, there are obvious counters to the blockade. ...

[Several voices, unintelligible]

Robert Kennedy: And also the argument against the blockade is that it's very slow death, and it kills up, and goes over a period of months, and during that period of time you've got all these people yelling and screaming, examination of Russian ships and shooting down of Russian planes that try to land there, you have to do all those things.

[Further discussion of options]

Unidentified voice/George Ball?: ... [unintelligible] ... the Soviet reaction, if as Tommy and Chip predicted, the Soviets would not try to run the blockade, then they would have deserted their friends in Cuba, and I think there would be serious political chaos in Cuba if the Soviets deserted their own comrades[?].

Unidentified voice: Also, I assume that you would be in negotiations with Khrushchev.

Unidentified voice: In the case of any of these attacks in all logic you would have a blockade ... [unintelligible] ... all of these military actions apply also to a blockade.

Unidentified voice: I agree.

Unidentified voice: Oh yeah, sure, sure.

Unidentified voice: What would you do about a declaration of war?

Robert Kennedy?: Simultaneously, seems to me you declare that a state of war exists, and you call the Congress.

Llewellyn Thompson: I think that Khrushchev will deny that these are Soviet bases. ... [unintelligible] ... I think what he'd say, what are you getting so excited about? We have, the Cubans asked us for us the missiles to deal with these emigre bases which are threatening, have attacked and are threatening attack. These are not missiles, other than defensive. They're much less offensive than your weapons in Turkey. You've got these armed with nuclear warheads. We haven't given them nuclear weapons. These are simply to deal with the threats to Cuba. That would be the general line.

Unidentified voice: Well, that would be patently false on its face as to the nature of the weapons.

[Several voices, unintelligible]

Robert Kennedy: If we act, it better be Cuban missiles.

Unidentified voice: Surely.

Unidentified voice: I think our action is aimed at Cuba, just as much as possible in this situation.

Llewellyn Thompson?: You ought to make it, if you do that, perhaps, as easy as possible for him to back down. I think almost certainly it leads to his answer would be also this is so serious, I'm prepared to talk to you about it. You could scarcely refuse that with world war being threatened. And I think you immediately assume the next step.

That's why I think the attorney general's point, though certainly valid, is somewhat weakened in that during this period you would be negotiating out of this thing.

Robert McNamara?: But if he were to say let's talk, then you would have to say to him then stop immediately all activities on such and such fields, sites and so forth...

Llewellyn Thompson: Having imposed the blockade how do you do it?

John Kennedy: The blockade wouldn't be sufficient, he could go on developing the things he's got there. You don't know how much he's got there.

Unidentified voice: He would, uh, you impose a blockade, impose a blockade on Cuba, and he imposes a blockade on Berlin, and then you start to talk. And then you would trade these 2 off.

Unidentified voice: That's what he'd figure.

Unidentified voice: That's what he'd figure, yes.

Llewellyn Thompson: It seems to me one of the points of this ... [unintelligible] ... always curious as to why said he'd defer this till after the election ... [unintelligible] ...

John McCone: Mr. President, you might be interested in General Eisenhower's reaction to this ... [unintelligible] ... I briefed him ... [unintelligible] ... careful, I think, not to take any position, because I had no position. I was very careful not to indicate your position ... [unintelligible] ... However I should report that the thrust of his comments, would indicate that he felt, firstly, the existence ... [unintelligible] ... capabilities in Cuba was intolerable ... [unintelligible] ... Secondly, I think that he felt that limited actions, such as strafing, as anticipated, in 1 or 2 or even 3, of this paper[?] would not be satisfactory. It would cause the greatest of fear and concern among[?] our allies, and in all areas of the world, for the Soviets might take similar action against installations, United States installations over in Germany ... [unintelligible] ... Turkey or Pakistan or elsewhere. He felt, really, that if a move was made, and I think I pinned him down, he would recommend it, it should be an all out military action. He talked of conceiving it to go right to the jugular first, and

not an invasion, landing on the beach and working slowly across the island, but concentrated attacks right off the bat, at first, in the heart of it ... [unintelligible] ... And he felt that this was done, probably the thing ... [unintelligible] ... could be done with the minimum loss of life. Now he said that without the benefit of specific knowledge of troop deployments and equipment deployments and so forth. ... [unintelligible] ... I thought this would be of interest to you.

[Further discussion on options]