November 6, Khrushchev promised not to "hurt [his] chances in the November elections." Khrushchev said that he intended to give Kennedy a choice after the elections: "go to war, or sign a peace treaty. We will not allow your troops to be in Berlin. We will permit access to West Berlin for economic or commercial purposes, but not for military purposes. Everybody is saying nowadays that there will be a war. I don't agree. Sensible people won't start a war. What is Berlin to the United States? ... Do you need Berlin? Like hell you need it. Nor do we need it."

It was not clear to Kennedy why Khrushchev had reverted to such belligerence. He concluded that Khrushchev was an unstable personality, an irresponsible character carried away by delusions. He was wildly erratic and unpredictable, friendly one day and unfriendly the next. He was "like the gangsters both of us had dealt with," Bobby said. "Khrushchev's kind of action — what he did and how he acted — was how an immoral-gangster would act and not ... a statesman, not as a person with a sense of responsibility." Khrushchev, Kennedy told Cyprus Sulzberger of the New York Times, reminded him of Joe McCarthy and Jimmy Hoffa — rough, tough characters who could disarm people with their politeness. Llewellyn Thompson shared Kennedy's view. There was "a kind of hypocrisy" to the man, Thompson told Kennedy during a conversation about Khrushchev in August. "It's like dealing with a bunch of bootleggers or gangsters." Yet Kennedy also knew that Khrushchev was a shrewd, calculating politician who never acted without some self-serving purpose. Events in October 1962 would reveal what Khrushchev was trying to achieve.

CHAPTER 16

To the Brink — And Back

When at some future date the high court of history sits in judgment on each of us, it will ask: "Were we truly men of courage — with the courage to stand up to one's enemies — and the courage to stand up, when necessary, to one's associates?"

— John F. Kennedy, address to the Massachusetts Legislature, January 9, 1961

In the spring and summer of 1962, Khrushchev's renewed threats against Germany and Berlin were tied to his belief that Washington was planning an invasion to topple Castro. He was wrong. In March, when Cuban exile leader José Miró Cardona asked Bundy for help with an invasion, he refused. "Decisive action [cannot] be accomplished without the open involvement of U.S. armed forces," Bundy said. "This would mean open war against Cuba which in the U.S. judgment [is] not advisable in the present international situation." The following month Kennedy told Cardona the same thing. But even if the United States had no immediate invasion plan, Khrushchev felt that Castro's support of subversion would eventually persuade Kennedy to act against him. In addition, concern that Castro was moving closer to communist China gave Khrushchev another reason to strengthen Soviet-Cuban relations.

To do this, he decided to turn Cuba into a missile base from which he could more directly threaten the United States. In May and June, Khrushchev and Soviet military and political chiefs agreed to deploy on the island twenty-four medium-range R-12 missiles, which could travel 1,050 miles, and sixteen intermediate R-14 missiles, with a range of 2,100 miles. The forty missiles would double
the number in the Soviet arsenal that could reach the continental United States. The plan also called for approximately forty-four thousand support troops and thirteen hundred civilian construction workers, as well as a Soviet naval base housing surface ships and "nuclear-missile equipped submarines."

Khrushchev saw multiple benefits from the deployment of Soviet missiles abroad. It would deter a U.S. attack on Cuba, keep the island in Moscow's orbit, and give him greater leverage in bargaining with Washington over Berlin. Yet such a substantial change in the balance of power seemed likely to provoke a crisis and possibly a war with the United States. Khrushchev convinced himself, however, that the "intelligent" Kennedy "would not set off a thermonuclear war if there were our warheads there, just as they put their warheads on missiles in Turkey." These fifteen intermediate-range Jupiter missiles under U.S. command, which became operational in 1962, had indeed frightened Moscow, but Khrushchev did not anticipate using his missiles. "Every idiot can start a war," Khrushchev told Kremlin associates, "but it is impossible to win this war. . . . Therefore the missiles have one purpose — to scare them, to restrain them . . . to give them back some of their own medicine." The deployment would equalize "what the West likes to call 'the balance of power.' The Americans had surrounded our country with military bases and threatened us with nuclear weapons, and now they would learn just what it feels like to have enemy missiles pointing at [them]."

Khrushchev's Cuban plan also rested on a hope of regaining political influence lost because of domestic and foreign setbacks. He had failed to achieve predicted levels of food production, which had forced increases in consumer prices. Also, he had made no appreciable headway in forcing a final Berlin settlement, or in ensuring Castro's safety from an outside attack, or in squelching a Chinese challenge to Moscow's leadership of world communism. Most important, he had failed to close the missile gap between Russia and the United States.

Khrushchev's aim was to hide the buildup in Cuba until after the American elections, when he planned to attend the U.N. General Assembly and see Kennedy. He would then reveal the existence of the Cuban missile base and extract concessions from the president over Berlin and Cuba. As historians Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali concluded, borrowing from JFK, it was "one hell of a gamble."

Not the least of the risk was hiding from America's sophisticated intelligence apparatus the movement of men and equipment to Cuba. As was eventually learned from Soviet documents released in 1999, the Soviets had deployed nuclear missiles in East Germany in 1959 and managed to remove them later that year without apparent discovery by the West. Although Western intelligence agencies detected the Soviet deployment, the information apparently did not reach "top-level policymakers in the U.S. until late 1960." Nor did any Western intelligence agency give any indication to the Soviets that they knew of Moscow's unprecedented missile deployment. Although transporting missiles from Russia to Cuba was more difficult to hide than placing them in East Germany, Khrushchev believed that the Americans still assumed that he would never send weapons of mass destruction abroad. He acknowledged that the Americans would notice the increased shipments of men and arms to Cuba but believed that they would see them as no more than a strengthening of Cuban defenses against another invasion. By the time the Americans woke up to what was happening, the missiles would be in place.

His reasoning had some merit. In August 1962, U.S. intelligence reported increased Soviet military equipment going to Cuba, where it was transported to the interior of the island under Soviet guards. U.S. national security officials concluded that the Soviets were installing SA-2 missiles, a modern anti-aircraft weapon with a thirty-mile range. The report noted that the SA-2s could be fit with nuclear warheads, "but there is no evidence that the Soviet government has ever provided nuclear warheads to any other state, on any terms. It seems unlikely that such a move is currently planned — but," the analysts warned, "there is also little reason to suppose that the Soviets would refuse to introduce such weapons if the move could be controlled in the Soviet interest."

Soviet private and public statements also gave Kennedy assurances that the military buildup represented a change in degree but not in kind. In April 1961, after the Bay of Pigs invasion, Khrushchev had told Kennedy, "We have no bases in Cuba, and do not intend to establish any." On July 30, 1962, in order to reduce the likelihood of exposure, Khrushchev asked Kennedy, "for the sake of better relations," to stop reconnaissance flights over Soviet ships in the Caribbean. Eager to avoid any international crisis during the election campaign, Kennedy ostensibly agreed, on the condition that Moscow put the Berlin question "on ice." Though Khrushchev wanted to
know what the president meant by "on ice," he agreed to Kennedy's request. In early September, he sent word to Kennedy through Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, promising, "Nothing will be undertaken before the American congressional elections that could complicate the international situation or aggravate the tension in the relations between our two countries." At the same time, he had Georgi Bolshakov tell Bobby that the Soviet Union was placing no more than defensive weapons in Cuba.

Khrushchev gave Interior Secretary Stewart Udall the same message. During their September 6 conversations, Khrushchev said, "Now, as to Cuba — here is an area that could really lead to some unexpected consequences. I have been reading what some irresponsible Senators have been saying on this. A lot of people are making a big fuss because we are giving aid to Cuba. But you are giving aid to Japan. Just recently I was reading that you have placed atomic warheads on Japanese territory, and surely this is not something the Japanese need. So when Castro comes to us for aid, we give him what he needs for defense. He hasn't much military equipment, so he asked us to supply some. But only for defense."

However much Kennedy wished to believe the Soviet professions of restraint, he could not take their assurances at face value; their deviousness in secretly preparing renewed nuclear tests had made him suspicious of anything they said. Besides, McCone and Bobby were asserting that the "defensive" buildup might presage offensive missile deployments, and even if not, they saw the expanding Soviet presence in Cuba as reason to topple Castro's regime as quickly as possible. Complaints from Republicans about timid responses to the Cuban danger joined with the McCone-Bobby warnings to heighten Kennedy's concerns. On August 31, New York Republican senator Kenneth Keating complained in a floor speech that the administration had no effective response to the installation of Soviet rockets in Cuba under the control of twelve hundred Soviet troops; nor, Keating added, did the administration seem prepared to deal with the troubling construction of other missile bases.

At the beginning of September, Kennedy, trying to strike a balance between competing pressures, privately promised congressional leaders to take action against Cuba if Khrushchev was deploying surface-to-surface nuclear missiles. Therefore, it seemed prudent to issue a forceful warning to Moscow. Such a public statement would have the added benefit of blunting potential Republican political gains from assertions about White House inattentiveness to a crucial national security problem.

On September 4, Kennedy and his advisers spent several hours preparing a statement about Soviet missiles in Cuba. To be as clear as possible, Kennedy expanded an admonition about "offensive weapons" to include a warning against "ground-to-ground missiles." He also eliminated any mention of the Monroe Doctrine and kept references to Cuba to a minimum. He wanted the statement to focus on Soviet aggression and not on U.S. power in the Western Hemisphere or on the administration's eagerness to topple Castro's regime. "The major danger is the Soviet Union with missiles and nuclear warheads, not Cuba," he said in a taped conversation.

At six in the evening, Pierre Salinger read Kennedy's statement to the press. He cited evidence of anti-aircraft missiles with a twenty-five-mile range and torpedo boats equipped with ship-to-ship guided missiles. He also pointed to some thirty-five hundred Soviet support technicians in Cuba or en route there to facilitate the use of these weapons. He emphasized, however, that allegations of organized Soviet combat forces were unconfirmed, as were assertions that the Soviets had introduced weapons with an offensive capability, such as ground-to-ground missiles. "Were it to be otherwise," Kennedy declared, "the gravest issues would arise." Castro's regime would "not be allowed to export its aggressive purposes by force or the threat of force. It will be prevented by whatever means may be necessary from taking action against any part of the Western Hemisphere." On September 7, Kennedy also revealed that he was calling 150,000 army reserves to active duty for twelve months.

Kennedy balanced his public statement cautioning the Soviets with private resistance to congressional pressure for prompt action against Havana. "What is our policy in relation to Cuba?" Wisconsin Republican senator Alexander Wiley asked. "I'm just back from the hinterland and everybody is inquiring about it. . . . [Is it] just to sit still and let Cuba carry on?" Kennedy promised that any use of Cuba's new weapons against a neighboring country would bring a U.S. intervention. But a U.S. attack on Cuba now "would be a mistake. . . . We have to keep some proportion," Kennedy said. "We're talking about 60 MiGs, we're talking about some ground-to-air missiles . . . which do not threaten the United States. We are not talking about nuclear warheads. We've got a very difficult situation in Berlin.
We've got a difficult situation in Southeast Asia and a lot of other places." Wiley, who had been calling publicly for a blockade of Cuba, asked Kennedy about this possibility. "It's an act of war," Kennedy replied, and would likely produce a retaliatory blockade of Berlin. The danger from Cuba was "by subversion and example. There's obviously no military threat, as yet, to the United States... Even though I know a lot of people want to invade Cuba," Kennedy added, "I would be opposed to it today."

Kennedy's counsels of restraint could not inhibit Republicans fearful of Khrushchev's intentions and eager to exploit a political advantage from urging military action against Castro. But the Republicans were not the only ones pressing for a stronger White House response. The press chimed in with dire warnings. And the eight-eight-year-old poet Robert Frost, after meeting Khrushchev in Russia, told a press conference in New York on September 9 that Khrushchev thought Americans were "too liberal to fight." The comment angered Kennedy, who felt it added to the pressure on him to get tough with Castro and Khrushchev. "Why did Frost say that?" Kennedy asked Udall, who had been with the poet in Russia. Udall responded that it was Frost's way of paraphrasing Khrushchev's assertion that America and the West were in decline. (Khrushchev had reminded Frost of Tolstoy's famous comment to Maxim Gorky about sex and old age: "The desire is the same, it's the performance that's different.") But the damage was done.

Democratic senators at risk in the November elections also pressed the president for stronger action. They sent word through majority leader Mike Mansfield that they might "have to leave [him] on this matter" unless there were "at least a 'do-something' gesture of militancy." They urged Kennedy to consider everything from "a Congressional resolution to a 'quarantine' of Cuba (short of blockade) to all out war, at least with Cuba and perhaps with Russia as well."

The hysteria chilled Kennedy, who tried "to set the matter in perspective" at a September 13 news conference. Castro's charges of an imminent American invasion, he said, were an attempt to divert attention from self-inflicted economic problems and to justify increased Soviet military aid. Loose talk of an invasion by some in the United States served "to give a thin color of legitimacy to the Communist pretense that such a threat exists." Unilateral U.S. intervention, he argued, was neither required nor justified. Castro posed no direct military threat to the United States or to any of his neighbors. If any of this should change, however, the United States would not hesitate to protect its interests. He hoped that the American people would "in this nuclear age... keep both their nerve and their head."

The CIA reinforced Kennedy's counsels of caution. On September 19, the Agency, in an updated assessment of the Cuban buildup, reiterated that deploying ballistic missiles or building a submarine base would give the Soviets considerable military advantages, but, they noted, "[It] would be incompatible with Soviet practice to date and with Soviet policy as we presently estimate it. It would indicate a far greater willingness to increase the level of risk in US-Soviet relations than the USSR has displayed thus far."

On September 28, Khrushchev encouraged Kennedy's caution. In a long letter about nuclear tests and Soviet-American relations more generally, he emphasized his determination to settle the German/Berlin problem by signing a peace treaty. As Kennedy had requested, he had been willing to put the issue "on ice" until after the November elections. But the call-up of 150,000 reservists and U.S. threats to invade Cuba were forcing his hand, and Khrushchev wished the United States to be under no illusion: An American attack on Cuba would bring retaliatory action against Berlin.

The CIA assessment and Khrushchev's warnings outweighed arguments for direct action against Havana, but public assurances that the United States was under no new threat and private warnings to Moscow not to create one did not mute the congressional and public outcry over Cuba. On September 20, the Senate passed a resolution by 86 to 1 authorizing the president "to prevent the creation or use of an externally supported offensive military capability endangering the security of the United States." Schlesinger urged that Rusk call in Dobrynin and tell him that persistence in arming Cuba would "preclude the resolution of any outstanding disagreement" between them, force an increase in the U.S. defense budget, and possibly compel action "to eliminate Castro and his regime." One National Security Council member echoed Schlesinger's point: "The question is no longer whether we should 'do something about Cuba,'" William Jordan told Walt Rostow, "but rather what we should do, how, when, and where. There is urgent need for a program of action that will address itself to such things as: the great and growing sense of deep frustration on the part of millions of Americans as regards Cuban developments."
But as long as the Cuban buildup seemed to be defensive, Kennedy refused to go beyond warning Moscow and indirect intimidation. Secretly he ordered McNamara to put plans for military operations against Cuba into motion. There were also large-scale maneuvers, which were held on October 22 along the southern Atlantic coast and around Puerto Rico. The exercise — pointedly and obviously code-named “Ortsac” (Castro spelled backwards) — involved seventy-five hundred marines in a mock invasion of Puerto Rican beaches. Seventy thousand servicemen participated in air force maneuvers. Everything about the maneuvers seemed calculated to send Moscow signals of U.S. readiness to take military action.

Kennedy further instructed Bobby to step up the activities of the Special Group responsible for Mongoose operations to topple Castro. A Group meeting on October 4 produced “a sharp exchange” between Bobby and McCone. Bobby reported the president’s dissatisfaction with Mongoose — “nothing was moving forward” — and yelled at General Lansdale for failing to attempt any acts of sabotage. McCone attributed this failure to the administration’s reluctance to have anything blamed on Washington. Bobby denied that was the case and emphasized the need to throw aside worries about risks. Lansdale was instructed “to give consideration to new and more dynamic approaches,” including sabotage, mining of harbors to impede Soviet military deliveries, and possible capture of Cuban officers for interrogation. But Bobby’s abrasive comments were less a spur to “more dynamic approaches” than an admission of Mongoose’s incapacity to shake Castro’s popularity and firm hold on power.

Fearful that implementation of plans for a naval base would be quickly detected by U.S. intelligence and would stimulate a military response, Khrushchev canceled the deployment of surface ships and nuclear-armed submarines to Cuba. Instead, he approved the transit by ship of a squadron of light bombers and six short-range Luna missiles with their nuclear bombs. He also authorized a draft order to his Cuban commander to decide whether to use nuclear weapons in response to a U.S. invasion if communications with Moscow were lost. Khrushchev did not sign the order, however, but kept it ready for possible future implementation.

On October 1, McNamara and the Joint Chiefs received disturbing information about offensive weapons in Cuba. On September 21, the Defense Intelligence Agency had learned of “a first-hand sighting on September 12 of a truck convoy of 20 objects 65 to 70 feet long which resembled large missiles.” The convoy had “turned into an airport on the southwest edge of Havana.” Because early reports of a similar nature had proved false, the DIA described the information as only “potentially significant.” However, photographs received in the last week of September and reports of surface-to-air missile (SAM) sites produced “a hypothesis that MRBM [medium-range ballistic missile] sites were under preparation in Pinar del Rio province.”

High-altitude U-2 reconnaissance flights were essential to confirm the report. But concern that Soviet SA-2 anti-aircraft missiles might shoot down a U-2 made such surveillance risky. Detection on August 30 of a U-2 over Soviet airspace and the loss of a Taiwanese U-2 on September 8 to a Chinese missile had produced a temporary suspension of such flights over Cuba. But the CIA warned that the SA-2s might be guarding other missile installations in western Cuba and argued that whatever the risks, U-2 flights were called for.

“Don’t you ever let…up?” Rusk asked the CIA’s representative at a September 10 White House meeting. “How do you expect me to negotiate on Berlin with all these incidents?” But Bobby believed that the stakes were too high for them to avoid the risk. “What’s the matter, Dean,” he asked, “no guts?”

On October 5, Bundy and McCone argued for U-2 flights directly over Cuba. McCone believed that the existence of Soviet offensive missiles in Cuba was “a probability rather than a mere possibility,” but Bundy held to the conviction that “the Soviets would not go that far.” The same day, Bolshakov carried another message to Bobby from Khrushchev: “The weapons that the USSR is sending to Cuba will only be of a defensive character.”

But the reported possible MRBM sites at San Cristobal in Pinar del Rio settled the argument. On October 9, Kennedy approved a U-2 mission to take place as soon as weather permitted. Clear visibility up to seventy-four thousand feet, the U-2’s altitude, did not occur until October 14. In the meantime, on October 10, Keating publicly announced that he had evidence of six IRBM (intermediate-range ballistic missile) sites in Cuba. The IRBMs, which could reach targets twenty-one hundred miles away, had twice the range of MRBMs.

On the thirteenth, in a conversation with Chet Bowles, who had been a roving ambassador since November 1961, Dobrynin had “expressed worry and surprise at the intensity of U.S. public reaction” over Cuba. He gave Bowles fresh assurances that “in spite of [their] worries, the U.S.S.R. was not shipping offensive weapons and well understood the dangers of doing so.”
If Keating, whom Kennedy referred to as a “nut,” was posturing for political gain in the rapidly approaching elections, the White House had to have a more effective refutation than Khrushchev’s word or the likelihood that Moscow would not be so rash. To blunt Republican accusations of a passive White House, the administration leaked details of Operation Mongoose to James Reston, which he used in a column. But on the off chance that missile sites were going up and that Keating was right, the administration needed to face hard choices on how to eliminate them.

To Kennedy’s distress, the October 14 U-2 flight over the island, which lasted six minutes and produced 928 photographs, revealed conclusive evidence of offensive weapons: three medium-range ballistic missile sites under construction; one additional MRBM site discovered at San Cristóbal; and two IRBM sites at Guanajay. The photos also revealed twenty-one crated IL-28 medium-range bombers capable of delivering nuclear bombs. The CIA’s report on the discoveries reached Bundy on the evening of October 15, but he decided to wait until morning to present this “very big news” to the president, when enlargements of the photographs would be available. Besides, it seemed to him that a late-night meeting, which might attract attention, would be a bad idea. “It was a hell of a secret,” and it needed to remain such until the president could consider how to deal with it. Also, a rested president, who was returning from a strenuous week of campaigning for congressional Democrats, would be better prepared to confront the crisis than an exhausted one. Nevertheless, Bundy shared the news, which CIA chiefs already had, with Rusk and McNamara and a few of their deputies on the evening of the fifteenth.

At 8:45 on the morning of the sixteenth, Bundy brought the bad news to Kennedy in his bedroom. The president ordered Bundy to set up a White House meeting in the Cabinet Room before noon and ticked off the names of the national security officials he wanted there. He then called Bobby, who had been first on his list. “We have some big trouble. I want you over here,” the president told him. Determined not to create a public crisis and demands for press comments before he had had a chance to consider his options, Kennedy kept his early-morning appointments.

After twenty-one months in the White House, the Kennedys were not strangers to “big trouble.” The Bay of Pigs, Berlin, Laos, Vietnam, the Congo, the Freedom Riders, the clash with big steel, Soviet nuclear tests, and, most recently, the September crisis in Mississippi had schooled them in the strains of holding power. But this was worse than anything they had seen before. Indeed, no president or administration had confronted so much danger to the national survival since Roosevelt had led the country through the Second World War. True, Truman and Eisenhower had shouldered Cold War burdens in every corner of the globe, and Truman had presided over a frustrating conflict in Korea, which had cost some twenty-five thousand American lives. But Soviet missiles in Cuba were an unprecedented provocation—a challenge to American national security that threatened to bring on a nuclear war. And on a more trivial but still potent note, if Kennedy failed to remove them by negotiation or force, he assumed that a successor would come to power on the promise that he would.

Although the Kennedys did not have the luxury to reflect on how they had come to this confrontation with Moscow, the question could not have been far from their minds. Obviously Castro deserved some of the blame. His determination to train Latin American radicals committed to subverting as many hemisphere governments as possible provoked the Kennedy White House into counteractions. This ongoing crisis in U.S.-Cuban relations presented Khrushchev with an irresistible opportunity. By putting missiles on the island, he could achieve several objectives: reduce the Soviet missile gap with the United States; possibly compel a German settlement more compatible with Moscow’s security needs than just a wall ending the embarrassing flight of refugees from East to West; outshine China in competition for Third World hearts and minds; and boost his standing at home, where his state-managed economy had failed to deliver the goods. Of course, the Kennedys could not dismiss an American share of responsibility for the crisis. The Bay of Pigs fiasco, Operation Mongoose, and exaggerated fears of communist takeovers in Latin America, which, for all the rhetoric of good intentions, made the United States more an advocate of the status quo than a supporter of democratic change, had all contributed to the hemisphere tensions that drove Castro firmly into the Soviet camp.

The first order of business was not to assign blame for the Soviet-American confrontation but to find some way to eliminate the missiles and avert a nuclear war. At 11:45 A.M., thirteen men joined the president in the Cabinet Room for an hour-and-ten-minute
discussion. The group came to be called Ex Comm, the Executive Committee of the National Security Council. Kennedy sat in the center of an oblong table, with Rusk, Ball, and Deputy Undersecretary of State U. Alexis Johnson to his immediate right and McNamara, Gilpatric, Joint Chiefs chairman Maxwell Taylor, and acting CIA director Marshall Carter (McCone was at a family funeral) to his immediate left. Bundy, Dillon, Bobby, and Johnson sat across from the president. Two experts on aerial photography, Arthur Lundahl and Sidney Graybeal, briefed the group on the U-2 photos, which were propped on easels. Though Ex Comm would create the impression that Kennedy governed by committee, it was in fact the exception. Though he had appointed the most talented people he could find to his cabinet, for example, he had made almost no use of cabinet meetings in deciding major questions. Instead, consultations with a variety of individuals, including cabinet officers, before initiating policy had been his modus operandi. Regular formal cabinet discussions were never a significant part of his decision-making process.

As the Ex Comm discussion began, Kennedy activated the Cabinet Room tape recorder. After the experts presented the evidence of medium-range ballistic missile sites, Kennedy wanted to know if the missiles were ready to be launched. When told no, he asked how long before they could be fired. No one could be sure, but, McNamara said, "there is some reason to believe that the warheads aren't present and hence they are not ready to fire." The question of "readiness to fire" is "highly critical in forming our plans," McNamara added. Consequently, Kennedy agreed that additional U-2 flights were essential to discover where nuclear warheads might be stored and when the Soviets might be able to use them.

Kennedy wanted his advisers to explain, if they could, why Khrushchev was doing this. Perhaps it would give him a better idea of how to respond. "What is the advantage?" Kennedy asked. "Must be some major reason for the Soviets to set this up." He answered his own question: "Must be that they're not satisfied with their ICBMs." Taylor echoed the president's view: "What it'd give them is, primarily . . . [a] launching base for short-range missiles against the United States to supplement their rather defective ICBM system. . . . That's one reason." Citing McCone, Rusk said that Khrushchev might be animated by concerns about our nuclear superiority. Rusk also believed that "Berlin is very much involved in this." Khrushchev may be hoping to "bargain Berlin and Cuba against each other," he said, or use a U.S. attack on Cuba as an excuse to act against Berlin.

The principal focus of the meeting was on how to eliminate the missiles from Cuba. Rusk thought that they could do it by a "sudden, unannounced strike of some sort," or by a political track in which they built up the crisis "to the point where the other side has to consider very seriously about giving in." Perhaps they could talk sense to Castro through an intermediary, Rusk suggested. "It ought to be said to Castro that this kind of a base is intolerable. . . . The time has now come when he must, in the interests of the Cuban people . . . break cleanly with the Soviet Union and prevent this missile base from becoming operational." The alternative to the quick strike, Rusk said, was "to alert our allies and Mr. Khrushchev that there is an utterly serious crisis in the making here. . . . We'll be facing a situation that could well lead to a general war. . . . We have an obligation to do what has to be done, but to do it in a way that gives everybody a chance to pull away from it before it gets too hard."

For the moment, Kennedy was not thinking about any political or diplomatic solution; his focus was on military options and how to mute the crisis until they had some clear idea of what to do. He saw four possible military actions: an air strike against the missile installations; a more general air attack against a wide array of targets; a blockade; and an invasion. He wanted preparations for the second, third, and fourth possibilities, decisions on which could come later. But "we're certainly going to do number one," he said. "We're going to take out these missiles." Just when, he did not say, but he wanted knowledge of the missiles limited to as few officials as possible. He believed that the news would leak anyway in two or three days. But even when it became known, he wanted policy decisions to remain secret. "Otherwise," he said, "we bitch it up."

He scheduled another Ex Comm meeting for 6:30 that evening. Again to avoid any hint of crisis, he followed his prearranged afternoon schedule. The only public indication of his concern came in ad lib remarks to journalists attending a State Department conference. "The United States, and the world, is now passing through one of its most critical periods," he said. "Our major problem over all, is the survival of our country . . . without the beginning of the third and perhaps the last war." He reflected his sense of burden and irritation with people in the press and Congress who were second-guessing him by reciting a verse: "Bullfight critics row on row/Crowd the secret. "Otherwise," he said, "we bitch it up."

As the Ex Comm discussion began, Kennedy activated the Cabinet Room tape recorder. After the experts presented the evidence of medium-range ballistic missile sites, Kennedy wanted to know if the missiles were ready to be launched. When told no, he asked how long before they could be fired. No one could be sure, but, McNamara said, "there is some reason to believe that the warheads aren't present and hence they are not ready to fire." The question of "readiness to fire" is "highly critical in forming our plans," McNamara added. Consequently, Kennedy agreed that additional U-2 flights were essential to discover where nuclear warheads might be stored and when the Soviets might be able to use them.

Kennedy wanted his advisers to explain, if they could, why Khrushchev was doing this. Perhaps it would give him a better idea of how to respond. "What is the advantage?" Kennedy asked. "Must be some major reason for the Soviets to set this up." He answered his own question: "Must be that they're not satisfied with their ICBMs." Taylor echoed the president's view: "What it'd give them is, primarily . . . [a] launching base for short-range missiles against the United States to supplement their rather defective ICBM system. . . . That's one reason." Citing McCone, Rusk said that Khrushchev might be animated by concerns about our nuclear superiority. Rusk also believed that "Berlin is very much involved in this." Khrushchev may be hoping to "bargain Berlin and Cuba against each other," he said, or use a U.S. attack on Cuba as an excuse to act against Berlin.

The principal focus of the meeting was on how to eliminate the missiles from Cuba. Rusk thought that they could do it by a "sudden, unannounced strike of some sort," or by a political track in which they built up the crisis "to the point where the other side has to consider very seriously about giving in." Perhaps they could talk sense to Castro through an intermediary, Rusk suggested. "It ought to be said to Castro that this kind of a base is intolerable. . . . The time has now come when he must, in the interests of the Cuban people . . . break cleanly with the Soviet Union and prevent this missile base from becoming operational." The alternative to the quick strike, Rusk said, was "to alert our allies and Mr. Khrushchev that there is an utterly serious crisis in the making here. . . . We'll be facing a situation that could well lead to a general war. . . . We have an obligation to do what has to be done, but to do it in a way that gives everybody a chance to pull away from it before it gets too hard."

For the moment, Kennedy was not thinking about any political or diplomatic solution; his focus was on military options and how to mute the crisis until they had some clear idea of what to do. He saw four possible military actions: an air strike against the missile installations; a more general air attack against a wide array of targets; a blockade; and an invasion. He wanted preparations for the second, third, and fourth possibilities, decisions on which could come later. But "we're certainly going to do number one," he said. "We're going to take out these missiles." Just when, he did not say, but he wanted knowledge of the missiles limited to as few officials as possible. He believed that the news would leak anyway in two or three days. But even when it became known, he wanted policy decisions to remain secret. "Otherwise," he said, "we bitch it up."

He scheduled another Ex Comm meeting for 6:30 that evening. Again to avoid any hint of crisis, he followed his prearranged afternoon schedule. The only public indication of his concern came in ad lib remarks to journalists attending a State Department conference. "The United States, and the world, is now passing through one of its most critical periods," he said. "Our major problem over all, is the survival of our country . . . without the beginning of the third and perhaps the last war." He reflected his sense of burden and irritation with people in the press and Congress who were second-guessing him by reciting a verse: "Bullfight critics row on row/Crowd the
enormous plaza full/But only one is there who knows/And he is the one who fights the bull."

The evening meeting included the morning’s participants as well as Sorensen and Edwin Martin, a State Department expert on Latin America. Kennedy came back to his puzzlement over Khrushchev’s actions. Khrushchev had, all things considered, been cautious over Berlin, so how did the Russian experts explain his willingness to risk a war by putting nuclear missiles in Cuba, especially if, as some believed, it did not reduce America’s military advantage over the USSR? "Well, it’s a goddamn mystery to me," Kennedy admitted. "I don’t know enough about the Soviet Union, but if anybody can tell me any other time since the Berlin blockade where the Russians have given so clear a provocation, I don’t know when it’s been, because they’ve been awfully cautious, really."

Ball, Bundy, and Alex Johnson saw the Soviets as trying to expand their strategic capabilities. But McNamara was not so sure. The Joint Chiefs thought the Soviet missile deployments "substantially" changed the strategic balance, but McNamara believed it made no difference. Taylor acknowledged that the missiles in Cuba meant "just a few more missiles targeted on the United States," but he considered them "a very, a rather important, adjunct and reinforcement" to Moscow’s "strike capability."

Kennedy saw other reasons for eliminating them. If the United States left them in place, it would be an inducement for the Soviets to add ever greater strength to their forces in Cuba. In addition, it would make the Cubans, he added, "look like they’re coequal with us." Besides, he said, "We weren’t going to [allow it]. Last month I should have said that we don’t care. But when we said we’re not going to [allow it], and then they go ahead and do it, and then we do nothing, then I would think that our risks increase. . . . What difference does it make? They’ve got enough to blow us up now anyway. But more was at stake here than matters of strategic balance. "After all, this is a political struggle as much as military," he said.

The question that remained, then, was how to remove the missiles without a full-scale war. Despite his earlier certainty, Kennedy had begun to have doubts about a surprise air strike and may already have ruled this out as a sensible option. When he asked at the morning meeting, "How effective can the take-out be?" Taylor had answered, "It will never be 100 percent, Mr. President, we know.

We hope to take out the vast majority in the first strike, but this is not just one thing — one strike, one day — but continuous air attack for whenever necessary, whenever we discover a target." Kennedy picked up on the uncertain results of such an operation: "Well, let’s say we just take out the missile bases," he said. "Then they have some more there. Obviously they can get them in by submarine and so on. I don’t know whether you just keep high strikes on."

Bobby, who had been so eager for clandestine action, doubted the wisdom of air attacks, which he had described in the morning discussion as likely "to kill an awful lot of people." It was one thing to have professional spies and devoted Cuban opponents risk their lives to topple a communist regime in Cuba. But killing possibly hundreds, maybe thousands, of people, including surely some innocent civilians, chilled him. At the evening meeting, he passed a note to Sorensen: "I now know how Tojo felt when he was planning Pearl Harbor."

It seems possible, even likely, that Bobby was reflecting his brother’s views. Bobby was not given to freelancing; he was his brother’s spokesman on most matters. In this early stage of the discussions about what to do, it would have made Kennedy seem weak to shy away openly from air raids for fear they might not work well or yield some innocent victims. He surely had not ruled out the possibility, and absent another good solution he could imagine using air power to eliminate the missile sites. However, he was reluctant to follow that option. (When Soviet expert Charles Bohlen, who was leaving for Paris to become ambassador, wrote a memo advocating an ultimatum before any air strikes, Kennedy asked him to stay in Washington to participate in the deliberations. But concern that a delayed departure might alert the press to the crisis persuaded JFK to let him go.) Kennedy may also have tipped his bias against a quick air attack by telling Acheson that a U.S. bombing raid would be "Pearl Harbor in reverse." (Refusing to compare air raids on the missile sites to an unprovoked sneak attack, Acheson told the president, "It is unworthy of you to speak that way.")

The only new idea put forth at the evening meeting came from McNamara. He suggested a middle ground between the military and political courses they had been discussing. He proposed a "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 for
the future, we would be prepared to immediately attack the Soviet
Union in the event that Cuba made any offensive move against this
country."

After a long day of discussions, Kennedy was no closer to a firm
decision on how to proceed. On Wednesday, the seventeenth, while
he continued to hide the crisis from public view by meeting with
West Germany's foreign minister, eating lunch with Libya's crown
prince, and flying to Connecticut to campaign for Democratic can-
didates, his advisers held nonstop meetings. But first he saw McCone,
who had returned to Washington, at 9:30 in the morning. The CIA
director gained the impression that Kennedy was "inclined to act
promptly if at all, without warning, targeting on MRBMs and pos-
sible airfields." McCone may have been hearing what he wanted to
hear, or, more likely, Kennedy created this impression by inviting
McCone to make the case for prompt air strikes.

As part of his balancing act, Kennedy invited Adlai Stevenson
into the discussion. After learning about the crisis from the presi-
dent, who showed him the missile photos on the afternoon of the
sixteenth, Stevenson predictably urged Kennedy not to rush into
military action. When Kennedy said, "I suppose the alternatives are
to go in by air and wipe them out, or to take other steps to render
the weapons inoperable," Stevenson replied, "Let's not go into an air
strike until we have explored the possibilities of a peaceful solution."

The next day, before he returned to the U.N. in New York,
Stevenson wrote a letter urging the president to send personal emis-
saries to see Castro and Khrushchev. He predicted that an attack
would bring Soviet reprisals in Turkey or Berlin and would "risk
starting a nuclear war [which] is bound to be divisive at best and the
judgments of history seldom coincide with the tempers of the
moment." Stevenson's appeal to take the long view was not lost on
Kennedy, who understood that his actions could permanently alter
the course of human affairs. To underscore his point, Stevenson
added: "I know your dilemma is to strike before the sites are opera-
tional or to risk waiting until a proper groundwork of justification
can be prepared. The national security must come first. But 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 nego-
tiable before we start anything." This was not a counsel of defeat,
Stevenson concluded. The Soviets needed to be told "that it is they
who have upset the precarious balance in the world in arrogant dis-
regard of your warnings — by threats against Berlin and now from
Cuba — and that we have no choice except to restore the balance,
i.e., blackmail and intimidation never, negotiation and sanity always."

The differences between McCone and Stevenson were repeated
in various forms during discussions among Kennedy's advisers on
the seventeenth. At midnight, after three long meetings, Bobby sum-
marized five options that advisers were putting before the president:
(1) on October 24, after a week's military preparation and notifi-
cation to Western European and some Latin American leaders, bomb
the MRBMs and send Khrushchev a message of explanation — Rusk
opposed this plan; (2) attack the MRBMs after notifying Khrush-
chev — defense chiefs opposed this proposal; (3) inform Moscow
about our knowledge of the missiles and our determination to block
additional ones from entering Cuba, declare war, and prepare an in-
vasion — Rusk and Ball favored this option but wanted it preceded
by surveillance without air strikes; (4) engage in "political preliminar-
ies" followed by extensive air attacks with preparations for an inva-
sion; and (5) the "same as 4, but omit the political preliminaries."

When Ex Comm met again on Thursday morning, October 18,
additional reconnaissance photos revealed construction of IRBM
launching pads. They had now discovered five different missile sites.
McCone reported that the Soviets could have between sixteen and
thirty-two missiles ready to fire "within a week or slightly more."
Concerned about convincing the world of the accuracy of their
information, Kennedy wanted to know if an untrained observer
would see what the experts saw in the photos. Lundahl doubted
it. "I think the uninitiated would like to see the missile, in the tube,"
he said.

Sensing the president's hesitancy about quick action without
clear evidence to convince the world of its necessity, Rusk asked
whether the group thought it "necessary to take action." He believed
it essential. The Soviets were turning Cuba into "a powerful military
problem" for the United States, he said, and a failure to respond
would "undermine our alliances all over the world." Inaction would
also encourage Moscow to feel free to intervene wherever they liked
and would create an unmanageable problem in sustaining domestic
support for the country's foreign policy commitments. Rusk then
read a letter from Bohlen urging diplomatic action as a prelude to
military steps. An attack on Cuba without a prior effort at diplomatic
pressure to remove the missiles, Bohlen said, would alienate all America's allies, give Moscow credibility for a response against Berlin, and "greatly increase the probability of general war."

Bohlen's argument echoed Kennedy's thinking. People saw the United States as "slightly demented" about Cuba, the president said. "No matter how good our films are . . . a lot of people would regard this [military action] as a mad act by the United States." They would see it as "a loss of nerve because they will argue that taken at its worst, the presence of those missiles really doesn't change the [military] balance."

But the evidence of additional missile sites had convinced the Joint Chiefs to urge a full-scale invasion of Cuba. Kennedy stubbornly resisted. "Nobody knows what kind of success we're going to have with this invasion," he said. "Invasions are tough, hazardous. We've got a lot of equipment, a lot of — thousands of — Americans get killed in Cuba, and I think you're in much more of a mess than you are if you take out these . . . bases." And if Bobby's opinion remained a reflection of his brother's thinking, Kennedy also opposed unannounced air strikes. Ball made what Bobby called "a hell of a good point." "If we act without warning," Ball said, "without giving Khrushchev some way out . . . that's 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." The way we act, Bobby asserted, speaks to "the whole question of . . . what kind of a country we are." Ball saw surprise air strikes as comparable to "carrying the mark of Cain on your brow for the rest of your life." Bobby echoed the point: "We've fought for 15 years with Russia to prevent a first strike against us. Now . . . we do that to a small country. I think it is a hell of a burden to carry."

KENNEDY HAD NOT RULED OUT military action, but his remarks at the meetings on October 18 revealed a preference for a blockade and negotiations. He wanted to know what would be the best way to open talks with Khrushchev — through a cable, a personal envoy? He also asked, if we established a blockade of Cuba, what would we do about the missiles already there, and would we need to declare war on Havana? Llewellyn Thompson, who had joined the Thursday morning discussion, addressed Kennedy's first concern by suggesting Kennedy press Khrushchev to dismantle the existing missile sites and warn him that if they were armed, our constant surveillance

would alert us, and we would eliminate them. As for a declaration of war, Kennedy thought it would be unwise: "It seems to me that with a declaration of war our objective would be an invasion."

To keep up the facade of normality, Kennedy followed his regular schedule for the rest of the day, including a two-hour meeting with Soviet foreign minister Andrey Gromyko. Nothing was said about the offensive missiles by Gromyko or Kennedy. But they gave each other indirect messages. Gromyko ploddingly read a prepared statement. He emphasized that they were giving Cuba "armaments which were only defensive — and he wished to stress the word defensive — in character." After the meeting, Kennedy told Bob Lovett about Gromyko, "who, in this very room not over ten minutes ago, told more barefaced lies than I have ever heard in so short a time. All during his denial that the Russians had any missiles or weapons, or anything else, in Cuba, I had the . . . pictures in the center drawer of my desk, and it was an enormous temptation to show them to him." Instead, Kennedy told Gromyko that the Soviet arms shipments had created "the most dangerous situation since the end of the war."

Whatever hints Kennedy offered, Gromyko missed them. He noticed that Rusk was red "like a crab" and unusually emotional, and Kennedy was more deliberate than usual. Eager to believe that they were outwitting Kennedy, Gromyko advised Khrushchev that "the situation is in general wholly satisfactory."

Lovett's advice to Kennedy was similar to McNamara's: Establish a blockade around Cuba. If it failed, air strikes and an invasion could follow, but a blockade might persuade the Russians to withdraw the missiles and avoid bloodshed. It would also insulate the United States from charges of being "trigger-happy." When Bobby entered the room, the president asked Lovett to repeat what he was saying. When he did, Bobby agreed with the wisdom of "taking a less violent step at the outset, because, as he said, we could always blow the place up if necessary, but that might be unnecessary, and then we would be in the position of having used too much force."

Kennedy reconvened his advisers at a secret late-night meeting on the second floor of the executive mansion. He wanted to hear the results of the day's deliberations. Bundy now argued the case for doing nothing. He believed that any kind of action would bring a reprisal against Berlin, which would divide the NATO alliance. But Kennedy thought it was impossible to sit still. As he had said earlier in the day, "Somehow we've got to take some action.... Now, the
question really is . . . what action we take which lessens the chances of a nuclear exchange, which obviously is the final failure." They agreed that a blockade against Soviet shipments of additional offensive weapons would be the best starting point. Instead of air strikes or an invasion, which was tantamount to a state of war, they would try to resolve the crisis with "a limited blockade for a limited purpose."

On Friday, October 19, Kennedy kept his campaign schedule, which took him to Cleveland and Springfield, Illinois, and Chicago. He considered canceling the trip, but when he asked Kenny O'Donnell, who knew about the crisis, if he had called it off, O'Donnell replied, "I didn't call off anything. I don't want to be the one who has to tell Dick Daley that you're not going out there."

In the morning, however, he held a secret forty-five-minute meeting with the Joint Chiefs. The discussion was as much an exercise in political hand-holding as in advancing a solution to the crisis. Kennedy knew that the Chiefs favored a massive air strike and were divided on whether to follow it with an invasion. He saw their counsel as predictable and not especially helpful. His memories of the navy brass in World War II, the apparent readiness of the Chiefs to risk nuclear war in Europe and their unhelpful advice before the Bay of Pigs, and the army's stumbling performance just a few weeks before in Mississippi deepened his distrust of their promised results.

Nevertheless, Kennedy candidly discussed his concerns with the Chiefs. An attack on Cuba would provoke the Soviets into blockading or taking Berlin, he said. "And our allies would complain that 'we attack on Cuba would provoke the Soviets into blockading Berlin' left Washington, Kennedy told Bundy to keep the possibility of air strikes alive until he returned. His request may have partly resulted from Bundy's advice that a blockade alone would not get the missiles out. Having changed his mind, Bundy now urged an air campaign with an invasion. He saw their counsel as predictable and not especially helpful. His memories of the navy brass in World War II, the apparent readiness of the Chiefs to risk nuclear war in Europe and their unhelpful advice before the Bay of Pigs, and the army's stumbling performance just a few weeks before in Mississippi deepened his distrust of their promised results.

Nevertheless, Kennedy candidly discussed his concerns with the Chiefs. An attack on Cuba would provoke the Soviets into blockading or taking Berlin, he said. "And our allies would complain that 'we attack on Cuba would provoke the Soviets into blockading Berlin."

LeMay's response irritated Kennedy, who asked, "What did you say?" LeMay repeated himself: "You're in a pretty bad fix." Kennedy responded with a hollow laugh, "You're in there with me." After the meeting, referring to LeMay's assertion about a Soviet nonresponse, Kennedy asked O'Donnell, "Can you imagine LeMay saying a thing like that? These brass hats have one great advantage in their favor. If we listen to them, and do what they want us to do, none of us will be alive later to tell them that they were wrong."

The Chiefs were angry, too. After Kennedy left the room, marine commandant David Shoup said to LeMay, "You, you pulled the rug right out from under him." LeMay replied, "Jesus Christ. What the hell do you mean?" Shoup replied that he agreed with LeMay "a hundred percent" and added, "If somebody could keep them from doing the goddamn thing piecemeal. That's our problem. You go in there and friggin' around with the missiles. You're screwed. . . . You can't fiddle around with hitting the missile sites and then hitting the SAM sites. You got to go in and take out the goddamn thing that's going to stop you from doing your job." Earle Wheeler, the army's representative on the Joint Chiefs, thought that Kennedy was set against military moves: "It was very apparent to me, though, from his [Kennedy's] earlier remarks, that the political action of a blockade is really what he's [after]."

As he left Washington, Kennedy told Bundy to keep the possibility of air strikes alive until he returned. His request may have partly resulted from Bundy's advice that a blockade alone would not get the missiles out. Having changed his mind, Bundy now urged an air strike as a "quick . . . and a clean surgical operation." At the same time, Kennedy, who impressed Sorensen as "impatient and discouraged" by his meeting with the Chiefs, told Bobby and Sorensen "to pull the group together quickly — otherwise more delays and dissension would plague whatever decision he took."

At a late-morning gathering of the Ex Comm, Acheson, Bundy, Dillon, and McCone lined up with the Chiefs in favor of an air
strike. McNamara, undoubtedly alerted to the president’s preference, favored a blockade over air action. Bobby, grinning, said that he had spoken with the president that morning and thought “it would be very, very difficult indeed for the President if the decision were to be for an air strike, with all the memory of Pearl Harbor.... A sneak attack was not in our traditions. Thousands of Cubans would be killed without warning, and a lot of Russians too.” The president supported a blockade, which would “allow the Soviets some room for maneuver to pull back from their over-extended position in Cuba.”

Following an afternoon break, during which advocates of an air strike and a blockade formed themselves into committees to develop their respective arguments, the whole group reconvened for further discussion. After two and a half hours, they seemed to agree that a blockade should be a first step with air strikes to follow if the Soviets did not remove the missiles. But worried that support for a blockade remained shaky, Bobby urged the president to pretend he was ill with a cold and return to Washington to forge a clearer consensus.

For two hours and forty minutes, beginning at 2:30 P.M., on Saturday, October 20, Kennedy and the National Security Council reviewed their options. None impressed him as just right, but under the president’s prodding the group agreed to a blockade or, rather, a “quarantine,” which could more readily be described as less than an act of war and seemed less likely to draw comparisons to the Soviets’ 1948 Berlin blockade. The announcement of the quarantine was to coincide with a demand for removal of the offensive missiles from Cuba and preparations for an air strike should Moscow not comply. Kennedy was willing to discuss the removal of U.S. missiles from Turkey or Italy in exchange, but only if the Soviets raised the issue. Should the United States make this concession, he intended to assure the Turks and Italians that Polaris submarines would become their defense shield.

Managing domestic opinion was another Kennedy concern. He planned to reveal the crisis to the public and announce the quarantine in a televised speech on Monday evening, October 22, in which he intended to state clearly “that we would accept nothing less than the ending of the missile capability now in Cuba.” To mute the crisis until then, he asked the New York Times and Washington Post, which had learned of the crisis from Pentagon leaks, to hold off publishing emerging details of the danger.

Kennedy spent Monday working to create a national and international consensus for the blockade. Remembering LeMay’s implicit threat to reveal Kennedy’s reluctance to use air power as the Chiefs wanted, he told Taylor, “I know you and your colleagues are unhappy with this decision, but I trust that you will support me.” Kennedy telephoned former presidents Hoover, Truman, and Eisenhower and consulted advisers about messages to foreign heads of state and his planned evening address. At an afternoon National Security Council meeting he “outlined the manner in which he expected Council Members to deal with the domestic aspects of the current situation. He said everyone should sing one song in order to make clear that there were now no differences among his advisers as to the proper course to follow.” Kennedy feared that domestic dissent might encourage Moscow to defy the blockade or strike at Berlin in the belief that the president would lack national support for a military response. He also believed that domestic divisions could weaken the Democrats in the November elections.

A meeting with congressional leaders for an hour before he spoke to the nation heightened his doubts about being able to generate the strong support he felt essential in the crisis. Their opposition to a blockade was as intense as that voiced by the Chiefs and seemed more likely to become public; unlike the military, congressional barons were not under presidential command. Senator Richard Russell saw a blockade as a weak response to the Soviet action. “It seems to me that we are at a crossroads,” he said. “We’re either a first-class power or we’re not.” Since Russell believed that a war with Russia was “coming someday,” he thought that the time to fight was now. William Fulbright also favored an invasion. He saw a blockade as the worst possible policy; by contrast, an invasion of Cuba would “not actually [be] an affront to Russia.” Seizing or sinking a Russian ship was an act of war. “It is not an act of war against Russia to attack Cuba,” he said.

As they left the meeting, Kennedy joked with Hubert Humphrey: “If I’d known the job was this tough, I wouldn’t have beaten you in West Virginia.” “I knew, and that’s why I let you beat me,” Humphrey answered. Facing the possibility of an imminent nuclear war, the pressure on Kennedy was unimaginable. It was one reason for his calls to the three ex-presidents. He thought they were the only ones who could imagine his burden. “No one,” Kennedy told historian David Herbert Donald in February 1962, “has a right to grade a
President — not even poor James Buchanan — who has not sat in his chair, examined the mail and information that came across his desk, and learned why he made decisions." Eisenhower was particularly helpful to Kennedy: "No matter what you're trying to do," he said, "I'll be doing my best to support it."

Kennedy later described his session with the congressional leaders as "the most difficult meeting... It was a tremendous strain," he told Bobby, who had been absent. Kennedy understood their outrage at Khrushchev's recklessness; it mirrored his own anger when he first heard about the missiles and Khrushchev's deception in putting them in Cuba. But unlike the congressmen, he could not allow his anger or any sense of personal slight to cloud his judgment. As for Russell and Fulbright, he banked on their patriotism and party ties to ensure their support. He also expected the public to rally behind him, which would discourage military and political opponents of the blockade from taking issue with his policy.

KENNEDY SAW HIS SPEECH to the country and the world explaining the crisis and his choice of a blockade as crucial not only in bringing Americans together but also in pressuring Khrushchev to accede to his demands. He also sent Khrushchev a letter, which Dobrynin received at the State Department an hour before Kennedy spoke. He had an ongoing concern, Kennedy wrote, that "your Government would not correctly understand the will and determination of the United States in any given situation." He feared a Soviet miscalculation, "since I have not assumed that you or any other sane man would, in this nuclear age, plunge the world into war which it is crystal clear no country could win and which could only result in catastrophic consequences to the whole world, including the aggressor." He reminded Khrushchev that "certain developments" in Cuba would force the United States to "do whatever must be done to protect its own security and that of its allies." He insisted that Khrushchev remove the missile bases and other offensive weapons in Cuba that were threatening Western Hemisphere nations.

Kennedy's seventeen-minute speech Monday night reached one hundred million Americans, who had been alerted to the crisis by the media; it was the largest audience ever up to that point for a presidential address. The president's words matched his grim demeanor. Looking drawn and tired, he spoke more deliberately than usual, making clear the gravity of what the United States and USSR, and, indeed, the whole world faced. Moscow had created a "nuclear strike capability" in Cuba. The missiles could hit Washington, D.C., or any other city in the southeastern United States. IRBMs, when installed, could strike most of the major cities in the Western Hemisphere. Kennedy bluntly condemned the Soviets for lying: The deployment represented a total breach of faith with repeated Soviet promises to supply Cuba with only defensive weapons. The United States, Kennedy announced, could not tolerate this threat to its security and would henceforth quarantine Cuba to block all offensive weapons from reaching the island. A Soviet failure to stop its buildup would justify additional U.S. action. Any use of the missiles already in Cuba would bring retaliatory attacks against the Soviet Union. Kennedy demanded prompt dismantling and withdrawal of all offensive weapons in Cuba under U.N. supervision. He also promised to counter any threat to America's allies, including "the brave people of West Berlin."

With no response yet from Khrushchev on Tuesday morning, the country and the world feared the worse. Rusk woke George Ball, who was sleeping on a couch in his State Department office, with some graveyard humor: "We have won a considerable victory," he said. "You and I are still alive." The two needed to prepare for a 10:00 A.M. Ex Comm meeting at the White House. Kennedy had issued a National Security Action Memorandum giving formal status to the group, which was to meet every morning in the Cabinet Room for the duration of the "current crisis."

Ex Comm's first priority Tuesday was to ensure domestic support by convincing people in the Congress and the press that the administration had not been dilatory in identifying the offensive threat in Cuba. The president and Bobby agreed that McCone should brief skeptics about the timeliness of their actions. Kennedy also wanted the public to understand that the only way the United States could have stopped the Soviet deployment was through an invasion of Cuba in the previous two years, but, he reminded his advisers, "there wasn't anybody suggesting an invasion of Cuba at a time when they necessarily could have stopped these things coming onto the island." The committee endorsed Stevenson's use at the U.N. of reconnaissance photos to combat Soviet charges that a crisis was being manufactured as a pretext for invading Cuba. The discussion also produced an agreement that if a U-2 reconnaissance plane were lost, the United States would destroy a SAM site.
A reply from Khrushchev, which reached the president by noon, gave little hope of a peaceful settlement. Khrushchev complained that Kennedy's speech and letter to him represented a "serious threat to peace." A U.S. quarantine would be a "gross violation of ... international norms." Khrushchev reaffirmed that the weapons going to Cuba were defensive and urged Kennedy to "renounce actions pursued by you, which could lead to catastrophic consequences." Kennedy read Khrushchev's letter on the phone to Lucius Clay, who had ended his service as Kennedy's special representative in Berlin in the spring of 1962. The president asked Clay to make himself available for consultations and predicted that they were going to face "difficulties in Berlin as well as other places."

By late afternoon, after Rusk, in what some called his finest hour, had persuaded the Organization of American States to give unanimous approval to Kennedy's announced plan, Kennedy ordered a quarantine to begin the next morning. At an evening meeting, Ex Comm discussed how to enforce the blockade against twenty-seven Soviet and Eastern-bloc ships heading for Cuba. To avoid unnecessary tensions, they agreed not to stop and search ships that reversed course. They also agreed to answer Khrushchev's letter with a reaffirmation of their view that the Soviets had caused the current crisis by "secretly furnishing offensive weapons to Cuba." Kennedy's reply restated his intention to enforce the quarantine and asked that they both "show prudence and do nothing . . . to make the situation more difficult to control."

At the close of the evening meeting, Kennedy recorded a candid conversation with his brother. "How does it look?" Bobby asked. "Ah, looks like hell — looks real mean, doesn't it?" Kennedy responded rhetorically. He nevertheless felt that they had done the right thing. "If they get this mean on this one, it's just a question of where they go about it next. No choice," Kennedy said. "I don't think there was a choice." Bobby confirmed his brother's conclusion: "Well, there isn't any choice. . . . You would have been impeached," he said. "That's what I think," Kennedy declared. "I would have been impeached."

In his eagerness to find a way out of the crisis, Bobby had asked journalists Frank Holeman and Charles Bartlett to tell Bolshakov that the White House might be receptive to dismantling Jupiter missiles in Turkey if the Soviets removed the missiles in Cuba. But the American move could come only after the Soviets had acted — "in a time of quiet and not when there is the threat of war." When Bobby reported to Kennedy, the president suggested that his brother directly approach Dobrynin, which he did that evening. Telling the ambassador that he was there on his own, without instructions from the president, Bobby angrily accused him and Khrushchev of "hypocritical, misleading and false" actions. Bobby asked "if the ships were going to go through to Cuba." Dobrynin believed they would. As he left, Bobby declared, "I don't know how all this will end, but we intend to stop your ships."

At the morning Ex Comm meeting on the twenty-fourth, the group feared that they were on the brink of an unavoidable disaster. The Soviets were making "rapid progress" in the completion of their missile sites and bringing their military forces "into a complete state of readiness." In fact, by the morning of the twenty-fourth, all of the Soviet MRBMs and their warheads were in Cuba and close to operational. In addition, Soviet ships were continuing on course, and two of them, which seemed to be carrying "offensive weapons," would approach the quarantine line by about noon, or in two hours. The presence of Soviet submarines screening the ships made it "a very dangerous situation." U.S. forces had increased their state of readiness from Defense Condition 3 to DEFCON 2, only one level below readiness for a general war. Soviet military intelligence had intercepted an order from the Pentagon to the Strategic Air Command to begin a nuclear alert.

The president's tension was reflected in his appearance and physical movements. "This was the moment . . . which we hoped would never come," Bobby wrote later. "The danger and concern that we all felt hung like a cloud over us all . . . These few minutes were the time of greatest worry by the President. His hand went up to his face & covered his mouth and he closed his fist. His eyes were tense, almost gray, and we just stared at each other across the table. Was the world on the brink of a holocaust and had we done something wrong? . . . I felt we were on the edge of a precipice and it was as if there were no way off."

Only a State Department intelligence report gave a glimmer of hope. Khrushchev's "public line," the analysts advised — which continued to be that Moscow had no offensive weapons in Cuba — "seems designed to leave him with some option to back off, if he chooses." A written report handed to McCone during the meeting suggested that Khrushchev might be doing just that. "Mr. President,"
McCone interrupted McNamara, who was explaining how the navy would deal with the Soviet subs, "I have a note just handed to me... It says we've just received information through ONI [Office of Naval Intelligence] that all six Soviet ships currently identified in Cuban waters — and I don't know what that means — have either stopped or reversed course." McCone left the room to ask for clarification on what "Cuban waters" meant: Were these ships approaching or leaving Cuba? The good news that it was indeed ships heading toward Cuba momentarily broke the mood of dire concern. "We're eyeball to eyeball," Rusk whispered to Bundy, "and I think the other fellow just blinked." But no one saw this as an end to the crisis. There were serious concerns that a U.S. naval vessel might deepen the crisis by unauthorized actions. Did our navy know that it was not supposed to pursue the retreating ships? Rusk asked. Kennedy worried that a destroyer might sink a ship that had turned around.

His concern was warranted. In the afternoon, McNamara went to the navy's command center in the Pentagon, a secure room under constant marine guard. McNamara learned that it had taken hours for some of the information on Soviet ship movements to reach the White House. He began chiding the duty officers for the delay, when Admiral George Anderson, the navy's representative on the Joint Chiefs, entered. Mindful of the president's concern about unauthorized navy action, McNamara began interrogating Anderson about procedures for dealing with the Soviet ships. Anderson saw the president's instructions as an unwarranted interference in the navy's freedom to do its job. Anderson told McNamara that his local commanders would decide on the details of how to deal with Soviet ships crossing the quarantine line, and said, "We've been doing this ever since the days of John Paul Jones." He waved the navy regulations manual at McNamara, saying, "It's all in there." McNamara heatedly replied, "I don't give a damn what John Paul Jones would have done. I want to know what you are going to do, now." The objective was to deter Khrushchev and avert a nuclear war, McNamara explained. Anderson answered that they would shoot across the bow, and if the ship did not stop, they would disable its rudder. Anderson defiantly added, "Now, Mr. Secretary, if you and your deputy will go back to your offices, the navy will run the blockade." McNamara ordered him not to fire at anything without his permission and left. "That's the end of Anderson," the secretary told Gilpatric, who had witnessed the exchange. "He's lost my confidence." (In 1963, Kennedy made him ambassador to Portugal.)

At a late-afternoon meeting with congressional leaders, Kennedy reported some hopeful signs. Some of the ships headed for Cuba had changed course, and Khrushchev had sent British pacifist Bertrand Russell a telegram promising no rash actions or response to American provocations. He intended to do everything possible to avoid war, he said, including a meeting with Kennedy. Nevertheless, Kennedy emphasized that they would not know for twenty-four hours whether the Soviets would still try to cross the quarantine line, and they still had the problem of getting the missiles removed from Cuba. "If they respect the quarantine," Kennedy told Harold Macmillan on the telephone that evening. "then we get the second stage of this problem, and work continues on the missiles. Do we then tell them that if they don't get the missiles out, that we're going to invade Cuba? He will then say that if we invade Cuba that there's going to be a general nuclear assault, and he will in any case grab Berlin. Or do we just let the nuclear work go on, figuring he won't ever dare fire them, and when he tries to grab Berlin, we then go into Cuba?"

Khrushchev put a fresh damper on hopes that Moscow would not challenge the quarantine, with a letter arriving on the night of the twenty-fourth. His language was harsh and uncompromising. He objected to the U.S. "ultimatum" and threat of "force," described U.S. actions toward Cuba as "the folly of degenerate imperialism," and refused to submit to the blockade. We intend "to protect our rights," he wrote, and ominously declared, "We have everything necessary to do so."

At the same time, however, Khrushchev invited William E. Knox, the head of Westinghouse International, who was in Moscow on business, to meet with him at the Kremlin. During a three-and-a-quarter-hour conversation in which Khrushchev was "calm, friendly and frank," he acknowledged that he had ballistic missiles with both conventional and thermonuclear warheads in Cuba, and that if the U.S. government "really wanted to learn what kind of weapons were available for the defense of Cuba... all it had to do was to attack Cuba and Americans would find out very quickly. He then said he was not interested in the destruction of the world, but if we all wanted to meet in Hell, it was up to us." He declared himself "anxious to have a meeting with President Kennedy; that he would be
An unyielding reply from Kennedy to Khrushchev's letter, which reached Moscow on the morning of the twenty-fifth, plus indications that the Americans might invade Cuba, convinced Khrushchev it was time to negotiate an end to the crisis. More than anything else, it was Khrushchev's concern with Soviet military inferiority that compelled him to back down. "He could not go to war in the Caribbean with any hope of prevailing," Fursenko and Naftali write.

During a midday Kremlin meeting, Khrushchev stated his eagerness for a resolution of the U.S.-Soviet missile crisis. Additional caustic exchanges with Kennedy would be unproductive, he said. Instead, he proposed that four transports carrying missiles to Cuba now turn back and a new means be found to protect Cuba or make it into "a zone of peace." His solution was for the United States to pledge not to invade Cuba in return for dismantling the missiles, which the U.N. could verify.

Kennedy spent the twenty-fifth temporizing. Since a dozen Soviet ships had turned away from the quarantine line, the White House had some time to consider which remaining Cuba-bound ships to stop and inspect. Kennedy told the morning Ex Comm meeting that he did not want "a sense of euphoria to get around. That [October 24] message of Khrushchev is much tougher than that." At the same time, however, a proposal from U.N. secretary general U Thant for a cooling-off period, during which Moscow and Washington would avoid tests of the quarantine, persuaded Kennedy to temporarily suspend a decision to board a Soviet ship. Kennedy told U Thant that the solution to the crisis was Soviet removal of offensive weapons from Cuba. Kennedy now also told Macmillan, "I don't want to have a fight with a Russian ship tomorrow morning, and a search of it at a time when it appears that U Thant has got the Russians to agree not to continue."

Yet Kennedy was doubtful that U Thant's initiative would come to much. On the afternoon of the twenty-fifth, he watched a televised confrontation at the U.N. between Stevenson and Soviet ambassador Valerian Zorin. When Stevenson pressed Zorin to say whether the Soviets had put offensive missiles in Cuba, he replied, "I am not in an American courtroom, and therefore I do not wish to answer a question that is put to me in the fashion in which a prosecutor puts questions." Stevenson would not let him evade the question. "You are in the courtroom of world opinion right now, and you can answer yes or no," Stevenson shot back. "You will have your answer in due course," Zorin answered. "I am prepared to wait for my answer until hell freezes over," Stevenson said. He then embarrassed the Russians by putting U-2 photos of the missiles before the Security Council. "I never knew Adlai had it in him," Kennedy said of his performance. "Too bad he didn't show some of this steam in the 1956 campaign."

To make clear that he was not backing away from the quarantine while they waited for Khrushchev's answer to U Thant, Kennedy authorized the boarding of a Soviet-chartered Lebanese ship on the morning of October 26. Since it was not a Soviet ship per se and since the boarding went off without incident, the White House had not jeopardized U Thant's proposal. But Kennedy had sent a message.

At the Ex Comm meeting at 10:00 A.M. on the twenty-sixth, it was clear that the quarantine was no longer the central issue. There were no ships close to the quarantine line; nor did they expect any "quarantine activity with respect to Soviet ships . . . in the next few days." The concern now was the continuing missile buildup in Cuba. "Even if the quarantine's 100 percent effective," Kennedy said, "it isn't any good because the missile sites go on being constructed." And there was running out on a peaceful solution to that problem: "We can't screw around for two weeks and wait for them [the Soviet ships] to finish these [missile bases]," he declared. Moreover, he saw only "two ways of removing the weapons. One is to negotiate them out. Or the other is to go in and take them out. I don't see any other way you're going to get the weapons out." Nor was he convinced that negotiations would work. He anticipated using an air strike followed by an invasion, which would risk Soviet use of the missiles against U.S. territory. He told Macmillan that evening, "If at the end of 48 hours we are getting no place, and the missile sites continue to be constructed, then we are going to be faced with some hard decisions."

But Kennedy did not have to wait two days. Within two hours after talking to Macmillan, he received a long, rambling letter from Khrushchev, which Llewellyn Thompson, who was with the president when he read it, believed Khrushchev had written in a state of
near panic without consultation. It was an unmistakable plea for a settlement. He justified Soviet help to Cuba as preserving its right of self-determination against U.S. aggression, and he continued to dispute Kennedy’s characterization of the missiles as offensive weapons, but declared, "Let us not quarrel now. It is apparent that I will not be able to convince you of this." He had no interest in mutual destruction. It was time for "good sense." To that end, he proposed an exchange: If the United States promised not to invade or support an invasion of Cuba and would recall its fleet, the Soviet Union would no longer see a need for armaments on the island — "the presence of our military specialists in Cuba would disappear." He urged Kennedy to avoid the catastrophe of a nuclear war, but warned, should there be one, "We are ready for this."

Because he could not bring himself to say directly that he would remove the missiles from Cuba — to acknowledge his defeat and humiliation — Khrushchev spoke more clearly through a subordinate. On the afternoon of the twenty-sixth, Aleksandr Feklisov, who was officially known as Aleksandr Fomin, the KGB station chief in Washington, ostensibly a Soviet embassy counsel, asked John Scali, an ABC television journalist, to meet him. Scali, who had had occasional meetings with Fomin for ten months, suggested lunch at the Occidental restaurant in downtown Washington. Fomin made a startling proposal. Scali should transmit to the State Department a three-point proposal for ending the Cuban crisis. In return for a promise not to invade Cuba, Moscow would dismantle its missile bases on the island, and Castro would pledge never to accept offensive weapons of any kind.

But fresh evidence of Soviet progress on the missile sites, coupled with reports that six Soviet and three satellite ships remained on course toward the quarantine line, put a damper on Khrushchev’s negotiating proposal. "We cannot permit ourselves to be impaled on a long negotiating hook while the work goes on on these bases," Kennedy told the Ex Comm at the October 27 morning meeting. They feared that Khrushchev’s letter might be a ploy for engaging them in drawn-out talks that would allow Soviet completion of the missile sites.

A new initiative from Moscow, which reached Kennedy during the morning Ex Comm discussions, deepened their suspicions. The Kremlin had released a more polished version of Khrushchev’s October 26 letter to the press. It now included a proposal that the United States remove its Jupiter missiles from Turkey in return for the dismantling of what "you regard as offensive weapons" in Cuba. The revised letter also maintained the demand for a pledge against invading Cuba and reliance on the U.N. as an intermediary.

The altered proposal created consternation among the Ex Comm members. It impressed them as the work of the Politburo eager to gain more advantages than Khrushchev had originally demanded. Could they, then, simply ignore the addition of Turkey to the exchange of pledges and respond only to Khrushchev’s first proposal? "Well now, that’s just what we ought to be thinking about," Kennedy said. But it would put the United States "in an unsupportable position" because "to any man at the United Nations or any other rational man, it [the Turkey-Cuba swap] will look like a very fair trade." Bundy disagreed, arguing that such a trade-off would not sit well with our European allies, who would see us as "trying to sell our allies for our interests." To buy time, the group released an interim press statement. "Several inconsistent and conflicting proposals have been made by the U.S.S.R. within the last 24 hours," the White House announcement said. "The proposal broadcast this morning involves the security of nations outside the Western Hemisphere. But it is the Western Hemisphere countries and they alone that are subject to the threat that has produced the current crisis."

Only after this threat had ended would the United States take up proposals concerning the security of nations elsewhere.

For almost four hours beginning at 4:00 P.M. on Saturday the twenty-seventh, the Ex Comm agonized over Khrushchev’s Cuba-for-Turkey missile swap. With the Cuban missile sites nearing completion and reports that a SAM had shot down a U-2 flying over Cuba and killed its pilot, the Joint Chiefs were pressing for a massive air strike no later than Monday morning, the twenty-ninth, to be followed by an invasion in seven days. Kennedy and his advisers saw Khrushchev’s proposal as possibly the last chance to reach a settlement and avoid military action that could lead to a nuclear exchange.

Everyone agreed that trading the Jupiters in Turkey for the missiles in Cuba would undermine the NATO alliance and weaken faith in U.S. willingness to take risks for the defense of its allies. Llewellyn Thompson also believed that it was unnecessary to include the Turkish missiles in the deal; Khrushchev would be able to boast of saving Cuba from a U.S. invasion, and he did not need to remove the Jupiters to end the crisis.
But Kennedy was not so sure. He was eager to do everything possible to avoid military action and the “ultimate failure,” a nuclear war. He wanted to promise to discuss the Jupiters in Turkey if Khrushchev would suspend work on the missile sites and “disarm these weapons.” If we keep the missiles in Turkey, Kennedy believed, “we are either going to have to invade or have a massive strike on Cuba which may lose Berlin. That’s what concerns me,” he said. He thought war. He wanted to promise to discuss the Jupiters in Turkey if Khrushchev would suspend work on the missile sites and “disarm these weapons.”

Nevertheless, Kennedy’s advisers convinced him to omit any mention of Turkey in his written reply to Khrushchev — in other words, to answer the first letter and largely ignore the second. He told Khrushchev that he first had to stop work on offensive missile bases in Cuba, make all offensive weapons systems there “inoperable,” and halt the further introduction of such weapons. All of it was to be done under U.N. supervision. In return, the United States would end the quarantine and give assurances against an invasion of Cuba. Such a settlement “would enable us to work toward a more general arrangement regarding ‘other armaments,’ as proposed in your second letter which you made public. . . . The continuation of this threat, or a prolonging of this discussion concerning Cuba by linking these problems to the broader questions of European and world security, would surely lead to an intensification of the Cuban crisis and a grave risk to the peace of the world.”

At the same time Kennedy cabled his letter to Moscow, he had Bobby hand deliver it to Dobrynin. By using his brother as the messenger, Kennedy was indicating that this was no committee or bureaucratic response but a statement of his personal eagerness to end the crisis on the terms described in the letter. Bobby’s mission was also meant to signal the urgency of a positive response from Khrushchev to relieve Pentagon pressure on the president for military action. As is clear from a memo Bobby subsequently made of his conversation with Dobrynin, he left no question that a failure to agree to the proposed exchange would have disastrous consequences. Bobby told him that the attack on the U-2 and death of the pilot compelled the administration “to make certain decisions within the next 12 or possibly 24 hours. There was very little time left. If the Cubans were shooting at our planes, then we were going to shoot back.” Bobby told Dobrynin “that he had better understand the situation and he had better communicate that understanding to

Mr. Khrushchev . . . We had to have a commitment by at least tomorrow that those bases would be removed. This was not an ultimatum. I said, but just a statement of fact. He should understand that if they did not remove those bases then we would remove them. His country might take retaliatory action but he should understand that before this was over, while there might be dead Americans there would also be dead Russians.” Bobby warned that “drastic consequences” would come from a failure to accept the president’s proposal by the next day.

When Dobrynin asked about Khrushchev’s proposal on Turkey, Bobby was ready with an answer. At a meeting with the president and several of his advisers just before he met with the ambassador, Bobby was instructed by Kennedy and Rusk to say that “while there could be no deal over the Turkish missiles, the President was determined to get them out and would do so once the Cuban crisis was resolved.” The group agreed that knowledge of this commitment would be a closely guarded secret, since “this unilateral private assurance might appear to betray an ally.” Bobby was also told to make plain to Dobrynin that if Moscow revealed this pledge, it would become null and void. On October 27, Kennedy secretly instructed Rusk to telephone Andrew Cordier, a Columbia University dean, who had served under U Thant at the U.N., and ask him to be prepared to give the secretary general a statement proposing the simultaneous removal of the missiles in Turkey and Cuba. Although this contingency plan was never activated and Rusk did not reveal its existence until 1987, it leaves no doubt that the president would have publicly given up the Jupiters for an end to the crisis.

No one involved in the October 27 discussions could have doubted that the United States was on the brink of military action against Cuba, which seemed likely to lead to a crisis in Europe and a possible war with the Soviet Union. Kenny O’Donnell remembered an Ex Comm evening meeting as “the most depressing hour that any of us spent in the White House during the President’s time there.” A State Department cable to the U.S. NATO mission said it all: Khrushchev’s second, public, letter had “diminished” hope for a settlement. The situation “is increasingly serious and time is growing shorter.” Recounting the loss of the U-2 and continuing Soviet ship movements toward the quarantine line, despite promises to the contrary, the cable advised that the United States “may find it necessary
within a very short time in its own interest and that of its fellow nations in the Western Hemisphere to take whatever military action may be necessary to remove this growing threat to the Hemisphere."

At ten in the evening, after the Ex Comm had reviewed the gloomy prospects if Khrushchev rejected the president’s offer, Bobby asked McNamara, “How are you doing, Bob?” “Well, how about yourself?” McNamara replied. “All right,” Bobby said. “You got any doubts?” McNamara asked. "No," Bobby answered, "I think that we’re doing the only thing we can." McNamara wanted to be sure that Moscow did not misread U.S. intentions. "I think the one thing, Bobby ... we ought to seriously do before we attack them, you’ve got to be damned sure they understand it’s coming."

They did. At a meeting of the entire Soviet presidium in a Moscow suburb, Khrushchev declared the need for a “retreat” in order to save Soviet power and the world from a nuclear catastrophe. As a prelude to a discussion on how to respond to Kennedy’s offer, the presidium authorized Soviet forces to repel a U.S. attack on Cuba if there were no settlement. During the presidium discussion, the arrival of Dobrynin’s report on his meeting with Bobby created a sense of urgency about ending the crisis. Khrushchev immediately dictated a letter accepting Kennedy’s terms and instructed that it be broadcast on the radio to ensure its prompt receipt in Washington before some incident triggered military action. At the same time, Khrushchev sent the president a secret communication expressing satisfaction at Kennedy’s promise to remove the Jupiters from Cuba in confidence.

The Soviet broadcast, which was heard in Washington at 9:00 A.M. Sunday morning, lifted a pall of apprehension from Kennedy and his Ex Comm advisers. Only the Joint Chiefs refused to take Khrushchev’s “surrender” at face value. Led by LeMay, they sent the president a letter recommending execution of the planned air strikes on Monday followed by the invasion unless there were “irrefutable evidence” of immediate Soviet action to remove the missile sites. They cautioned against a Soviet delaying tactic while they finished their missile buildup in preparation for “diplomatic blackmail.” A few days later, when Kennedy met with the Chiefs to thank them for their counsel and help during this most difficult period, they were not mollified. Admiral Anderson told the president, “We have been had!” LeMay called the settlement “the greatest defeat in our history,” and urged a prompt invasion. McNamara remembered Kennedy as “absolutely shocked” and “stuttering in reply.”

Kennedy told his advisers that the quarantine would continue until they could be sure that the terms of the agreement were met. He would remain uncomfortable with the continued presence of Soviet IL-28 bombers in Cuba, which had been omitted from the required elimination of offensive weapons. He also anticipated no end to communist subversion in the hemisphere and expected the two sides would be “tobe to toe on Berlin” by the end of November. But for the moment, the danger of a Soviet-American war had receded. Kennedy urged everyone to be reserved and to avoid gloating, which would humiliate Khrushchev and only add to future difficulties between the United States and the USSR.

Khrushchev’s promise to remove the missiles from Cuba ended the immediate danger of a military clash, but Kennedy could not assume that the crisis was concluded. Although he was confident that Khrushchev had backed down rather than risk a nuclear war, he could not afford to take anything for granted. Khrushchev’s initial lies about the presence of offensive weapons made Kennedy unwilling to take him at his word. Bob Komer of the National Security Council encouraged the president’s suspicions: “We’ve given K. a bloody nose in a way very hard for USSR to take without attempting in some way to recoup. [The] whole image of Soviet ‘invincibility’ will be eroded if K. doesn’t do something.” Kennedy shared Komer’s concern: “We must operate on the presumption that the Russians may try again,” he told McNamara on November 5. “I am sure that we are watching for any developments by the Soviet Union of a submarine base in Cuba,” he wrote John McCone in December. “Will you keep me informed periodically as to whether or not anything of a suspicious nature has turned up in this regard?”

In refusing to declare the crisis at an end, Kennedy wished to avoid an embarrassing possible reversal, which would be a political disaster and an irresistible prod to military action. He planned to officially end the quarantine after the Soviets dismantled the launching sites and shipped the missiles back to Russia. He also wanted the IL-28 bombers removed. Three weeks of negotiation and continued flights over Cuba produced a mutually agreeable formula. At a news conference on November 20, Kennedy announced that Khrushchev would remove all the IL-28 aircraft from Cuba within thirty days and
would allow U.S. observation of the procedure. He also reported that "all known offensive missile sites in Cuba have been dismantled," that the Soviets had loaded the missiles on departing ships, and that inspection at sea had confirmed their departure. A naval quarantine was no longer necessary. He was thankful that the crisis had concluded peacefully and hoped that the outcome "might well open the door to the solution of other outstanding problems."

Though the missiles were gone, because Castro rejected U.N. inspection of Cuba Kennedy would not abandon schemes to oust him from power. He declared at his news conference that to protect the hemisphere from offensive weapons, the United States would "pursue its own means of checking on military activities in Cuba." The continuing presence of Soviet ground combat units made ongoing vigilance essential. Moreover, he promised that if Cuba was "not used for the export of aggressive Communist purposes, there will be peace in the Caribbean." But he described efforts to halt subversion and encourage the establishment of freedom in Cuba as "very different from any intent to launch a military invasion of the island." As he told McNamara in a memo of November 5, he still believed an invasion of Cuba carried huge military risks: "Considering the size of the problem, the equipment that is involved on the other side, the Nationalists' fervor which may be engendered, it seems to me we could end up bogged down. I think we should keep constantly in mind the British in the Boer War, the Russians in the last war with the Finnish and our own experience with the North Koreans." At the same time, Kennedy told Schlesinger, "An invasion would have been a mistake — a wrong use of our power. But the military are mad. They wanted to do this." Kennedy had little attraction to a direct American assault on Cuba, especially after McNamara gave him estimated casualties of between forty and fifty thousand. If they were to bring down Castro's regime, it would have to be by covert subversion, which the administration continued to support in the coming months.

Kennedy received justifiable plaudits for resolving the crisis. Yet he had no illusion that his response was the principal reason for success. Rather, America's local military superiority, Moscow's limited national security stake in keeping missiles in Cuba, and the Soviets' difficulty justifying to world opinion a possible nuclear conflict over Cuba were of greater importance in persuading Khrushchev to back down. Still, Kennedy's resistance to pressure from military chiefs for air attacks and an invasion, and his understanding that patient diplomacy and measured pressure could persuade the Soviets to remove the missiles were essential contributions to the peaceful outcome of the crisis.

Of course, Kennedy's problem with Cuba was not strictly of his making, but partly the consequence of an "unimaginative and sterile" policy in 1959–1960. "Probably no United States policy could have prevented Castro's movement into the Soviet orbit," Schlesinger wrote Kennedy in November 1962, but "a more imaginative U.S. policy could have made it much harder for Castro to join the Soviet bloc." Indeed, a greater measure of sympathy for a government striving to right the many wrongs visited on Cuba by a U.S.-backed Batista regime was a regrettable Eisenhower omission. And indeed, some historians believe that Kennedy's role in provoking the confrontation makes him less than heroic in resolving it. As Barton J. Bernstein has said, "a different president than Kennedy might well have chosen not to launch the Bay of Pigs venture, not to pursue clandestine activities against Cuba and Castro, not to build up the American nuclear arsenal well beyond the size of the Soviets', and not to place the Jupiters in Turkey." Bernstein believes that these actions, but especially plotting against Castro and indications of a possible invasion, provoked Khrushchev into his Cuban missile adventure.

Bernstein's argument has merit. Without Kennedy's Cuban provocations, Khrushchev would have been hard-pressed to justify placing missiles on the island. The administration's anti-Castro actions gave Moscow an inviting opportunity to use Cuba to reduce America's nuclear advantage over the USSR and/or force a favorable resolution of the Berlin problem. Yet, as Ernest May and Philip Zelikow have pointed out, Khrushchev probably acted "more from instinct than from calculation. Whether Berlin or the strategic balance or concern about Cuba was uppermost in his mind at the time he ordered the missiles sent to Cuba, he himself could probably not have said." Khrushchev, in the view of two close aides, was a "reckless" gambler or "hothead," who made a big bet in hopes of getting a huge payoff. Having stumbled badly in advancing his country's economic well-being and believing that Kennedy would wilt in a confrontation rather than go to war, Khrushchev sent the missiles to Cuba hoping to win a big foreign policy victory that could secure his political fortunes. He was wrong, and the consequences of his error
were nearly fatal. But his ultimate good sense joined with Kennedy's wise judgment to avert a disaster that the president believed would have been described as the "final human failure."

Forty years after the crisis, historians almost uniformly agree that this was the most dangerous moment in the forty-five-year Cold War. Moreover, despite his part in provoking the crisis, they generally have high praise for Kennedy's performance. His restraint in resisting a military solution that would almost certainly have triggered a nuclear exchange makes him a model of wise statesmanship in a dire situation. One need only compare his performance with that of Europe's heads of government before World War I — a disaster that cost millions of lives and wasted unprecedented sums of wealth — to understand how important effective leadership can be in times of international strife. October 1962 was not only Kennedy's finest hour in the White House; it was also an imperishable example of how one man prevented a catastrophe that may yet afflict the world.

CHAPTER 17

New Departures: Domestic Affairs

The winds of change appear to be blowing more strongly than ever, in the world of communism as well as our own. For 175 years we have sailed with those winds at our back. ... Today we still welcome those winds of change — and we have every reason to believe that our tide is running strong.

— John F. Kennedy, State of the Union Message, January 14, 1963

Kennedy's highest priorities during the missile crisis had been to rid Cuba of Soviet missiles without a nuclear war and to ensure against a future confrontation by convincing Khrushchev that there could be no payoff from attempted nuclear blackmail. At the same time, however, he was mindful of the political consequences to his administration. With midterm congressional elections only a week away when Khrushchev pledged to remove the missiles, Kennedy appreciated that a failure to deal effectively with the crisis would have been a terrible blow to the future of his presidency.

Kennedy's successful diplomacy gave the Democrats an advantage in the November elections that he was happy to exploit. The White House welcomed descriptions by Acheson, Bundy, Harriman, Norman Cousins of The Saturday Review, and General Norstad of a president who had been "extraordinarily skillful," "firm," "reasonable," and "calm." It also took satisfaction from Newsweek's assertion that Kennedy "had given Americans a sense of deep confidence in their President and the team he had working with him."