KHRUSHCHEV'S EXACT scenario for November, if it was ever spelled out on paper, has not been found. But the elements were coming together. By November 6 the missiles would be in Cuba and operational, and his Foreign Ministry would have prepared boilerplate for formal agreements on the establishment of a UN presence in West Berlin and the withdrawal of Western troops. In addition, he would have a draft test ban treaty that he could offer Kennedy as a sweetener once the president had swallowed the retreat from Berlin. So long as the secret deployment to Cuba could hold for another five weeks, Khrushchev believed that John Kennedy would have no choice but to accept Soviet terms for ending the Cold War in 1962.

THE UNRAVELING of Khrushchev's grandest ploy began with a flight of an American U-2. Once again U.S. technology proved the Soviet leader's undoing. One week after Attorney General Kennedy's meeting with Bolshakov in early October 1962, McGeorge Bundy brought bad news to John Kennedy along with his morning newspapers. Bundy had been one of those who had advised Kennedy in September that it was highly unlikely that Khrushchev would install strategic weapons in Cuba. Now, on October 16, he carried photographs of what photo interpreters at the CIA believed were medium-range ballistic missile sites in Cuba. Oleg Penkovsky, the CIA's agent in the GRU, who had proved so useful in the Berlin crisis a year earlier, had turned over manuals on the R-12S that helped the analysts make sense of the photographs. There was really no doubt in their minds. Bundy made clear to the president that there should be no doubt in his either.

Kennedy immediately decided that the United States could not accept the deployment of Soviet missiles to Cuba. Although Secretary of Defense McNamara assured him that these missiles would not erode America's advantage in the strategic balance of power, the president sensed that the missiles might tip the psychological balance in Khrushchev's favor. Just one month earlier the United States had warned of the unacceptability of any deployment of Soviet offensive weapons to Cuba and had singled out missiles as an offensive weapon. The Kremlin had subsequently promised in public and through back channels that its military supply program in Cuba did not include missiles. American allies, let alone the American people, would doubt the credibility of the U.S. president's word if he suddenly turned around and accepted the missiles as a fait accompli.

Over the next six days Kennedy met secretly with his Cuban team, a group centered on the attorney general, the vice president, McNamara, Bundy, John McCone of the CIA, Secretary of State Dean Rusk and his
Kennedy’s initial preference was for a surprise air strike that cleaned out the missiles before they became a threat to the United States. U.S. intelligence believed they were not yet operational. The weaknesses of this response became apparent to Kennedy as the discussion proceeded. “How effective can the takeout be?” he asked on October 16. “It’ll never be a hundred percent, Mr. President, we know,” replied General Maxwell Taylor. “We hope to take out a vast majority in the first strike.” No military commander could promise Kennedy that all the sites that had been found could be destroyed in a single attack, and no one dared suggest that all the Soviet sites had been discovered. The other military option, a massive invasion of Cuba with ground forces, was no more attractive. The Pentagon estimated it would take a week to get all the necessary troops into position for an invasion, and it did not wish to start moving any troops until after an air strike had removed the missiles. Any earlier movement would eliminate the element of surprise.

There was an additional telling argument against a surprise attack. Robert Kennedy reminded his brother that nothing defined treachery for their generation more than the Japanese decision to launch a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. President Kennedy, who kept pushing for some certainty that an air strike alone would work, came to agree that Moscow would have to get some kind of warning.

The risks associated with each attack scenario were so great that Kennedy also began to consider how the issue might be resolved diplomatically. On October 18 he had his favorite speechwriter, Theodore Sorensen, begin drafting a letter to Khrushchev that would offer negotiations. But in the end neither Sorensen nor, more important, Kennedy found a way to begin the process diplomatically without appearing weak. Instead Kennedy became increasingly fond of a suggestion that came from his defense secretary, Robert McNamara. A naval blockade or quarantine of Cuba would put pressure on the Soviets while giving Khrushchev the opportunity to consider if he wanted to plunge the world into war. Initially the blockade could do nothing about the missiles already on the island, so Kennedy believed U.S. military preparations would have to continue in the event an attack against the existing launch sites became unavoidable. The United States would meanwhile seek the support of its allies in the hemisphere and in NATO to present a united front to Khrushchev.

The intensive policy discussions in the White House passed completely unnoticed by the Kremlin until October 22. While it was already afternoon in Moscow, both the local KGB and GRU stations began reporting on unusual activity at the White House and the Pentagon that morning. A few hours later, at 1:30 P.M., eastern daylight time, Pierre Salinger announced to the press that the president would be making a speech to the nation at 7:00 P.M. about “a matter of national importance.” Soviet intelligence could not divine on which foreign policy problem Kennedy would speak. “The press emphasizes,” wrote the GRU resident from Washington, “that the reasons for this official activity remain top secret. It is assumed that this has to do with the possibility of new measures regarding Cuba or Berlin.”

Khrushchev reacted quickly to the news from Washington, concluding that whatever the American president had to say would affect his grandiose plans for November. He also suspected that Kennedy would have something to say about Cuba. Just a few days earlier Khrushchev had read reports on Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko’s recent meetings with Kennedy and Rusk. These had taken place on October 18 in Washington as Gromyko made his way home to Moscow from a session at the United Nations. In these reports Khrushchev detected a hardening of the U.S. position on Fidel Castro.

Khrushchev had fellow Presidium member Frol Kozlov arrange a special night session of the Presidium. Kozlov shared Khrushchev’s belief that the Kremlin was about to face a crisis over Cuba. When Mikoyan asked for the reason behind this unscheduled meeting, Kozlov answered, “We are awaiting Kennedy’s important speech on Cuba.” Both the Soviet defense minister, Marshal Malinovsky, and Colonel General Ivanov, the chief of the main operational department of the Soviet general staff, were invited to the meeting. In keeping with Khrushchev’s main preoccupation, Malinovsky collected whatever information he could on the status of U.S. forces in the Caribbean, and Ivanov prepared a briefing on the status of Soviet forces in Cuba.

Despite the convictions of some of the top men in the Kremlin, the agenda item for this meeting—“further actions regarding Cuba and Berlin”—betrayed the deep uncertainty in the Kremlin about the crisis to come. A month earlier Khrushchev had confidently told the West German ambassador...
Hans Kroll that he would be the one to choose when the next crisis in U.S.-Soviet relations took place. With news of the impending speech by Kennedy, Khrushchev had to recognize that he had lost control of events.

The Presidium meeting that started at 10:00 P.M., Moscow time, on Monday, October 22, 1962, was arguably the most tense of Khrushchev's career. "It has become known," the Soviet leader began in opening the meeting. "If R-14 missiles, all their warheads are operational. 14 The ships of the U.S. Navy with marines." It was 3:00 P.M. in Washington, with four hours to go before Kennedy was to speak.

Khrushchev gave the floor to Malinovsky, who reassured the members of the leadership that the United States was not preparing a preemptive strike of any kind. "Lightninglike actions," he said, were unlikely. "If Kennedy announces an invasion," he assured the Kremlin, "there will still be enough time for us to prepare." The GRU team in Havana was responsible for watching Florida. That morning it redoubled its long-standing efforts to intercept U.S. military communications. 12 It had picked up a new concentration of forces in Florida, but there still was no evidence that an attack on Cuba was likely in the near future. Consequently, Malinovsky reported that he was quite convinced that the Presidium would have some time to deal with whatever Kennedy had to say. If anything, the Soviet defense minister seemed a little cocksure. "Kennedy's radio address will be some kind of pre-election trick." Malinovsky did not believe it was as yet necessary to put the Soviet R-12s in Cuba, which had arrived there in late September, in a higher state of readiness.

General Ivanov of the general staff followed Malinovsky to report on the status of Soviet forces in and around the island. Following Khrushchev's Pitsunda decision, Ivanov had formalized the operational procedures for the Soviet Group of Forces in Cuba. In September he instructed General Igor Stetsenko, the commander of the R-12 and R-14 missile detachments, to await a signal from Moscow before launching the missiles. 13 Ivanov explained to the Presidium that some of the R-12s on Cuba were operational. 14 All their warheads had arrived on the Indigirka before the crisis started. However, because of the changes to the Anadyr plan in September, the missiles and warheads for the longer-range R-14 missiles were not on the island. They were still en route, and it would be some time before they could be deployed. The ships carrying the R-14 missiles, the Kasimov and the Krasnodar, were not even halfway to Cuba.

The short-range or tactical missiles that Khrushchev had requested in September were also on the island. The Indigirka had also delivered twelve Luna missiles and forty-two FKR cruise missiles and their nuclear warheads. By the time of the meeting on October 22 the Luna had been integrated into the Soviet infantry units, and the cruise missiles deployed to coastal sites as well as near the Cuban border with the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo. The infantry units and the coastal installations were designed to protect the island and the Soviet long-range missiles against any attempt by the United States or Cuban émigrés to invade. Moscow retained control over the Lunas' and the FKR's nuclear warheads, which were at a special warhead facility under the control of General Nikolai Beloborodov and some miles away from the infantry units and coastal installations.

Despite this impressive display of Soviet might already on the island, Khrushchev was depressed by the prospect of Kennedy's speech. A rumor reached KGB headquarters that he had been heard saying, "Lenin's work is destroyed." much as Stalin is said to have feared the collapse of the Soviet Union in the first hours of the German attack in June 1941. Khrushchev realized that his effort to alter the strategic balance might actually lead to the one thing he most wished to avoid, a nuclear war. Khrushchev betrayed his inner turmoil to the men in the room: "The point is we didn't want to unleash a war. All we wanted to do was to threaten them, to restrain them with regard to Cuba." 16 The United States had missile bases all around the Soviet Union that "have restrained us," he acknowledged. Why could the USSR not have one of its own? 17

Although he said that he "agreed with Comrade Malinovsky's conclusions," the Soviet leader did not share his defense minister's confidence that Kennedy wasn't about to launch an attack on Cuba. Since the Bay of Pigs Khrushchev had increasingly acted on the assumption that John Kennedy was not fully in control of the U.S. government. In Khrushchev's opinion, the militarists and the imperialists swirling around the White House were able to influence Kennedy to a larger extent than, in retrospect, they had shaped Eisenhower's actions abroad. Khrushchev reminded his colleagues of Kennedy's statements to Gromyko on October 18. "Kennedy chose his words very carefully when speaking about Cuba," he concluded from reading the Soviet transcript. 18 Even more disquieting was what the U.S. secretary of state had said. "During the meeting," Khrushchev said, "[Rusk] led and got drunk on the discussion about Berlin, while actually alluding to Cuba." He added
with unease, “Rusk told Gromyko that Cuba was for the United States as Hungary was for us.”9 This was exactly the same simile that had first worried Khrushchev earlier in the year, when his son-in-law, Aleksei Adzhubei, reported on his January 30 conversation with Kennedy.

Khrushchev believed that the United States had been looking for a pretext to attack Cuba for some time and that the impending speech meant the Americans had found one. “The tragedy is that they can attack, and we shall respond. This may end in a big war.”20 Khrushchev concluded pessimistically, “Our problem is that we didn’t deploy everything we wanted to and we didn’t publish the treaty.” For reasons he did not explain at the meeting, Khrushchev believed that the twenty-four R-12 nuclear-tipped missiles that were already on the island were not enough of a deterrent to protect the Cubans. Instead of suggesting that Moscow immediately declare that it already had nuclear missiles in Cuba, a military fact that might deter the Americans from taking any further action against Cuba, Khrushchev was wringing his hands because he had not taken the advice of the Cubans in late August and published the Soviet-Cuban defense agreement. Somehow he believed that this agreement would make a deeper impression on Kennedy than the half-completed Anadyr operation. Curiously, as Khrushchev explained himself that night, he never seemed to consider using Soviet power anywhere else in the world to prevent an attack on Cuba. At no point, for example, did he suggest threatening NATO’s vulnerable outpost in West Berlin.

Newly available minutes from the meeting clarify how Khrushchev viewed the alternatives that night. After expressing his anxieties, he laid out a series of options in rapid sequence. “We could announce on the radio that there is already a [Soviet-Cuban defense] agreement regarding Cuba,” said Khrushchev. He then asked himself, “How would the United States react to this?” Khrushchev estimated the three most likely outcomes: “They could announce a blockade of a Cuba and do nothing else; they could seize our ships that are on their way to Cuba; or they could stop thinking about attacking Cuba.”21

Khrushchev felt it prudent that the Kremlin prepare itself for how it would respond in case Kennedy launched an invasion of Cuba. He wondered aloud whether it would be useful, if the worst came to pass, to transfer control of the nuclear weapons to the Cubans. “In the case of an attack, all means could be with the Cubans, who will announce that they will respond.”22 Otherwise he told his colleagues that the Soviet forces would have to be prepared to use the tactical nuclear weapons to defend their position and the Castro regime, though “not for the time being the strategic weapons.”23

With these options outlined, Khrushchev called for a five- to ten-minute break, “so that comrades could consider and express their own opinion.”24 There is no evidence that the Kremlin leadership had ever before taken the time to think through how they might use the force that had been sent on their orders twelve thousand miles to Cuba. In May they had been asked to endorse the deployment for purely political reasons. In September Khrushchev alone had decided to add the Lunas to the force. Soviet military doctrine accepted the use of tactical weapons on the battlefield—it was also accepted NATO doctrine—but there was no specific plan for how these might be used in Cuba. An order that would have assigned responsibility to the Soviet commander in Cuba to determine whether or not to use them depending on the situation had never been signed at the Soviet Defense Ministry. The other tactical weapons, the FKR cruise missiles, had belonged to the original plan in May, but it seems that here too their use was never considered by the Soviet Union’s political leadership until around eleven on the night of October 22.

After the short recess the Kremlin leaders received two useful bits of information. From the Foreign Ministry came news that the U.S. State Department had informed Ambassador Dobrynin that the Soviet Embassy would receive a copy of Kennedy’s remarks an hour before the speech, at 1:00 a.m. Moscow time. The Defense Ministry added that a report had just come in from Soviet military intelligence sources in Moscow of consultations taking place among the European ambassadors of the NATO countries and those of South American countries.

After hearing the reports, Anastas Mikoyan and fifty-nine-year-old Mikhail Suslov, longtime members of the Presidium, expressed anxiety about the deteriorating situation in the Caribbean and their belief that a U.S. attack on Cuba was imminent. Khrushchev did not disagree. This was the reason he had wanted his colleagues to consider what to do in extremis. It was time, he believed, to consider the instructions that Moscow would send to its commander in Cuba, General Issa Pliyev. Khrushchev already had something in mind. “Bring [the units] to a condition of military readiness,” he dictated. “At first do not deploy the atomic [weapons] with all the forces.” In his current frame of mind a cautious instruction like this would not be enough for him. “If there is a [U.S.] landing,”—Khrushchev continued to dictate—“[use] the tactical atomic weapons, but [not] the strategic weapons until [there is] an order.”25

According to Anastas Mikoyan, the Soviet defense minister Malinovsky
had prepared his own draft instruction, which authorized General Pliyev to use all available means to defend the island. When Malinovsky read it aloud, Khrushchev replied angrily that this instruction seemed to imply using the long-range nuclear missiles and that "would mean the start of a thermo-nuclear war." Malinovsky then stumbled in his reply.

Concerned about what he was witnessing, Mikoyan once again—as he had at key moments since 1958—tried to steer the Kremlin further away from the brink of war with the United States. Mikoyan criticized Khrushchev’s earlier suggestion of transferring control of the missiles to the Cubans, either now or later in the crisis. If the Americans were to understand that the missiles are under our control, they would proceed from the assumption that we would not attempt some kind of [nuclear] adventure since we know what the consequences would be.” But this would not be so if Washington thought Castro had his finger on the button. “If they found out that the missiles belonged to the masters of the island, then they would take it as some kind of provocation.” Mikoyan believed Washington might calculate that the Cubans were capable of firing off the missiles. In this moment of maximum peril, Mikoyan wanted to eliminate any doubt the Americans might have that the missiles were and would remain under Soviet control.*

With the elevation of many of his protégés in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Khrushchev had grown more powerful than he had been in November 1958, when Mikoyan had forced him to back down from unilaterally ending U.S. occupation rights in West Berlin. Nevertheless, the wily forty-year Kremlin veteran still commanded respect, especially on matters of foreign policy. In 1960 he had successfully discouraged Khrushchev from shooting down a Western airplane over East Germany to demonstrate his impatience at the slow progress of negotiations over Berlin. Mikoyan’s words this night put Khrushchev on the defensive.

“We'll keep the missiles as Soviet property under our exclusive control,” said Khrushchev, who accepted Mikoyan’s point about not provoking Washington by handing them over to Castro. However, he refused to give in on the larger issue of whether Moscow’s nuclear weapons should be used at all to save the Castro regime. “If we do not use nuclear weapons,” said Khrushchev, “then they could capture Cuba.” If Khrushchev had hoped for backing from his handpicked defense minister at this crucial moment, he did not get it. “The forces that the Americans have in the Caribbean,” said Malinovsky, “are not enough to seize the island.” Even given this more optimistic assessment from his defense chief, Khrushchev was not prepared to concede the point on using tactical nuclear weapons. “The Americans could shell from their rocket carriers [destroyers and missile sites in Florida],” he argued, “without sending any airplanes.”

At this point in the discussion another senior Presidium member, First Deputy Premier Aleksei Kosygin, intervened. His contribution appears lost to history. Neither of the Presidium scribes at that meeting, Vladimir Malin and Aleksandr Serov, noted it down. However, after Kosygin spoke, the focus of the discussion shifted dramatically. Whatever he said had persuaded the group to stop thinking about when to use nuclear weapons and to start thinking about how to control events so that the situation did not escalate into a nuclear war. Even if the strategic missiles were not used, nuclear war could begin after Moscow fired its tactical force to defend against a U.S. landing. Each of the Luna tactical missiles deployed with the Soviet military in Cuba had a range of thirty-one miles and a 2-kiloton nuclear warhead, enough to irradiate an area a thousand yards from the center of the blast. The thirty-six FKR cruise missiles already deployed to the island were even more powerful. These missiles, which pointed out to sea and were designed to destroy invasion armadas, had a hundred-mile range and carried warheads that varied in destructive power between 5.6 and 12 kilotons of TNT. The Soviets already had enough of them on the island to blow apart a U.S. carrier group.

Khrushchev gave in to the concerns of his colleagues. Vowing that nothing would be done to provoke “the use of nuclear weapons against Cuba,” he called for a revision of the instructions to the Soviet commander on the island. This time they read that in the event of a U.S. attack, the Kremlin authorized Pliyev to use “all means except those controlled by Statsenko [Major General Igor D. Statsenko, the commander of the rocket units] and Beloborodov [Colonel Nikolai K. Beloborodov, the controller of the atomic warheads].” Pliyev could use the short-range Luna and the FKR cruise missiles, but only with conventional warheads. Moscow had backed down from using all means at its disposal to fight a battle in Cuba. Once again the cautious Mikoyan had helped prevent the Cold War from turning hot.

Fearful that if U.S. intelligence intercepted this order, the Pentagon might exploit Soviet weakness, Malinovsky suggested that perhaps the instruction not be sent to Pliyev until the Kremlin had had a chance to look at a copy of Kennedy’s speech, which the U.S. government had promised to hand over to the Russians at 1:00 A.M. “Otherwise,” he said, “they might be given a pretext to use the atomic weapon.”

Despite Malinovsky’s reservations, the Kremlin decided not to wait to see

*See authors’ note to the paperback edition on page 623.
the text of Kennedy's speech. At five minutes to midnight the Defense Ministry sent the order to Cuba. For the next hour the Presidium held its collective breath. Then, at 11:15 A.M., V. V. Kuznetsov of the Foreign Ministry brought the leadership a Russian translation of Kennedy's speech. In it, the U.S. president demanded that the Soviet Union withdraw its nuclear missiles from Cuba and announced a naval blockade of the island, but for the moment no other military action. "It seems to me that by its tone," said Khrushchev, who had quickly scanned his copy, "this is not a war against Cuba but some kind of ultimatum." The room relaxed. Khrushchev then suggested that the session be suspended until the morning, so that they all could get some sleep. He decided to stay in the Kremlin, where he would sleep on a couch in his office and be available for any emergency.

The Presidium broke for the night before making any decision on what to do about the Soviet ships and submarines heading toward the U.S. Navy. Kennedy had not established a blockade zone or line in his speech, vowing only that "all ships of any kind bound for Cuba from whatever nation or port will, if found to contain cargoes of offensive weapons, be turned back." There was some very valuable Soviet offensive weaponry on the high seas. The ships with the R-14s and their warheads were in the North Atlantic steaming, while the four Foxtrot submarines, which had left their home port on October 1, were nearing Cuba. Each diesel-electric Foxtrot carried a nuclear-tipped torpedo.

The submarines were a little behind schedule. They all had been expected to arrive at the Cuban port of Mariel between October 21 and October 23. The closest to its destination was the Foxtrot later designated C-23 by NATO, which was north of the Bahamas, a two-day sail away. The others were spread in an arc that extended south from Bermuda. The C-18 and C-19 were both more than three hundred miles south of Bermuda, a hard three-day journey away from Cuba, and C-26 was trailing behind the Soviet ship Aleksandrovsk, more than two hundred miles northeast of Cuba near the Turks and Caicos Islands. C-26 was protecting the Aleksandrovsk, which carried nuclear warheads.

Kennedy had no idea of the discussion going on in Moscow. He spent the hours before his speech gathering political support for a step-by-step approach to getting the missiles out of Cuba. Having ruled out a military attack as an opening move, he needed to still any domestic concerns that he was not doing enough while assuring his European and Canadian allies that he was not doing too much. His aides arranged a meeting for him with the leaders of Congress just before he was to appear on television and radio.

The meeting with the congressional leadership took a toll on Kennedy. Senator Richard Russell, the legendary power broker and the formidable chairman of the Armed Services Committee, questioned the administration's decision to buy time at this stage. "My position is that these people have been warned," said Russell. The words brought a tense exchange with the president. "By attacking, you will only make it sure that when the time comes, when if they do use these MiGs to attack our shipping or to drop a few bombs around Miami or some other place, and we do go in there, that we'll lose a great many more men than we would right now—" Kennedy responded: "But, Senator, we can't invade Cuba... [I]t takes us some while to assemble our force to invade Cuba." And just so neither the senator nor anyone else in the room doubted his determination, the president added, "We are now assembling that force, but it is not in a position to invade Cuba in the next 24 or 48 hours." Kennedy now made a dire prediction: "Now, I think it may very well come to that before the end of the week."40

The speech itself had been ready for a day. Sorensen had incorporated phrases from the State Department and the attorney general. A barometer of the twists and turns in the debate among Kennedy's advisers, the drafting process had taken the better part of a week.

At 7:00 P.M. on October 22, 1962, President Kennedy began a speech that an entire generation later remembered as the start of a week filled with fear and concern. "Good evening, my fellow citizens. This government, as promised, has maintained the closest surveillance of the Soviet military buildup on Cuba." Kennedy was adamant that the missiles could not stay in Cuba. Calling the deployment "a deliberately provocative and unjustified change in the status quo," Kennedy took a page from history to demonstrate his determination. "The 1930s taught us a clear lesson: Aggressive conduct, if allowed to grow unchecked and unchallenged, ultimately leads to war." In announcing a blockade against all ships that were carrying "offensive military" cargoes to Cuba, Kennedy cautioned that this was probably only the first step in what might turn out to be a protracted and bloody crisis. "No one can foresee precisely what course [the crisis] will take or what costs or casualties will be incurred... But the greatest danger of all would be to do nothing."41
Kennedy's code breakers in the National Security Agency were soon scanning the airwaves in search of information about the Soviet response to Kennedy's speech. They did not have to wait long. At 11:15 P.M., Washington time, on October 22 (or 6:15 A.M., October 23, in Moscow), less than four hours after Kennedy's speech, the Soviet ships on the high seas were sent what appeared to be an alert telling them to prepare for a special instruction. The messages were sent in a cipher the NSA could not break; however, because the call signs of the message were in the clear, the NSA figured out that something special had been sent. Up to that point the southern port of Odessa had been the originating point for all the messages sent to the Soviet ships plying their way to Cuba. But this time the call sign for Moscow was substituted for Odessa. The American listeners straining to hear these sounds therefore understood that something important was coming. The instruction came in at 12:05 A.M., October 23 (or 7:05 A.M. in Moscow). It seemed to be sent to individual ships and the first dispatch was directed at seven of them. The message went unbroken by the United States. But within less than two hours, through analysis of call signs, the NSA started detecting the ships responding one by one.

It was just a few minutes past dawn on the first day of this international crisis. The first light allowed U.S. ships and airplanes to see what the code breakers could not determine on their own: whether the Soviet ships were staying on course or turning around. Electronic and aerial snooping was Kennedy's most reliable guide to the developing crisis. On the eve of the crisis the CIA had lost its only mole in the Soviet defense administration. Just before the Presidium met on October 22, the KGB had pounced on Oleg Penkovsky. The day after his arrest Penkovsky was free. As a free man Penkovsky would have been very useful to the Americans in this crisis. There might have been less tension in Washington in the days that followed had the Kennedy administration known that Khrushchev was already looking for a way to avoid war.

The Presidium resumed its discussions at 10:00 A.M., Moscow time, on October 23 with the mood still tense but the leaders relieved that the most dire scenario, a U.S. invasion of Cuba, had not yet played out. Overnight the Soviet Foreign Ministry had studied Kennedy's speech very carefully and then drafted three documents for consideration by the leadership. The first was a general declaration by the Soviet government on the situation in Cuba; the second, a set of instructions for the Soviet ambassador to the United Nations, Valerian Zorin; and the third, a resolution to present to the Security Council condemning the U.S. action. Soviet representatives were instructed to rally the third world by denying the U.S. charge that there were nuclear missiles in Cuba.

After the Presidium approved these drafts, its first order of business was to draft something to send directly to President Kennedy. Khrushchev took the floor and suggested they offer Kennedy a chance to reconsider the blockade. The U.S. president should be invited to "show prudence and renounce actions pursued by you, which could lead to catastrophic consequences for peace throughout the world." Khrushchev also decided that he would take a slightly different position in his dealings with Kennedy from that which the Soviet Union took publicly. Rather than deny that there were nuclear missiles in Cuba, he suggested language that would assure Kennedy that the weapons were there only for defensive reasons. "Regardless of the weapon's class," Khrushchev dictated, "it has been delivered. [And] it has been delivered to defend against aggression." In July, before this very group, Khrushchev had described the missiles as offensive weapons. Now he hoped that he could convince Kennedy and the world that their only purpose in Cuba was to defend Castro's revolution.

Despite his relief that Kennedy had not announced an attack on Cuba, Khrushchev believed that the Soviet Union would have to revise the Anadyr operation. He was not inclined to test the U.S. blockade for two reasons. Besides wanting to avoid a confrontation that might escalate, he did not want to give the United States the opportunity to capture any of the strategic technology loaded on some of the ships. The two large-hatch ships bearing the R-14 missiles, the Kasimov and the Krasnodor, were still very far from Cuba. Khrushchev pondered aloud whether all the ships carrying weapons should not be ordered to return immediately. In the end he decided that the ships already in the Atlantic should go no farther than the approaches to Cuba until the situation was clearer. Ships still in the Mediterranean were to return to their Black Sea ports immediately. But there remained the question of the Aleksandrovsk, the ship carrying warheads for the R-14s and some of the shore-based FKR cruise missiles. It was a day away from Cuban shores. The Presidium decided to take a risk on bringing it to shore as quickly as possible.

Aware that these changes in the operation might upset the Cubans, Khrushchev recommended telling Castro that the operation "was halfway successful." He wanted to let the crisis die down, and then, "if necessary, it..."
will be possible to send the [R-14] missiles again." Khrushchev wanted Havana to understand that his immediate priority was to stabilize the situation in the area and establish, through the UN, Cuba's right to have whatever weapons it deemed necessary to defend itself.

Khrushchev thought the submarine escorts were a different matter from the surface ships. He believed the submarines might still be of use in defending Cuba, and he also believed they could travel undetected to the Cuban port of Mariel. The records of the October 23 meeting are fragmentary. From these fragments and Mikoyan's recollections it appears that the Soviet leadership had not been briefed on even the basics of U.S. antisubmarine capabilities. As almost every Soviet submariner knew, even the quietest submarine in 1962—and they were veritable jukeboxes compared with what was to be commissioned by both navies later—emitted an array of sounds and impulses, from the dropped teaspoon on board to the grinding of the propulsion screws to the electric impulses of the batteries that kept everything working. On any given day, specially outfitted U.S. Navy Orion planes crisscrossed the Atlantic and the Caribbean, listening for these sounds, using sensors dropped into the water. Whenever they thought they heard something, they reported it to a ship, which began using sonar, a process called pinging by U.S. sailors and throwing peas by their Soviet counterparts. The sonar was very effective at locating the noisy Foxtrots.

Indeed, after October 16 the Soviet submarines had begun reporting home that they could hear a lot of ship activity. Although the Soviets did not yet know why, the discovery of the missiles by the U-2 on October 14 had led to a massive increase in the U.S. Navy presence in the very waters the Foxtrots had to navigate. By October 23 the sustained presence of U.S. naval vessels had forced at least one of the Foxtrots to stay underwater so long that its batteries were running very low.

It appears that Malinovsky reported none of this to the Presidium. If he had told Khrushchev about it beforehand, the Soviet leader had chosen to ignore the information in the meeting. However, Khrushchev's chief foreign policy critic, Anastas Mikoyan, worried that letting the submarines test the U.S. blockade would be a mistake. Khrushchev did nothing but watch as Mikoyan tried to put Malinovsky on the spot. The defense minister refused to give an inch when Mikoyan insisted that it was risky to let these submarines into the blockage zone. He was convinced that the U.S. Navy could detect them. Moreover, the Kremlin had to assume, Mikoyan explained, that since the United States would be able to detect these four noisy diesel submarines, it would interpret their continued movement into the blockade zone as a hostile act.

Malinovsky refused to accept the premise of Mikoyan's argument. Despite the fact that some of the Foxtrots had likely been detected, the Soviet defense minister still insisted in front of the Soviet leadership that the subs would be able to approach Cuban shores without being seen or heard. In reply, Mikoyan told his colleagues that this was nonsense and would simply create a new danger for the Soviet Union, but this time he had no seconders. Khrushchev, Kozlov, Brezhnev, and the rest of the Presidium either decided that Malinovsky knew what he was talking about or at least chose to remain silent. When Mikoyan proposed that the group order the submarines to hold at the approaches to the island, he was overruled. Then the group broke for lunch.

During the lunch break Mikoyan approached Khrushchev to make a private appeal that the Presidium revisit the submarine issue in the afternoon. "I strongly believed [in my concerns]," he told Khrushchev, "and I consider that we must return to this question of the submarines because I consider that it was a mistake to turn down my proposal." Khrushchev would raise the question after lunch.

Two hours later the Presidium reconvened to hear Mikoyan's plea. Once again he warned his colleagues that these old Soviet submarines would be detected as soon as they violated the U.S. blockade. Once again Malinovsky insisted that the four boats could "reach the shores of Cuba undetected." The Soviet defense minister prevailed a second time.

The group gathered again after dinner. At this point, Mikoyan's warnings on the submarines were taken seriously but only because, twenty-four hours into the crisis, a senior naval officer was finally invited to make his views known on the submarine issue. Ironically, it was Malinovsky who brought the commander in chief of the Soviet Navy, Admiral Sergei Gorshkov, the country's specialist on submarine warfare, to the meeting. Tensions existed between the Ministry of Defense and the Soviet Navy, and yet Malinovsky inadvertently offered Admiral Gorshkov an opportunity to show up his ministry in front of the Presidium. Gorshkov knew that the U.S. Navy could easily detect Foxtrot-class submarines, which were not the latest in Soviet submarine technology.*

At the evening session, the third time the Presidium met on October 23, Gorshkov turned the submarine debate. A map of the waters around Cuba was placed in front of the Presidium. Gorshkov very carefully explained that it was extremely difficult to bring submarines close to Cuban shores. The

*See authors' note to the paperback edition on page 623.
waters got very shallow the nearer you came to Cuba. There were also a great number of tiny islands that you would have to maneuver around. “To approach the main island, the vessel must follow a very narrow channel, which is under the control of the radars from [nearby] U.S. naval bases . . . in other words it would be impossible to negotiate this channel undetected.” Just as Mikoyan hoped and expected, Gorshkov recommended keeping the four Foxtrot submarines at a perimeter, a two- to three-day sail from Cuba.

Mikoyan thought he had won. “With his incompetence revealed,” Mikoyan recalled later, “Malinovsky could not possibly object.” Khrushchev seemed to agree and supported a new instruction to the submarine captains ordering them to stay a distance of two days’ sail away from Cuba.

C A P T A I N  N I K O L A I  S H U M K O V knew nothing about the debate in the Kremlin over his orders. He had a crew of about seventy-five men on his Foxtrot C-18.* At three hundred feet long and just twenty-six feet wide, the boat could travel eighteen knots on the surface and sixteen knots when submerged. Designed for cold-water running, these submarines were neither air-conditioned nor battery-cooled. If the batteries became too hot, they would release hydrogen gas, a real hazard in a confined space.53

Besides the crew, food, and fuel, each Foxtrot was equipped with twenty-two torpedoes, one of which carried a nuclear warhead. Commanders were told to use their weapons only in self-defense. As Shumkov recalled, “we couldn’t use our weapons independently.” But all the submariners knew that in a battle situation, it might be impossible to check with Moscow. “We could only get in touch with our commanders at certain times,” Shumkov recalled. “The Americans were on the surface and could keep in touch with their base all the time. . . . So it could have happened that the Americans were ordered to use arms and we would not have known anything about it . . . that was our disadvantage.”

Late on October 23, C-18, like the other Soviet submarines, surfaced for the day’s news. Chebrasov, the chief radioman on C-18, said, “We found out about the American blockade from the commander.” Shumkov announced to his crew that “in our path stood an American fleet, in particular antinaval boats, but we were going to continue to carry out our mission that we would carry on through to Cuba.”54

Despite the concerns in the Kremlin, none of the submarines altered its course to stay out of harm’s way. Either Khrushchev and Malinovsky had

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*See authors’ note to the paperback edition on page 623.
We could easily lose an American ship by that means.” Faced with McNamara’s concerns, Kennedy decided not to alter the navy’s instructions. But he worried about what Khrushchev’s reaction would be if the Soviets lost a submarine or a ship. He expected the Soviets to respond where they enjoyed a geographical advantage: “[T]hey would say that there’s no movement in or out of Berlin—a blockade.” The prospect was deeply worrying to him, “What is then our situation? What do we do then?” This was not the last time in those difficult days that Kennedy worried that forceful action by the United States in the Cuban crisis might be met by a Soviet reprisal against Berlin.

Just as he was contemplating a possible confrontation in Central Europe, John McCone, the CIA director, returned with reassuring news about the ships that the navy had spotted turning around: “These ships are all west-bound, all inbound for Cuba.” When Kennedy asked for clarification, McCone added, “[T]hey either stopped them or reversed direction.” These ships were in the mid-Atlantic, west of the Azores. Not all Soviet ships turned, but among those that did were all those with seven-foot hatches, which U.S. intelligence associated with missile cargoes.

The news brought some relief and may have been the moment when Dean Rusk turned to McGeorge Bundy and whispered, “We are eyeball to eyeball, and I think the other fellow just blinked.” Kennedy reminded the group that the United States would not touch any ship that had stopped or reversed course. Soviet submarines, however, had not reversed course.

The United States was also receiving good news on the diplomatic front. On October 23 the Organization of American States had unanimously passed a resolution supporting a quarantine of Cuba. At the United Nations the Kremlin’s decision to deny categorically that there were missiles in Cuba put Valerian Zorin into an increasingly untenable position. When the U.S. permanent representative to the United Nations, Adlai Stevenson, asked Zorin on October 25 if Moscow had placed missiles in Cuba, the stage was set for what would be one of the most famous exchanges in the Cold War:

ZORIN: 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: You are in the courtroom of world opinion right now, and you can answer yes or no.

ZORIN: You will have your answer in due course.

STEVenson: I am prepared to wait for my answer until hell freezes over.

Stevenson then displayed overhead photography of the Soviet missile sites. The spectacle was carried live on American television.

The mood was sober in the Kremlin on Thursday, October 25. A day earlier Khrushchev had sent a strong letter to Kennedy that described the U.S. naval blockade as illegal and suggested that the only way for the United States to avoid a military confrontation was to back down. “Naturally,” he had written, “we will not simply be bystanders with regard to piratical acts by American ships on the high seas.” This day, however, Khrushchev viewed the situation around Cuba differently. He had become convinced that he should take the initiative before events spiraled out of control. Zorin’s humiliation at the UN had not yet happened when Khrushchev reconvened the Presidium to propose a way out of this crisis. The Soviet leader believed the time had come for tactical flexibility, and he suggested a straight trade. If Kennedy would offer a pledge not to invade Cuba, Khrushchev would order the removal of the ballistic missiles.

Khrushchev tried to explain the retreat as a Soviet success. “There is no doubt the Americans have turned into cowards,” he said. Referring to an old Russian proverb, he added, “Apparently Kennedy slept with a wooden knife.” His reference was too obscure even for wily old Mikoyan. “Why a wooden knife?” Mikoyan asked. “When a person goes bear hunting for the first time,” Khrushchev explained, “he brings a wooden knife with him, so that cleaning his [soiled] trousers will be easier.” The tension in the room broke with this exchange.

The joke was really on Khrushchev. It was he who was afraid at this point in the crisis and needed the protection of a fake weapon. But there was an element of truth to his hopefulness that Kennedy might take the trade. Although Khrushchev had started out with a much broader agenda than saving Fidel Castro, if Kennedy took the deal, it could be said that at least the missile scheme had prevented a future U.S. attack on Cuba. Khrushchev tried to convince his listeners that removing the R-12s from Cuba would also come at no cost to Soviet security. “We can [still] defeat the USA from USSR territory,” he said without fully believing it. About the consequences for his dream of starting a crisis over Berlin in the fall, he made only one vague, passing reference: “[W]e have succeeded in some things and not in others.” Afterward discussion of the Berlin tie-in immediately became taboo.

Khrushchev found it hard to sustain his bravado. As he continued talking, he came to admit the terror that he and the others had felt since Kennedy’s
October 22 speech. "The initiative is in our hands; there is no need to be afraid. We started out and then we got afraid.

"But this is not cowardice," Khrushchev said defensively about the proposed deal; "it is a prudent move." Cuba was not a good enough reason for the Soviet Union to wage war with the United States, he argued, because "the future does not depend on Cuba, but on our country." Nevertheless, he was not suggesting that Moscow abandon Havana. He recommended that in return for a noninvasion pledge from the United States the Soviet Union offer only to remove the R-12 ballistic missiles—the R-4Bs had not yet arrived—but to leave "the other missiles," presumably the nuclear-tipped Lunas and cruise missiles to protect the Cubans in the future. "This way we will strengthen Cuba and save it for two to three years. Then in a few years it will get even harder for [the United States] to deal with it."

Khrushchev's colleagues voted unanimously that night to approve this diplomatic retreat. None of them, including Mikoyan, forced Khrushchev to take personal responsibility for this calamity. His call for prudence must have rung hollow to those who had watched how since Vienna he had repeatedly advocated brinkmanship—creating a meniscus—to achieve Soviet foreign policy goals. On this most difficult night, however, his colleagues left it to his judgment when to make the offer to Kennedy. They should "look around," he said, and find the right time to suggest the trade.68 The offer would be made in a letter to the U.S. president that Khrushchev would dictate. In the meantime, to lessen the risk of war, he recommended that the last ship on the high seas carrying "special cargo," a euphemism for nuclear materials, be returned to Soviet shores.

In light of Khrushchev's ambitious plans for the fall of 1962, the collapse of Anadyr represented a major personal defeat. The defense of Cuba had not been Khrushchev's sole concern and certainly was not the principal reason why he had opted to send nuclear missiles to the island. Nevertheless, it was a good fallback position that in the eyes of the world and his Cuban allies the trade would be consistent with the ostensible goals of his policy toward the island regime. "The rockets have served a positive role," he assured his colleagues, "and if need be, the rockets can appear there again."

That night, after the meeting, Khrushchev may have also asked that feelers be sent to the Americans in advance of his letter.69 Soviet intelligence had been reporting that Kennedy wanted some kind of diplomatic settlement. But all this was vague, and as yet the Kennedy administration had avoided talking directly to the GRU's Bolshakov or Ambassador Dobrynin. Despite the Kremlin's security precautions, Khrushchev's interest in a diplomatic settle-

ment may have reached the headquarters of the KGB. Vladimir Semichastny, the chairman of the KGB, had not been invited to the October 25 meeting.70 But his patron, Aleksandr Shelepin, the former chief of the KGB, who was now a full-fledged member of the Presidium, had been there. To the end of his days Semichastny denied receiving any special request that night to test the White House's interest in a diplomatic settlement. Nevertheless, the next morning the KGB station chief in Washington did propose to an American journalist the very same deal discussed hours earlier in the Kremlin.

Since his arrival in Washington in early 1962 on his current mission, Aleksandr Feklisov had considered ABC News's John Scali a useful contact. "He came from Boston, and I thought he knew the Kennedys," Feklisov later remembered.71 Feklisov was a legendary case officer in Soviet intelligence, having once handled the famous atomic bomb spy Julius Rosenberg. Scali, a balding spark plug, was among the generation of serious journalists who had made their start in print journalism before he became pioneer of television news. Scali was more accustomed to cultivating sources than being one himself, but after the FBI suggested it was a good thing for the country that he get to know Feklisov, the two had started meeting regularly.72

On October 26 Feklisov called to arrange an urgent meeting with Scali. They met for lunch at the Occidental, tucked beside the Willard Hotel. The restaurant was not the place for a secret rendezvous. It was the favorite hangout of many Washington political stars and even of those less known to newspaper readers. The high-level intelligence professional and future director of central intelligence Richard Helms had a designated table.

The conversation between Scali and Feklisov that day became a source of controversy. Kremlin records suggest that the version later recounted by Scali was the more credible one.73 Feklisov asked Scali what he "thought" of a three-point approach to ending the crisis:

1. The Soviet missile bases would be dismantled under UN supervision.
2. Fidel Castro would promise never to accept offensive weapons of any kind, ever.
3. In return for the above, the United States would pledge not to invade Cuba.

This was almost word for word the scheme that Khrushchev had proposed to his colleagues in Moscow the night before. Scali rushed the plan to his contact in the State Department.74

Whatever the Kremlin's role in this feeler, Khrushchev had already decided
not to wait for any further word from Kennedy before sending his letter. He had a green light from his colleagues to concede whenever the time was right. That moment came the next day. Early on Friday, October 26, Khrushchev received a stream of information indicating the likelihood that the Americans were readying an attack for October 27. None of this was hard evidence. The best was some barroom gossip that a Russian émigré who worked as a bartender picked up at the National Press Club. Late on October 25 the New York Herald Tribune’s Warren Rogers and his editor Robert Donovan were blowing off some steam after a tense day. Rogers had just been selected for the Pentagon’s pool for any invasion of the island and thought he might be called down to Florida the next day. The Reuters correspondent in Washington, P. Heffernan, and an agent code-named Gam told the GRU and the KGB roughly the same thing. Finally, Osvaldo Dorticós, the Cuban president, shared his anxieties with Soviet military intelligence at about the same time. Swayed by these shards of information about the thinking in the White House, Khrushchev decided it was time to seek his diplomatic out.

The U.S. Embassy received Khrushchev’s long personal letter to Kennedy just before 5:00 P.M., Moscow time, on October 26. Khrushchev offered to remove the missiles in return for a U.S. pledge not to invade the island. “We, for our part, will declare that our ships, bound for Cuba, will not carry any kind of armaments. You would declare that the United States will not invade Cuba with its forces and will not support any sort of forces which might intend to carry out an invasion of Cuba. Then the necessity for the presence of our military specialists in Cuba would disappear.” To make sure Kennedy understood that he meant removing the missiles, Khrushchev wrote, “[I]f there is no threat, then armaments are a burden for every people. Then, too, the question of the destruction, not only of the armaments which you call offensive, but of all other armaments as well, would look different.”

A very noisy tin can armed with a nuclear torpedo posed a threat to Khrushchev’s efforts to get out of the Cuban mess without a catastrophe. By October 26 the batteries on Nikolai Shumkov’s submarine were running low. A submarine could stay underwater only three or four days before the batteries had to be recharged. Shumkov had not been able to recharge for days, and two of his motors did not have enough power to work. It would take a whole day on the surface, running the diesel engines on a mixture of oil and air, to recharge the batteries. He knew he was not going to get anywhere near twenty-four hours of peace on the surface to recharge, but he had to try to get some recharging done. He prepared to take his chances whenever he had the cover of night. An attempt late on October 25 had failed when he had seen a U.S. ship, so he tried again at about 10:00 P.M. East Coast time (2:25 A.M., Zulu time) on October 26. “We went up and managed to recharge for about two or three hours. [Then] I was told that from four directions U.S. anti-submarine warfare ships were approaching me.” Neither the submarine nor its pursuers were using floodlights, a violation of the rules of international navigation, but this was a moment of possible combat, not commerce.

The Americans had detected the surfaced submarine with night vision goggles and radar. C-18 was a sitting duck. “When I heard that they had detected us,” Shumkov recalled, “I ordered the recharging to stop and for the submarine to submerge.” Sluggish because of its weakened power plant, C-18 began its dive only just in time to miss an onrushing U.S. destroyer that sliced the water above its conning tower. “That night nearly became catastrophic for us.” To alert the Soviet sub that it had been caught in this game of high-stakes tag, the U.S. ship dropped three grenades on C-18. “When they blew up those grenades,” Shumkov said, “I thought they were bombing us.”

Refusing to surface, Shumkov ordered the dive to continue, but soon there was another emergency. He received word that a leak had developed in one of the submarine’s compartments. The textbook answer to this kind of problem was to surface. If too much water leaked in, the submarine might sink uncontrollably. Shumkov knew surfacing was no option with U.S. ships still prowling above. Fortunately it turned out to be a microfracture that his crew was able to repair. Shumkov nearly died twice in one day. It is not known if the Kremlin ever learned of this encounter before the crisis was over.

When they met in Vienna, John Kennedy had teased Khrushchev for having enough time for long visits with American columnists like Walter Lippmann. Although he never learned English—his wife and his children did learn the language—Khrushchev always made time to read in translation what the prominent U.S. columnists were saying about him. To the extent he could approve of any bourgeois views, he appreciated Lippmann’s realism. The columnist, who had known the famous American Bolshevik John Reed at Harvard, seemed to understand what was and was not possible in international relations. Often his knowledge seemed to indicate some inside information.

At some point late Friday, October 26, or early Saturday, October 27, Khrushchev was given Lippmann’s October 25 column. The writer recom-
mended a different variation on the diplomatic deal to end the crisis from that which Khrushchev had just sent to Kennedy. Equating the Soviet missile base in Cuba with the U.S. Jupiter missile base in Turkey, Lippmann suggested that the superpowers dismantle both to end the missile crisis.

Lippmann’s idea hit Khrushchev just as he was beginning to doubt his own fears about what Kennedy would do. It had been more than four days since Kennedy had given his quarantine speech, and nothing had happened. The U.S. president probably knew that some of the Soviet ships had turned around, but Khrushchev in protest of the blockade continued to send to Cuba innocuous freighters and tankers, which were about to be boarded. Why had the White House not used force by now? Then there were the shards of intelligence information about an invasion that he had received. According to Rogers and the others, the attack should be occurring. Yet it hadn’t.

Could it be that Kennedy was making him an offer through Lippmann? That was a new idea for Khrushchev. But even if Lippmann’s proposal was solely the product of his creative mind, the fact that the administration seemed paralyzed meant that Khrushchev could probably get a better deal to end the whole affair. Flush with the most confidence he had felt since the dreadful night of October 22, Khrushchev decided to up the ante.

In the Presidium he recommended sending yet another letter to Kennedy. This one demanded that Kennedy promise the withdrawal of the Jupiter missiles in addition to the conditions outlined in the letter of October 26. Thus the famous second letter of the missile crisis was born. “If we did this,” Khrushchev said enthusiastically, “we could win.”

Excited about the prospects suggested by this new offer, Khrushchev wanted it sent immediately. Kennedy had yet to respond to his October 26 proposal; perhaps this could forestall his accepting the less advantageous offer. Instead of using a confidential channel, as he had done with his previous letters, Khrushchev instructed that this one be read by Radio Moscow. That was how Fidel Castro learned that Moscow was trying to negotiate away its Cuban nuclear base.

President Kennedy’s Excomm met continuously throughout the crisis, and the appearance of the two letters from Khrushchev confused him and his advisers. First, Khrushchev seemed to be prepared to remove the missiles with merely a noninvasion pledge in turn. Then on the morning of Saturday, October 27, the Excomm received Khrushchev’s public letter calling for the removal of the Jupiters from Turkey. Opinions differed on why the change had occurred. There was some thought that perhaps the hard-liners around Khrushchev had forced him to demand a higher price for removing the missiles from Cuba. No one near Kennedy could imagine that it was Khrushchev himself who was desperately trying to save face by achieving at least a small shift in the nuclear balance of power.

The news later on October 27 that a U-2 piloted by Major Rudolf Anderson had been shot down on a photographic mission over Cuba increased the tension. For many in Washington this seemed to be a deliberate ploy by Moscow to keep the heat on Kennedy as he wrestled with the two letters. Ultimately the president chose to send a formal response only to the first letter. He and his advisers differed on how to finesse Khrushchev’s Jupiter demand in the second letter. Accepting it would require the participation of the Turks, who were already signaling that they did not want the Jupiters to be part of any trade, and many in the Excomm were solidly against giving Khrushchev this concession.

Kennedy, however, was sure that the Jupiters were not worth the price of a nuclear war. He sent his brother to make a private offer to the Soviets. Bolkhakov had by this time been superseded by Dobrynin, who now seemed to be a better channel to the Kremlin. Late Saturday evening Robert Kennedy met with the Soviet ambassador. Kennedy announced that the president found Khrushchev’s offer to withdraw the missiles in return for a U.S. commitment not to invade “a suitable basis for negotiating the entire Cuban affair.” Asked about Khrushchev’s additional demand that the Jupiter missiles be removed, Kennedy replied, “If that is the only obstacle to achieving the regulation I mentioned earlier, then the president doesn’t see any insurmountable difficulties in resolving this issue.” He promised the missiles would be removed in “four to five months” and asked that the Soviet understand that “the greatest difficulty for the president is the public discussion of the issue of Turkey.” Moscow got the message. The Jupiter concession would have to be kept secret.

Khrushchev gathered his advisers and the entire Presidium at his dacha outside Moscow around noon on October 28. It was early in the morning in Washington, where the White House had known about his Jupiter demand for less than twelve hours. Nevertheless, Khrushchev sensed that he could wait no longer to end the crisis, even if that meant missing the opportunity to get the Americans to dismantle their missile base in neighboring Turkey. The recent intelligence from Cuba was, if anything, even more threat-
II

with Dobrynin reached the meeting hall, Khrushchev was delighted and likely relieved, for he knew that the removal of the Jupiter missiles symbolized a grudging American acceptance of a parallel between what he had attempted to do in Cuba and what the Eisenhower administration and its successor had sought to achieve in the lands around the Soviet Union. Perhaps sweeter than the invasion rumors he had received on October 26. A Soviet commander had used a SAM to shoot down an American spy plane without specific authorization. It also appeared that Castro was becoming irrational. Khrushchev knew that the Cuban leader had spent the night of October 26–27 dictating a letter to Ambassador Alekseyev. In it he advocated a nuclear war, if necessary, to defend the honor of Cuba and the socialist cause. 

If they actually carry out the brutal act of invading Cuba," he wrote, "that would be the moment to eliminate such danger forever through an act of legitimate defense, however harsh and terrible the solution would be."

Until the opening of the Kremlin's archives, it had been assumed that Kennedy's decision to give in to Khrushchev's last-minute request for the removal of the missiles in Turkey had clinched the diplomatic settlement. Vladimir Malin's Presidium notes, however, leave no doubt that Khrushchev had decided to agree to the first proposed deal well before he received word that John Kennedy, through his brother Robert, had offered to dismantle the Jupiter missiles in Turkey. Khrushchev had actually dictated his concession speech, which was to take the form of a letter to the U.S. president, before he knew of Kennedy's own concession. When news of Robert Kennedy's talk with Dobrynin reached the meeting hall, Khrushchev was delighted and likely relieved, for he knew that the removal of the Jupiter missiles symbolized a grudging American acceptance of a parallel between what he had attempted to do in Cuba and what the Eisenhower administration and its successor had sought to achieve in the lands around the Soviet Union. Perhaps sweeter because it had been so unexpected and unnecessary, the concession was for Khrushchev a form of justification.

Khrushchev did not change his dictated letter. Robert Kennedy had asked that the concession be a secret held between the world's two most powerful leaders, and Khrushchev agreed. His greatest concern was to get the general message that the crisis was over to the U.S. government as quickly as possible, and a radio broadcast would be the best means to do this.

The Cubans had played no role in Khrushchev's negotiations with Kennedy. In the final days of the crisis Khrushchev had not bothered to confer with Castro, even as he vacillated between feeling he had gained the upper hand and depths of anxiety over the imminent approach of war. Castro later described this lack of consultation and Khrushchev's sudden decision to remove the ballistic missiles as one of the great "betrayals" of the Cuban Revolution. What most irked Castro was that Khrushchev had been willing to deal away a measure of Cuban sovereignty to save his own skin. The Soviets knew that Castro would not allow inspectors into his country, yet Khrushchev had unilaterally offered Kennedy in his letters of October 26 and October 27 some form of inspection of the missile bases to assure the Americans the weapons were gone. At the October 28 meeting where he assembled the final package to resolve the crisis, Khrushchev discussed the possibility of involving the Red Cross in the inspections without even giving a thought to the possibility that the idea of inspection would be unacceptable to his Cuban ally. This was the kind of brazen disregard of the interests of an ally that Khrushchev had criticized Stalin for, and now he had committed the same sin himself.

Curiously, Khrushchev did find time during the crisis to assuage the concerns of one important ally. Walter Ulbricht apparently was not party to the preparations that had been made for Khrushchev's November trip to the United Nations and in all likelihood had not been told about Anadyr. Relations with East Germany had gotten frosty as the fall progressed. Once again the East Germans had proposed what the Soviets considered an irresponsible five-year economic plan. In the midst of everything else on October 23, the Kremlin had considered a report on the East German economic situation. The story was not unfamiliar. Yet again Ulbricht wanted to buy more abroad and cause the Soviets to sell gold and spend hard currency to make this possible. Khrushchev blamed his ambassador in East Germany, Pervukhin, for the East German unwillingness to see economic reason. Probably worried about what concessions Kennedy might be able to wring out of Khrushchev on Berlin to end the Cuba crisis, Ulbricht had requested a visit with Khrushchev for October 27.

Agreeing to the request, Khrushchev and quite a few of his Kremlin colleagues met with a large, high-ranking East German delegation, led by Ulbricht. It is unknown what the men said to each other, but Ulbricht left satisfied. Unlike Castro, Ulbricht was able to settle his concerns with Khrushchev face-to-face. With the failure of Khrushchev's Cuban bid for strategic gains, economic reforms were even more important as a guarantee of East Germany's future.

KHRUSHCHEV'S AGREEMENT to settle the Cuban crisis was greeted with relief in Washington on October 28. The news had reached the White House by midmorning, East Coast time. John Kennedy assumed that it was the Turkish offer that had sealed the agreement. Not wishing to let on that he had made this last-minute concession, the president and the attorney general confined this knowledge to a small group of advisers.

Unaware that the missile gambit had been a crucial element of a larger
Kremlin offensive, Kennedy had no idea of the extent of his success in the crisis. Khrushchev's effort to alter the balance of power in one stroke had failed. He had taken this risk to make future gains in Central Europe and Southeast Asia more than he had done this to protect Fidel Castro. Since the Suez crisis of 1956, Khrushchev had believed that only the projection of nuclear power could bring the political settlement he sought throughout the world. He had harbored no real desire to fight to remove Western troops from West Berlin, to bring Jordan, Iraq, and Syria to the Soviet side or to end U.S. support for the Phoumi Nosavan group in Laos. In each case he had hoped to scare the United States into accepting the Soviet conception of an equitable outcome. After some confusion in January 1962 over when to make his move, by the late spring Khrushchev had decided that this would be the year of what he called the final fight.90

The negotiated settlement of October 28 was not the outcome he had intended. Once the missiles left Cuba, what had he gained from this operation? Was he any closer to strategic parity with the United States? Did he get a disarmament agreement or Kennedy's acquiescence to a free city of West Berlin? No. What he got was a U.S. promise not to invade Cuba, an invasion Khrushchev had not really expected until at least 1964, and a secret U.S. promise to remove some missiles from Turkey.

The Soviet leader could rejoice in the fact that John Kennedy for a few days had seemed worried. But the U.S. president had not panicked. It was Khrushchev who had been forced to admit to colleagues that his foreign policy initiative had become too risky. Events had confirmed the wisdom of Mikoyan's concerns in May and his continued caution in October. Khrushchev now better understood that there were limits to how much the Kremlin could control events in a crisis. A disastrous encounter between the Foxtrot submarines and the U.S. Navy had been only narrowly averted. On the tensest day of the crisis, when Moscow was hoping for a diplomatic settlement, a local Soviet commander had shot down an American U-2 over Cuba without authorization.

Although Kennedy worried on October 28 about the political costs of his Jupiter concession if the secret ever got out, it would be Khrushchev who had greater reason to be concerned about the lingering effects of this crisis on his ability to lead. The Cuban missile crisis proved to be a turning point in Khrushchev's handling of Soviet foreign policy and, as a result, the Cold War.

In the wake of the Cuban missile crisis Nikita Khrushchev would have to rethink his entire approach to contesting U.S. power in the Cold War. November 1962 was supposed to bring an end to the foreign policy reversals that had plagued him since 1958. Instead he faced the challenge of negotiating a dignified retreat from his missile base in Cuba.

The exchange of letters between Kennedy and Khrushchev at the end of October had lowered the temperature considerably, ending the tensest period of the missile crisis, but the agreement between the leaders was incomplete. All that Khrushchev had in return for his promise to withdraw the strategic missiles was what Kennedy had written in his letter of October 27, 1962: "We, on our part, would agree—upon the establishment of adequate arrangements through the United Nations to ensure the carrying out and continuation of these commitments—a) to remove promptly the quarantine measures now in effect and b) to give assurances against an invasion of Cuba." The president's language was more conditional than Khrushchev would have liked, but he had accepted it. Besides this written promise, Khrushchev had extracted an oral agreement conveyed by Robert Kennedy on October 27 that within four to five months the United States would withdraw the fifteen Jupiter intermediate-range missiles that it had stationed in Turkey earlier in 1962. With the crisis subsiding, the Kremlin wanted to nail down these U.S. commitments.

Khrushchev had no choice but to involve Castro in this diplomacy. Up to now the Soviet leader had excluded the Cubans from the crisis negotiations. But in his letter of October 27 Khrushchev had promised Kennedy "to reach agreement to enable United Nations representatives to verify the dismantling of these means."2 Cuban approval of some kind of on-site inspection regime would be required to satisfy this promise. While Khrushchev had his own phobias about letting foreign inspectors into the Soviet Union, he believed