The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Joint Chiefs: Military Operations to Meet Political Ends

Dan Martins
The role the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) played in the Cuban missile crisis offers a significant historical lesson on the primacy of defining political objectives over pursuing an expedient military solution. The recommendations the JCS provided to the president were consistent with decades of military experience, as well as doctrine designed to keep the Soviets in check through deterrence, but President John F. Kennedy did not take those recommendations, and the crisis was resolved by other means.

Following the Cuban missile crisis, General Thomas S. Power, the commander of Strategic Air Command (SAC), cited SAC’s overwhelming nuclear deterrent as the reason President Kennedy was able to achieve a diplomatic solution to the crisis. During the crisis, SAC stood an airborne nuclear alert, conventional forces massed in the southeastern United States to prepare for an invasion, and the U.S. Navy carried out a blockade. On October 19, 1962, the chiefs disagreed with the president’s assessment of Soviet premier Nikita S. Khrushchev’s next move and recommended that the president respond with an air strike.

That would have been an appropriate military response, one in line with White House policy and Department of Defense plans. The JCS recommendation of an air strike against Cuba as the solution—to accomplish the removal of the Soviet medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs)—was the logical result of decades of planning and Air

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Force operations. Furthermore, the military’s Operational Plans (OPLANs) 312, 314, and 316 and the initial actions the JCS took were aligned with the Kennedy administration’s Cuba policies following the Bay of Pigs invasion of April 1961. From October 15 to 24, 1962, the JCS pressed military planning and deployments that placed U.S. nuclear forces at their highest state of readiness during the Cold War.

President Kennedy ultimately pursued a course that was at variance with the initial military recommendations from the JCS. Yes, nuclear and conventional deterrence were keys to resolving the Cuban missile crisis, but it was avoiding a confrontation that would have required Khrushchev and Kennedy to make a full conventional or nuclear response that provided the balance that allowed the crisis to be resolved.

Having dutifully advised the president over the course of the Cuban missile crisis, including disagreeing as appropriate, the JCS—particularly the Air Force and Navy chiefs—then faithfully executed the president’s direction. This offers a narrative of the crisis that is far more nuanced than a simplistic hawks-versus-doves interpretation.

This article relies on military command histories, declassified notes and chronologies from JCS meetings during the crisis, and declassified oral histories. Furthermore, this analysis relies heavily on the Miller Center transcripts of the presidential recordings. While digesting the voluminous declassified documents presents a challenge, this article focuses on primary sources that reveal how the JCS maintained their primary recommendation for military action against Cuba. Lastly, my research builds on James G. Hershberg’s “Before ‘The Missiles of October’: Did Kennedy Plan a Military Strike against Cuba?,” which deftly examines the covert and contingency plans for a U.S. removal of Castro and the invasion of Cuba.\(^2\) The Cuban missile crisis must be viewed as a Soviet response to the Bay of Pigs invasion and the Kennedy administration’s continued efforts to remove Castro. Hershberg’s article is key to understanding the normalization of military operations and planning among military commanders with respect to Cuba. Leading up to the Cuban missile crisis, the Joint Chiefs developed plans and conducted exercises aimed at removing Castro from Cuba and overthrowing the Communist government. This supports my conclusion that the JCS decision to support air strikes was a normal response to the discovery of Soviet missiles in Cuba and was in keeping with years of military planning.

The JCS recommendation to conduct air strikes against Cuba was aligned with previous Kennedy administration Cuba policies, but ultimately did not take sufficiently into account the political costs of taking such unilateral action. On October 19, 1962, after four days of planning, the JCS argued forcefully to President Kennedy in favor of air strikes against Soviet targets in Cuba. But while the JCS
worked to implement a military solution to the crisis, the president maximized the variables of space and time to achieve a diplomatic solution. After the JCS had made their case for air strikes and an invasion to accomplish the removal of the Soviet missiles, the successful implementation and execution of the blockade demonstrate that solving any complex crisis must be guided by the sought-after political outcome, not by which action seems expedient or decisive.

**MISSILES IN CUBA AND MEETINGS IN WASHINGTON**

Beginning in March 1962, covert U-2 surveillance flights tracked the Soviet buildup in Cuba. These Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) flights eventually observed surface-to-air missile (SAM) sites, missile-armed patrol boats, and Soviet-built MiG-21 fighter jets.

When the CIA began flying over Cuba, SAC used a lower-echelon command—the 544th Reconnaissance Technical Group’s Research Center, under Lieutenant Colonel Eugene F. Tighe Jr.—to study the Cuban intelligence. The 544th was able to shorten the time necessary to discover possible SAM sites, and eventually MRBMs, because it concentrated its initial analysis efforts on locations described in CIA reports, relying on information passed on from Cuban operatives. As director of SAC intelligence, Brigadier General Robert N. Smith provided the SAC commander in chief (CINCSAC), General Power, the latest assessments on Cuba. The 544th’s Cuba assessments were one of the many ways SAC monitored worldwide Soviet threats to the U.S. nuclear force.

By late June 1962, “[a]ll-source intelligence”—corroborated by “refugee and agent reports, communications intelligence, and the like—had begun to highlight certain areas as centers of unusual activity.” Photo interpreters at the 544th observed ground sites prepared in Cuba that matched SA-2 missile sites in the Soviet Union. When Tighe had served in West Germany in 1958, he had watched the Soviets deploy similar rings of SA-2 sites at Glau, East Germany. The effect had been to elevate the risk of reconnaissance flights, and thus to deter U.S. observation of Soviet missile deployments in East Germany.

General Power, Brigadier General Smith, and Lieutenant Colonel Tighe briefed their assessment of possible missile deployments in Cuba at the Pentagon, but the reception in Washington was lukewarm. The National Photographic Interpretation Center (NPIC), the CIA, and the Air Staff discounted SAC’s assessment. Not until late August did further photo intelligence reveal roads with “the characteristic ‘star of David’ pattern associated with the SA-2.” Tighe’s assessment jibed with a memo from CIA director John A. McCone to President Kennedy that interpreted the SAM deployments as predecessors to offensive missile deployments. A preponderance of evidence pointed to the presence of
offensive weapons in Cuba, which President Kennedy publicly stated would be intolerable for U.S. national security.⁹

On the afternoon of October 14, 1962, SAC and the 544th used the tracker-camera film from a U-2 overflight of Cuba to confirm the presence of Soviet MRBMs. When the JCS convened for a three-hour meeting at 2:00 PM (EST) on Monday, October 15, 1962, the meeting content suggests that SAC relayed its assessment of the U-2 flight photography. This put events in motion at the Pentagon a day before NPIC director Arthur C. Lundahl briefed the president on October 16, relying on analysis of the higher-resolution main-camera film. On Monday evening, the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) informed the Pentagon that the October 14 U-2 flight revealed “cylindrical objects that equated to 700 or 1100 nautical mile ballistic missiles in the Pinar del Rio area west of Havana.”¹⁰ Yet despite the DIA information, the JCS did not meet until the next day, at 10:00 AM, Tuesday, October 16.¹¹

While mention of SAC’s assessment of the tracker film is absent from the JCS meeting notes of October 15, the Pentagon thereafter planned and operated as if the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba had been confirmed. Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara summarized as follows: “[The] President wants no military action within the next three months, but he can’t be sure, as he does not control events. For instance, aerial photos made available this morning show 68 boxes on ships that are not believed to be Il-28s and cannot be identified.”¹² The meeting discussed the long lead times for the troop movements necessary to prepare an invasion force, and McNamara cited the Suez crisis, stating, “We can’t do what the British and French did over Suez—say we will take action, then do nothing while a long buildup is completed. We can’t do nothing during the 18-day preparatory period for OPLAN 314 while the enemy prepares and world pressure mounts.”¹³

The meeting notes are sparse for a three-hour meeting, but the JCS decided that Commander in Chief, Continental Air Defense Command should provide a report on the air defense of the southeastern United States, along with estimates of casualties and damage from an air strike from Cuba.

Additionally, the JCS requested that Commander in Chief, Atlantic Command (CINCLANT) revise OPLANs 314 and 316.¹⁴ On October 15, 1962, the JCS directed revisions to invasion plans for Cuba before NPIC had interpreted the preliminary results of the October 14 U-2 flight.¹⁵ Thus, even before the presence of MRBMs was confirmed, the Pentagon already had begun to address the delays inherent in the existing military plans and to prepare revised and additional military options to respond to Soviet missiles in Cuba.¹⁶

The chiefs were decidedly hawkish on the next actions the United States should take. At 7:30 AM on October 16, DIA director Lieutenant General Joseph F. Carroll briefed Secretary McNamara on the ballistic missiles found near San
At the 10:00 AM meeting, the DIA briefed the Joint Chiefs that three MRBM sites could be operational within twenty-four hours. The Chief of Staff of the Army (CSA), General Earle G. Wheeler, favored a surprise air strike, followed by invasion, and the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), Admiral George W. Anderson, concurred. General William F. Mc Kee, the Vice Chief of Staff of the Air Force, dissented only slightly, believing that an invasion was not necessary on top of air strikes and a naval blockade, and the Chairman of the JCS (CJCS), General Maxwell Taylor, agreed. The Commandant of the Marine Corps (CMC), General David M. Shoup, recommended that the United States give the Soviets an ultimatum to remove the missiles, or the United States would eliminate them. The meeting concluded with the JCS agreeing that the first step should be to recommend additional intelligence flights, then “surprise attacks on missiles, airfields, patrol torpedo [i.e., PT] boats, SAMs, and tanks; concurrently reinforce Guantanamo, [and] prepare to initiate an invasion.” General Taylor took these recommendations to the first meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm).

At 4:30 PM on October 16, General Taylor summarized the first ExComm meeting to the Joint Chiefs and select subordinates, including General Power (CINCSAC); General Walter Sweeney, Commander, Tactical Air Command; and Admiral Robert L. Dennison, CINCLANT. Taylor highlighted the perspective of Secretary of State Dean Rusk, who viewed the Soviet move to place missiles in Cuba as a measure to further Khrushchev’s objectives in Berlin. McNamara laid out three courses of action: he classified political moves as useless; he weighed the possibility of open surveillance and a blockade; and he supposed that an all-out military action could trigger a Soviet response.

Out of this meeting, the Joint Chiefs cautiously agreed that low-level reconnaissance flights did not recommend themselves as a course of action, since the effort could appear to be an attack. Intent on eliminating any Soviet threat on Cuba, the JCS decided it was not advisable to attack only the MRBM sites, leaving Soviet aircraft, SAMs, patrol boats, and tanks untouched. Thus, while the JCS were careful not to take actions, such as low-level flights, that could be mistaken as a prelude to invasion, they agreed that any action taken should be decisive: a large strike, against all Soviet forces.

At the October 16 evening ExComm meeting, Taylor echoed his morning position and took an approach in favor of gaining more intelligence, to build time for a decision. “Our recommendation would be to get complete intelligence, get all the photography we need, the next two or three days, no, no hurry in our book. Then look at this target system. If it really threatens the United States, then take it right out [with a] hard crack.” Taylor reiterated the stance the Joint Chiefs had taken that morning, during the 10:00 AM meeting at the Pentagon.
This desire by General Taylor and the Joint Chiefs for more intelligence gave the Pentagon additional time to refine military plans, thus delaying any immediate decision that would reveal U.S. knowledge of the missile sites. On the basis of McNamara’s and Taylor’s guidance, the JCS prepared to conduct the defense of the United States and contingency air strikes against Cuba. The lead time for a possible air strike allowed President Kennedy additional time to contemplate the consequences of air strikes on Cuba and the possible Soviet response.

On the morning of Wednesday, October 17, President Kennedy met with West German foreign minister Gerhard F. Schröder. They discussed recent developments in Berlin with respect to visa initiatives and Soviet intentions to restrict movement into Allied zones by West Germans. This conversation between Kennedy and Schröder, occurring as it did early on during the Cuban missile crisis, shows that for Kennedy the Soviet measures in Berlin were important political considerations, to be factored into the analysis of Khrushchev’s placement of missiles in Cuba.

The early planning meetings of McNamara and the JCS focused on surveillance and preparations for either an invasion of or an air strike against Cuba. Absent from the JCS meeting notes are any extensive discussions of Soviet motives or expected follow-on actions by Khrushchev, other than General Taylor’s comment that amassing a force for a large-scale invasion of Cuba would tie up 250,000 U.S. soldiers—“playing Khrushchev’s game.”26 In contrast, Kennedy’s meeting with Schröder on October 17 illustrated that the president viewed the placement of missiles in Cuba as a political act that held wider implications for the Western presence in Berlin. At the October 19 ExComm meeting, the Joint Chiefs disagreed with the president that military action against missiles in Cuba would lead to a Soviet response in Berlin.27 Yet Kennedy continued consistently to view the placement of missiles in Cuba as part of the Soviets’ wider Cold War engagement with the United States.28

The Joint Chiefs reconvened at the Pentagon at 10:00 AM on October 17, 1962. Overnight the staff had prepared sortie estimates based on McNamara’s five courses of action for air strikes, and had forwarded these estimates to the White House. Yet—in evidence of planning myopia—the estimates did not account for support missions related to the air strikes, including “escort, suppression of air defenses, and post-strike reconnaissance.” General Taylor chastised the staff, proclaiming, “What! These figures were reported to the White House. You are defeating yourselves with your own cleverness, gentlemen.”29 Nonetheless, the Joint Staff had sidestepped the chairman. Whether the staff did this intentionally or through ineptitude, the result was the same: from there the sortie estimates subsequently climbed, increasing the projected scale of an air strike against Cuba. Furthermore, the Joint Chiefs remained adamant that it would be pure folly to
strike only the MRBM sites. The staff subsequently (on October 17) produced a memorandum to McNamara “advocating air attack against all missile sites, all combat aircraft, and nuclear storage, combat ships, tanks, and other appropriate military targets in Cuba, in conjunction with a complete blockade... and advising that the elimination of the Castro regime would require an invasion, preferably under OPLAN 314.”

On October 17, an internal study that examined Soviet intentions contributed to the military leadership's entrenchment in its position that air strikes were necessary. The Joint Strategic Survey Council (JSSC), a planning body under the Joint Staff, concluded that “the USSR would not resort to general war in direct response to U.S. military action against Cuba, that the most likely Soviet reactions would be at sea, against Iran or an ICBM [intercontinental ballistic missile] ‘accident’ on the Pacific Test Site, and that sharp and strong encroaching actions at Berlin, short of direct seizure, could reasonably be expected.” General Taylor debriefed the chiefs on the Wednesday morning meeting at the White House with personnel from the State and Defense Departments—Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Under Secretary of State George W. Ball, Ambassador at Large for Soviet Affairs Llewellyn E. Thompson, and Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Paul H. Nitze—along with Attorney General Robert Kennedy. General Taylor relayed State's preference for political measures—which would minimize damage to alliances—including perhaps a summit meeting with Khrushchev. At the State Department meeting the feeling had been that a blockade necessitated a wider war, and was considered as an additional step only by those who did not feel air strikes alone were enough to eliminate the threat of Soviet missiles in Cuba.

By the 17th, internal memos and external meetings had reinforced the Joint Chiefs' views that air strikes were the primary action necessary in Cuba, and that Russian reactions to such strikes would be confined to the periphery and incidental to main U.S. interests.

From October 16 to 19, the JCS consistently advocated for some form of air strikes and prepared for an invasion of Cuba. On the 18th, U-2 photos revealed MRBM sites at Guanajay, San Julian, San Cristóbal, and Santa Cruz. At the 9:00 AM JCS meeting that day, General Taylor aligned with the chiefs in support of air strikes and an invasion. He outlined to the JCS three plans that the ExComm was considering: “(1) maximum political effort; (2) a combination, with military effort being built around blockade, then reconnaissance; (3) no political discussion, air strike followed by invasion.” The CJCS reported that the Secretary of State had proposed a period of discussions with the United Nations, the Organization of American States, and Khrushchev, thereafter proceeding to a blockade “and state of war.” After three days of planning, General LeMay expressed frustration at the hesitation to commit to a military solution, saying, “Are we really going
to do anything except talk?” On the basis of the October 17 meetings, General Taylor outlined the likely approach, suggesting that there would be a political overture and warning, followed by a blockade, air strike, and invasion, starting sometime the next week. The earliest date an air strike could be ready was October 21, with the optimum date being October 23, followed by an early invasion on October 28, but optimally on October 30, 1962.35

At the October 18 meeting, Taylor directed that planning efforts should continue to examine a “total blockade, selective blockade, and the necessity for a declaration of war.”36 This direction did not precipitate a lightbulb moment of clarity for the Joint Chiefs, with General LeMay responding negatively to the blockade proposal: “It would be pure disaster to try that.”37 Taylor told the JCS that the options on the table were either an air strike against all targets, with an invasion and blockade possibly to follow, or the aforementioned political action, with a blockade to follow. The JCS were due to meet with the president on Friday morning, so they codified their recommendations as follows: “(1) Notify [British prime minister] Macmillan and possibly [West German chancellor] Adenauer, two hours in advance. (2) Carry out a surprise attack on comprehensive targets. (3) Reconnaissance surveillance. (4) Complete blockade. (5) Invade Cuba? CSA, CSAF [USAF Chief of Staff], and CNO say yes; CJCS says only be prepared to do so. (6) Realize there will be a strain upon and NATO problems about Berlin.”38

McNamara dissented from the Joint Chiefs’ belief that the Soviet deployments affected the strategic balance of power, but the chiefs found the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba to be militarily unacceptable.39

“ALMOST AS BAD AS THE APPEASEMENT AT MUNICH”

On October 19, following a 9:00 AM planning session at the Pentagon, the JCS drove to the White House for a meeting with the president in the Cabinet Room. The CJCS laid out for the president the chiefs’ united position: that the United States should attack the missile sites, continue surveillance to watch for other sites, then blockade Cuba to prevent additional Soviet weapons from entering. Taylor admitted that the JCS had not considered fully the political implications of this course of action or the “political disabilities” inherent in the JCS recommendation.40

For the president, the entire situation was tied directly to Khrushchev’s motives in Berlin. “When we balance off that our problem is not merely Cuba but it is also Berlin and when we recognize the importance of Berlin to Europe, and recognize the importance of our allies to us, that’s what made this thing be a dilemma for three days. Otherwise our answer would be quite easy.” General Taylor agreed with the president, offering that the JCS thought that if the United States did not respond in Cuba it would hurt U.S. credibility in Berlin.41
General LeMay agreed that decisive action in Cuba was necessary to ensure U.S. credibility in Berlin, but echoed the JSSC assessment on expected Soviet actions in Berlin if the United States should strike or invade Cuba. LeMay disagreed with the president that the Soviets would take Berlin if the United States invaded or bombed Cuba. The Air Force general went further: “This blockade and political action, I see leading into war. . . . This is almost as bad as the appeasement at Munich. [pause] Because if this blockade comes along, their MIGs are going to fly. Their IL-28s are going to fly against us. And we’re just going to gradually drift into war.” LeMay and the JCS felt that maintaining a blockade—involving large military forces on high states of readiness—ran the risk of accident and misinterpretation, and closed off the military advantage of surprise. LeMay concluded his long statement as follows: “I just don’t see any other solution except direct military intervention right now.”

CNO Anderson and CSA Wheeler both agreed with LeMay’s statement. Anderson acknowledged President Kennedy’s opening statement to the meeting regarding the president’s concern over Soviet intentions in Berlin. The CNO asserted that the United States must demonstrate resolve in Berlin in conjunction with the attack, blockade, and invasion of Cuba: “We recognize the great difficulty of a military solution in Berlin. I think on balance, the taking [of] positive, prompt, affirmative action in Berlin demonstrating the confidence, the ability, the resolution of the United States on balance, I would judge it, would be to deter the Russians from more aggressive acts in Berlin.” Anderson and Wheeler reemphasized the JSSC assessments, with Wheeler adding that “from a military point of view, the lowest-risk course of action if we’re thinking of protecting the people of the United States against a possible strike on us is to go ahead with a surprise air strike, the blockade, and invasion because these series of actions progressively will give us increasing assurance that we really have got the offensive capability of the Cuban-Soviet cornered.” Wheeler’s statement of his case to the president was effective, appealing as it did to the fact that Khrushchev had not declared Cuba a part of the Warsaw Pact, nor had he made an announcement that the Soviet Union was establishing a base in Cuba. On this evidence, Wheeler found an attack prior to such an announcement to be not only a low-risk maneuver but politically advantageous.

CMC Shoup reflected that the American people already lived under the threat of a Soviet nuclear strike from Russia, and that adding the capability to strike from Cuba was a Soviet move to tie the United States up in its own back yard. “And each time you then have to take some action in Berlin, South Vietnam, Korea, you would be degrading. You’d have to degrade your capability against this ever-increasing force in Cuba.”
To each of the chiefs, Kennedy agreed or disagreed openly, leading to the infamous LeMay-versus-Kennedy exchange in which LeMay told the president, “You're in a pretty bad fix,” and the president responded, “You're in there with me . . . personally.” The president solicited the earliest date an air strike could be conducted, and LeMay offered October 21 and 23 as the earliest and optimal dates, respectively.\(^45\)

Before the president concluded the meeting, General Wheeler asked, “Today . . . am I clear that you are addressing yourself as to whether anything at all should be done?” President Kennedy replied, “That's right.” Wheeler followed up, “But that if military action is to be taken, you agree with us.” The president replied with an affirmative, “Yeah.”\(^46\) Thus, Kennedy agreed with the JCS that it might come to an air strike and invasion, but he was not going to make that decision yet. That afternoon the president remained uncommitted.

Before departing, Kennedy had a private discussion with McNamara, after which the Secretary of Defense issued orders to the CJCS to develop fully the planning for a blockade and continue to work on the details for an air strike.\(^47\) At the JCS meeting on the morning of October 19, Anderson had voiced his concern regarding the difficulties of conducting a blockade, but after the meeting with the president the Joint Chiefs would press ahead with two planning efforts.\(^48\)

After McNamara and Taylor departed, Wheeler, LeMay, and Shoup continued their discussion. There in the Cabinet Room Shoup voiced his final dissent, and the secret tape recorder continued to capture their conversation.

SHOUP: You, you pulled the rug right out from under him.
LEMay: Jesus Christ. What the hell do you mean?
SHOUP: I just agree with that answer, General. I just agree with you a hundred percent. He [President Kennedy] finally got around to the word escalation. I heard him say _escalation_. That's the only goddamn thing that's in this whole trick. It's been there in Laos; it's been in every goddamn one [of these crises]. When he says _escalation_, that's it. If somebody could keep them from doing the goddamn thing piece-meal. That's our problem. You go in there and friggin’ around with the missiles. You're screwed. You go in and frig around with anything else, you're screwed.
LEMay: That's right.
SHOUP: You're screwed, screwed, screwed. And if some goddamn thing some way, he could say: “Either do this son of a bitch and do it right, and quit friggin’ around.” That was my conclusion. Don't frig around and go take the missiles out.\(^49\)

The generals agreed that the president equated Berlin with Cuba, and Wheeler suggested that, on the basis of Kennedy's statements, the president was leaning...
toward political action and a blockade. But the Joint Chiefs had made their case for the best military solution to the president, and their recommendations had an effect. As the president departed Washington on a campaign trip, he requested that McGeorge Bundy, the presidential assistant for national security affairs (i.e., the national security advisor) keep the air-strike option open despite the president’s inclination toward a blockade.\textsuperscript{50}

General LeMay’s comments during the meeting with the president were pointed. Admiral Anderson and General Wheeler were forthright in their counsel to the president. The JCS had such an effect that the president’s planning continued in both directions. At McNamara’s direction, the Pentagon divided into two planning teams to explore the details of the blockade and air strikes. During the JCS meeting on Saturday, October 20, at 10:00 AM, Admiral Anderson “protested to the SECDEF [Secretary of Defense] that this would [be] locking the barn door after the horse had been stolen. Blockade would not accomplish the objective, was not in the U.S. interest, would be imposed after the missiles had been emplaced, and would bring a confrontation with the Soviet Union rather than Cuba.”\textsuperscript{51} So Anderson still thought the blockade alone would not eliminate the missiles in Cuba, but nonetheless he directed the Navy planning effort to implement a blockade.

JCS meetings continued throughout Saturday, culminating with General Taylor’s return to the Pentagon to debrief the afternoon meeting at the White House. Announcing that “[t]his was not one of our better days,” Taylor described how Rusk, McNamara, and Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson had weighed in to support a blockade, to commence twenty-four hours after the president’s television address. The Joint Chiefs were to plan for a naval blockade against offensive weapons and “be prepared to execute an air strike against missiles only, (1) without warning on Monday or Tuesday or (2) after 24 hours’ notice.”

Taylor recounted to the JCS in the Pentagon, “The President said to me, ‘I know that you and your colleagues are unhappy with the decision, but I trust that you will support me in this decision.’ I assured him that we were against the decision but would back him completely.” In this statement Taylor appealed to the absolute professionalism of the military in the execution of the lawful orders of the president of the United States. Kennedy knew that by asking for Taylor’s backing he was calling expressly on the Joint Chiefs to execute their duty-bound, constitutional obligation or resign. Taylor, in turn, relayed this to the JCS and put the matter to rest, effectively telling the Joint Chiefs to get in line. The chiefs complied, although Wheeler raised a last flag of protest, stating, “I never thought I’d live to see the day when I would want to go to war.”\textsuperscript{52}
ONLY A BLOCKADE AWAY FROM THERMONUCLEAR WAR

Over the weekend following the Friday, October 19, JCS meeting with the president, the Navy continued planning to make the quarantine a reality and the Air Force prepared for air strikes. On Sunday morning, President Kennedy met with Tactical Air Command’s General Sweeney to review the general’s estimate on the likely success of any air strike. The meeting lasted from 11:30 AM to 12:30 PM. CIA director John McCone and McNamara agreed that the number of launchers totaled approximately forty, with thirty-six sites known. General Sweeney, with the support of General Taylor, maintained that to be effective any air strikes against missile sites would have to include sorties against Soviet fighter jets and bombers, pushing sortie counts for an air strike up to five hundred. Although on Saturday Kennedy had shut down the idea of an air strike, on Sunday morning the president reviewed the plan with General Sweeney and directed McNamara to be ready to execute such an attack as early as Monday, October 22, if required. Kennedy had to keep the possibility of a direct attack on Cuba poised for execution should the blockade fail entirely. The JCS and Air Force stood ready to give the president military options during the crisis.

Although the meeting was not archived on Kennedy’s secret tape-recording system, the ExComm convened again on Sunday, October 21; the meeting lasted from 2:30 PM until 4:50 PM. In this meeting Admiral Anderson described how the blockade would follow “accepted international rules,” and reported that forty Navy ships already were in position. Anderson further recommended that the blockade commence twenty-four hours after the president’s scheduled speech on October 22, 1962, to allow the Soviets time to issue instructions to their ships. Anderson proposed that if Soviet ships or aircraft took hostile actions, the Navy would have permission to respond. McNamara backed the CNO, stating that he favored such rules of engagement. At the conclusion of the meeting the president and CNO had their famous exchange, in which President Kennedy said, “Well, Admiral, it looks as though this is up to the Navy,” to which the CNO responded, “The Navy will not let you down.”

That night the Navy worked to answer the concerns regarding the blockade (even as the president’s speech was adjusted to use the word “quarantine” instead of “blockade”). Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell L. Gilpatric further informed the Navy that the Secretary of Defense required the drawing up of rules of engagement regarding the blockade and Guantánamo. The CNO remained at the Pentagon until 11:25 PM, finalizing a message to CINCLANT Admiral Dennison, for approval by the Secretary of Defense (the Secretary of State had approved the message previously). Navy personnel worked through the night, and by 7:20 AM had produced a rules-of-engagement document that outlined how the Navy would respond to Soviet ships approaching the blockade line.
memorandum referenced established Navy procedures and specified that compliant Soviet ships would be diverted to non-Cuban ports. Should a Soviet ship not comply, “the blockade would be carried out with minimum use of force.”

Late in the evening of October 22, 1962, following President Kennedy’s address to the nation, McNamara and Anderson began the process of identifying which ship would be the first to be stopped.

As commencement of the blockade drew closer on October 23, 1963, in a 10:00 AM ExComm meeting President Kennedy and the ExComm held detailed conversations on which ships were likely to be stopped first, with McNamara identifying Kimovsk. Further, the Secretary of Defense reviewed possible alternatives by which the president could respond if SAMs shot down a U-2. The ExComm and the president dug further into the details of the military execution of the blockade and the surveillance flights over Cuba. Given the risks involved if the blockade effort escalated and Kennedy’s interest in the details of military procedure, McNamara’s review with the president of the delegation of authority to respond to a SAM “shootdown” of a U-2 was understandable.

At the second ExComm meeting that day, at 6:00 PM, the ExComm members debated how to handle Soviet ships approaching the quarantine line. Kennedy read the quarantine proclamation aloud, going through it point by point. He paused in his reading to voice his understanding that if a Soviet ship was hailed it would have the option to divert to a non-Cuban port.

“McNamara followed up: “The question is: Can we search a vessel which was proceeding toward Cuba, was hailed, requested to stop, did not do so, but turned around and proceeded to reverse direction away from Cuba. . . . I don’t believe we should undertake such an operation.” To which President Kennedy replied, “Not right now.” McNamara again agreed with the president, “Not immediately. That’s right. So my instruction to the Navy was: Don’t do it.”

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Thus, while the Navy had established rules of engagement on the morning of October 22, as late as the evening of October 23 the ExComm still was debating tactical-level decisions for conducting the quarantine, while the president edited the quarantine proclamation.

Near the end of the October 23 ExComm meeting, President Kennedy asked, “Okay, now what do we do tomorrow morning when these eight [Soviet] vessels continue to sail on? We’re all clear about how we handle it?” JCS Chairman
General Taylor offered, “Shoot the rudders off of them, don’t you?” McNamara added that he would like to hold off issuing more-specific instructions to CINCLANT Admiral Dennison until the morning. The ExComm walked through various scenarios, such as whether ships carrying nurses or baby food would press through the quarantine. Kennedy found none of the scenarios in which ships continued beyond the quarantine line acceptable. The president realized the difficulties and joked, “I’ll tell you, for those who considered the blockade course to be the easy way, I told them not to do it!” The president received a loud outburst of laughter from around the room.64

Ultimately, the possibility that bothered the president was a tactical engagement in which USN sailors forcibly boarded a Soviet ship, then got killed by machine-gun fire. The ExComm did not have an easy answer for the president, so finally General Taylor offered, “I think we just have to say, Mr. President, [to use] a mission type of order: to use the minimum force required to cause—” The president stopped Taylor: “Well, except that doesn’t give them quite . . . I think this is the point. If he disables a ship and they’re eight hundred miles out and they refuse to let us aboard, I don’t think we ought, he ought to feel that he has to board that thing in order to carry out our orders.” Taylor responded, “Well, he’s to keep the ships from going into Cuba, that’s his basic mission now.” Kennedy drilled further down into the quarantine procedures: “I think at the beginning it would be better if this situation happened, to let that boat lie there disabled for a day or so, not to try and board it and have them [unclear] with machine gunning with thirty to forty people killed on each side.”65

Whether Kennedy was thinking back to his own service in the Navy and the life-and-death decisions a commander faced, or he simply sought to minimize the chance that an escalation of force would spiral out of control, the effect was the same. The ExComm and McNamara did not press the president any further on his guidance.

McNamara briefed Kennedy on suspected submarine movements and Kennedy communicated his concern for the survivability of the carriers Enterprise and Independence. Assured by Taylor that the Navy could track the Soviet submarines reasonably well, the president closed the tactical discussion on the quarantine as follows: “All right. Well, Mr. Secretary, I think I’d like to make sure that you have reviewed these instructions that go out to the Navy, having in mind this conversation that we’ve just had.” McNamara replied, “I have, and I will do so again tonight, Mr. President.”66 Following the ExComm meeting, McNamara and Gilpatric returned to the Pentagon and directed the Navy to set up a meeting in Flag Plot to discuss the first Soviet ship intercept. The discussion on Russian submarines must have had an effect on President Kennedy, because at 7:35 PM the White House phoned the duty officer at the Pentagon and directed the Navy
to “put a hold on any depth charge attacks on submarines for 48 hours.” The duty officer later logged that McNamara phoned the President at 10:00 PM for clarification on the depth charge order, and McNamara obtained permission to use “noise type” depth charges against Soviet submarines to cause them to surface. Thus, with the blockade less than a day away, the White House and Department of Defense still were finalizing guidance to the Navy.

The different accounts of the Flag Plot meeting between CNO Admiral Anderson and Secretary of Defense McNamara are incongruent in several particulars. The Secretary of Defense’s oral history from 1986 recounted a long tirade by McNamara emphasizing the blockade’s political nature to Admiral Anderson. A more balanced investigation into the meeting (which was actually held in Intelligence Plot) depicted a calmer encounter, with the meeting focused on suspected Soviet submarine positions and the Secretary of Defense directing Navy ships to positions intended to force the interdiction of specific Soviet ships on October 24. Following the meeting in Intelligence Plot, the CNO returned to Flag Plot and relayed McNamara’s orders to CINCLANT Admiral Dennison, determining which Navy ships would intercept Kimovsk, Gagarin, and Poltava.

Reviewing McNamara’s account in light of the ExComm transcripts and recordings from October 23 reveals that, while President Kennedy asked the Secretary of Defense to review the quarantine procedures with the Navy, McNamara missed the president’s ultimate concerns. Kennedy understood that the Navy had to stop the Soviet vessels if they breached the quarantine line. The CNO met with the ExComm on Sunday, October 21, and explained the procedures, and had codified them into rules of engagement by the morning of October 22. The president’s message—which McNamara did not convey—was the president’s fear of escalation if the Navy had to board a Soviet ship. If all the previous week’s planning is reduced to McNamara’s supposed statement, according to his account—“There will be no firing of any kind at that Soviet ship without my personal authority”—it means that his direction ran counter to the president’s intent. Earlier in the interview, McNamara stated, “We established the quarantine, not particularly to stop the Soviet ships, but to convey as forcefully as possible the political message.” Yet despite McNamara’s recollection, the actual concerns that the ExComm and the president explicitly expressed on the evening of October 23 concerned the political disaster that would ensue if Soviet ships with offensive weapons were allowed to proceed through the quarantine line. The ExComm meeting centered on ensuring that the Navy was prepared to stop the Soviet vessels.

While the Secretary of Defense’s oral history makes for a great “sea story,” the presidential recordings of the ExComm meetings reveal a nuanced understanding of the difficulties the Navy could anticipate in upholding the quarantine.
the end, neither the Navy nor the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Anderson, let the president down.

On October 24, at the 10:00 AM ExComm meeting, CIA director McCone received a message from the Office of Naval Intelligence that Poltava, Gagarin, Kimovsk, Dolmatovo, Moscow Festival, and Metallurg Kursk either had stopped or had changed direction. Thus, the quarantine had the desired tactical effect: it turned around the Soviet ships inbound to Cuba.

After the initial quarantine standoff, diplomacy continued, as did the threat of all-out war. The crisis was not resolved until Sunday, October 28, 1962, with Radio Moscow’s broadcast and Khrushchev’s letter to Kennedy agreeing to remove the missiles from Cuba in return for the United States pledging not to invade the Communist island.

Sheldon M. Stern’s *The Cuban Missile Crisis in American Memory: Myth versus Reality* compares secondary literature and primary-source recollections on the Cuban missile crisis with the presidential recordings. The analysis reveals that the participants shaped the lessons they drew from the Cuban missile crisis so as to align themselves with the ultimate outcome: a political resolution to a Soviet nuclear missile deployment ninety miles from the United States.

The simplistic narrative of the Cuban missile crisis painted the Joint Chiefs of Staff in a dogmatically warmongering light. McNamara’s oral history cast Admiral Anderson as a naval officer who would have preferred to blow the Soviets out of the water at first light. The truth is just not that simple. Both Stern’s work and any review of the ExComm recordings reveal that nearly every member of the ExComm shifted his views on supporting an air strike or establishing a blockade. The only consistent member of the ExComm was President Kennedy, who sought room to maneuver and delayed making a decision, and whose overriding concern was avoiding a path that would lead to all-out war.

The Joint Chiefs, on the other hand, had decades of institutional knowledge and military planning behind them when they gave President Kennedy their recommendation for air strikes and a subsequent invasion of Cuba. Presented with a military problem, the Department of Defense returned a military solution. Kennedy finally opted for the quarantine, keeping the air strikes as an option depending on the Soviet response to the quarantine. The Air Force placed its bombers on alert and the Navy readied the Atlantic Fleet. The Joint Chiefs disagreed with the president’s quarantine decision, but they executed his orders faithfully and expertly. Furthermore, the chiefs understood that if the quarantine failed, the military could be called on to execute the air strikes and an invasion. Experience uniquely informs decisions, and the military experience of the Joint Chiefs informed their decisions and actions during the Cuban missile crisis.
Military and political leaders are forged in the organizational culture and by the personal experiences of their careers. The JCS remained entrenched in their initial assessment and provided a military option to end the Cuban missile crisis. Their assessment of the larger political crisis and possible Soviet reactions to an air strike differed from President Kennedy’s. As commander in chief, the president cast the deciding vote, after careful consideration of his subordinates’ opinions. President Kennedy weighed the resolution of conflict against the cost of war with the Soviet Union.

The outcome of the Cuban missile crisis was that a Communist dictatorship became entrenched in Cuba. But as politically abhorrent to the Kennedys (and many later U.S. presidents) as Castro proved to be, after the crisis Cuba failed to prove itself to be an existential threat to the United States. Yet until the resolution of the missile crisis, Castro’s removal was considered.

The president always will have a military solution available, and the quarantine, by any definition, was a military operation against Soviet shipping. Perhaps one of the many lessons of the Cuban missile crisis is that the military is the sharpest tool of diplomacy. Yet military operations must be conducted with clearly defined objectives, and military solutions should serve as options to achieve those objectives—and as deterrents, to ensure the continuation of political discourse and diplomacy.

The implicit trust underlying military service, which includes the inherent possibility of sacrifice, is that when sailors, Marines, soldiers, and airmen are called on to defend the nation, their lives will not be treated as merely an expedient solution, without recourse to thoughtful diplomacy. “The Navy”—and the Department of Defense—“will not let you down.” But when dealing with a dictator—whether in Russia, North Korea, or Syria—our elected leaders must take the long view when balancing the achievement of political objectives against the cost of military action.

NOTES


3. The U-2 aircraft carried two cameras, a main camera with higher-quality resolution and a second camera with variable resolution, used to correlate ground-track positioning. Since the National Photographic Interpretation Center in Suitland, Maryland, spent the bulk of its time viewing the main-camera film, the 544th’s photographic interpreters reviewed the tracker-camera film—which often was available weeks before the main-camera film. Sanders A. Laubenthal [Capt., USAF], The Missiles in Cuba, 1962: The Role of SAC Intelligence (U), SAC Intelligence Quarterly Project Warrior Study (Peterson AFB, CO:
14. CINCLANT Contingency Operation Plan No. 312-62 provided for a tailored air strike against single or multiple targets in Cuba to eliminate a threat to the United States, with little lead time from order to execution. OPLAN 314-62 provided for a simultaneous amphibious landing and airborne assault, requiring an eighteen-day buildup prior to attack. OPLAN 316-62 provided a shortened-timeline alternative to OPLAN 314-62, with the amphibious/airborne assault beginning seven days after the air strikes. Headquarters, U.S. Atlantic Command, “CINCLANT Historical Account of Cuban Crisis—1963,” 000119/J09H, April 29, 1963, Post-1946 Reports Collection, box 16, Archives Branch, Naval History and Heritage Command, Washington, DC.

18. “Notes Taken from Transcripts of Meetings,” p. 3.

21. “Notes Taken from Transcripts of Meetings,” p. 5.


25. “Notes Taken from Transcripts of Meetings,” p. 3.

26. Ibid., p. 5.

29. “Notes Taken from Transcripts of Meetings,” p. 6.

30. Joint Chiefs of Staff memorandum (JCSM)—794-62 is referenced in ibid., p. 7. The quoted


32. "Notes Taken from Transcripts of Meetings," p. 7.

33. Ibid., p. 9.

34. Ibid.


36. "Notes Taken from Transcripts of Meetings," pp. 9–10.

37. Ibid., p. 10.

38. Ibid.

39. Naftali, Zelikow, and May, The Presidential Recordings, pp. 441, 513. The intelligence on October 19 indicated sixteen MRBM launchers, with two previously identified MRBMs assessed as possible intermediate-range-ballistic-missile sites, capable of firing missiles with a range of 2,200 nautical miles. Additionally, there were three confirmed coastal-defense cruise-missile sites, twenty-two SA-2 SAM sites, and thirty-five to thirty-nine MiG-21 fighters. "Chronology of JCS Decisions," p. 19.

40. "Meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff on the Cuban Missile Crisis on 19 October 1962," in The Presidential Recordings, ed. Naftali, Zelikow, and May, tape 31.2.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.


49. "Meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff on the Cuban Missile Crisis on 19 October 1962.”


51. "Notes Taken from Transcripts of Meetings," p. 12.

52. Ibid., pp. 12–13.


56. Ibid., p. 528.


58. William D. Houser [Capt., USN], Francis J. Roberts [Col., USA], and Sidney B. Berry [Lt. Col., USA], Duty Officers Journal, 8B 10-21-62 Duty Officers, October 21, 1962, October 20–25, 1962, Secretary of Defense CMC files, Cuba 381, 1962, box 1, record group 330, NSA GWU.


60. Herbert D. Riley [VAdm., USN], Director, Joint Staff, to Deputy Secretary of Defense, "Rules of Engagement," memorandum, document 7, October 22, 1962 (Top Secret—excised copy), Taylor file, Misc. Papers, box 6, NSA GWU.


63. Ibid., tape 35.2.

64. Ibid.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid.


70. Ibid., p. 27.

71. McNamara oral history, p. 6.

72. Ibid., p. 4.


74. “Cuban Missile Crisis,” John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum, microsites.jfklibrary.org/.