THIRTEEN DAYS

BY ROBERT KENNEDY

"The President . . . knew he would have to act."

AFTER THE MEETING in the Cabinet Room, I walked back to the Mansion with the President. It would be difficult; the stakes were high—of the highest and most substantial kind—but he knew he would have to act. The U.S. could not accept what the Russians had done. What that action would be was still to be determined. But he was convinced from the beginning that he would have to do something. To keep the discussions from being inhibited and because he did not want to arouse attention, he decided not to attend all the meetings of our committee. This was wise. Personalities change when

the President is present, and frequently even strong men make recommendations on the basis of what they believe the President wishes to hear. He instructed our group to come forward with recommendations for one course or possibly several alternative courses of action.

It was during the afternoon and evening of that first day, Tuesday, that we began to discuss the idea of a quarantine or blockade. Secretary McNamara, by Wednesday, became the blockade's strongest advocate. He argued that it was limited pressure, which could be increased as the circumstances warranted. Further, it was dramatic and forceful pressure, which would be understood yet, most importantly, still leave us in control of events. Later he reinforced his position by reporting that a surprise air strike against the missile bases alone—a surgical air strike, as it came to be called—was militarily impractical in the view of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, that any such military action would have to include all military installations in Cuba, eventually leading to an invasion. Perhaps we would come to that, he argued. Perhaps that course of action would turn out to be inevitable. "But let's not start with that course," if by chance that kind of confrontation with Cuba, and of necessity with the Soviet Union, could be avoided.

Those who argued for the military strike instead of a blockade pointed out that a blockade would not in fact remove the missiles and would not even stop the work from going ahead on the missile sites themselves. The missiles were already in Cuba, and all we would be doing with a blockade would be "closing the door after the horse had left the barn." Further, they argued, we would be bringing about a confrontation with the Soviet Union by stopping their ships, when we should be concentrating on Cuba and Castro.

Their most forceful argument was that our installation of

a blockade around Cuba invited the Russians to do the same to Berlin. If we demanded the removal of missiles from Cuba as the price for lifting our blockade, they would demand the removal of missiles surrounding the Soviet Union as the reciprocal act.

And so we argued, and so we disagreed—all dedicated, intelligent men, disagreeing and fighting about the future of their country, and of mankind. Meanwhile, time was slowly running out.

An examination of photography taken on Wednesday, the 17th of October, showed several other installations, with at least sixteen and possibly thirty-two missiles of over a thousand-mile range. Our military experts advised that these missiles could be in operation within a week. The next day, Thursday, estimates by our Intelligence Community placed in Cuba missiles with an atomic-warhead potential of about one half the current ICBM capacity of the entire Soviet Union. The photography having indicated that the missiles were being directed at certain American cities, the estimate was that within a few minutes of their being fired eighty million Americans would be dead.

The members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff were unanimous in calling for immediate military action. They forcefully presented their view that the blockade would not be effective. General Curtis LeMay, Air Force Chief of Staff, argued strongly with the President that a military attack was essential. When the President questioned what the response of the Russians might be, General LeMay assured him there would be no reaction. President Kennedy was skeptical. "They, no more than we, can let these things go by without doing something. They can't, after all their statements, permit us to take out their missiles, kill a lot of Russians, and then do nothing.

If they don't take action in Cuba, they certainly will in Berlin."

The President went on to say that he recognized the validity of the arguments made by the Joint Chiefs, the danger that more and more missiles would be placed in Cuba, and the likelihood, if we did nothing, that the Russians would move on Berlin and in other areas of the world, feeling the U.S. was completely impotent. Then it would be too late to do anything in Cuba, for by that time all their missiles would be operational.

General David M. Shoup, Commandant of the Marine Corps, summed up everyone's feelings: "You are in a pretty bad fix, Mr. President." The President answered quickly, "You are in it with me." Everyone laughed, and, with no final decision, the meeting adjourned.

Later, Secretary McNamara, although he told the President he disagreed with the Joint Chiefs and favored a blockade rather than an attack, informed him that the necessary planes, men, and ammunition were being deployed and that we could be ready to move with the necessary air bombardments on Tuesday, October 23, if that was to be the decision. The plans called for an initial attack, consisting of five hundred sorties, striking all military targets, including the missile sites, airfields, ports, and gun emplacements.

I supported McNamara's position in favor of a blockade. This was not from a deep conviction that it would be a successful course of action, but a feeling that it had more flexibility and fewer liabilities than a military attack. Most importantly, like others, I could not accept the idea that the United States would rain bombs on Cuba, killing thousands and thousands of civilians in a surprise attack. Maybe the alternatives were not very palatable, but I simply did not see how we

could accept that course of action for our country.

Former Secretary of State Dean Acheson began attending our meetings, and he was strongly in favor of an air attack. I was a great admirer of his. In 1961, President Kennedy asked him to prepare a report for the National Security Council recommending a course of action to deal with the Russian threat to Berlin. Listening to his presentation then, I had thought to myself that I had never heard anyone so lucid and convincing and would never wish to be on the other side of an argument with him. Now he made his arguments that an air attack and invasion represented our only alternative in the same clear and brilliant way. He said that the President of the United States had the responsibility for the security of the people of the United States and of the whole free world, that it was his obligation to take the only action which could protect that security, and that that meant destroying the missiles.

With some trepidation, I argued that, whatever validity the military and political arguments were for an attack in preference to a blockade, America's traditions and history would not permit such a course of action. Whatever military reasons he and others could marshal, they were nevertheless, in the last analysis, advocating a surprise attack by a very large nation against a very small one. This, I said, could not be undertaken by the U.S. if we were to maintain our moral position at home and around the globe. Our struggle against Communism throughout the world was far more than physical survival—it had as its essence our heritage and our ideals, and these we must not destroy.

We spent more time on this moral question during the first five days than on any other single matter. At various times, it was proposed that we send a letter to Khrushchev

twenty-four hours before the bombardment was to begin, that we send a letter to Castro, that leaflets and pamphlets listing the targets be dropped over Cuba before the attack—all these ideas and more were abandoned for military or other reasons. We struggled and fought with one another and with our consciences, for it was a question that deeply troubled us all.

In the midst of all these discussions, Andrei Gromyko came to see the President. It was an appointment made long before the missiles were uncovered, and the President felt it would be awkward to cancel it. He debated whether he should confront the Soviet Foreign Minister with our knowledge of the missiles' presence and finally decided that, as he had not yet determined a final course of action and the disclosure of our knowledge might give the Russians the initiative, he would simply listen to Gromyko.

They met late Wednesday afternoon in the President's office in the White House. Gromyko began the conversation by saying the United States should stop threatening Cuba. All Cuba wanted was peaceful coexistence, he said; she was not interested in exporting her system to other Latin American countries. Cuba, like the Soviet Union, wanted only peace. Premier Khrushchev had instructed him, Gromyko said, to tell President Kennedy that the only assistance being furnished Cuba was for agriculture and land development, so the people could feed themselves, plus a small amount of defensive arms. In view of all the publicity in the American press, he said, he wanted to emphasize that the Soviet Union would never become involved in the furnishing of offensive weapons to Cuba.

Gromyko said he wished to appeal to the U.S. and to President Kennedy on behalf of Premier Khrushchev and the

Soviet Union to lessen the tensions that existed with regard to Cuba.

President Kennedy listened, astonished, but also with some admiration for the boldness of Gromyko's position. Firmly, but with great restraint considering the provocation, he told Gromyko that it was not the United States which was fomenting discord, but the Soviet Union. The U.S.S.R.'s supplying of arms to Cuba was having a profound effect on the people of the United States and was a source of great concern to him. Because of the personal assurances he had received from Khrushchev, he had been taking the public position that no action was required against Cuba, and yet the situation was becoming steadily more dangerous.

Gromyko repeated that the sole objective of the U.S.S.R. was to "give bread to Cuba in order to prevent hunger in that country." As far as arms were concerned, the Soviet Union had simply sent some specialists to train Cubans to handle certain kinds of armament, which were only "defensive." He then said he wished to emphasize the word "defensive" and that none of these weapons could ever constitute a threat to the United States.

The President replied that there should be no misunderstanding of the position of the United States—that that position had been made clear to the Soviet Union in meetings between the Attorney General and Ambassador Dobrynin and in his own public statements. To avoid any misunderstanding, he read aloud his statement of September 4, which pointed out the serious consequences that would arise if the Soviet Union placed missiles or offensive weapons within Cuba.

Gromyko assured him this would never be done, that the United States should not be concerned. After touching

briefly on some other matters, he said good-by.

I came by shortly after Gromyko left the White House. The President of the United States, it can be said, was displeased with the spokesman of the Soviet Union. . . .