

# The Role of the Executive Committee in the Cuban Missile Crisis

*by Jeanne Pavy*

The Cuban Missile Crisis is recognized as one of the most significant events in modern world history. It was probably the closest we have ever come to an outbreak of nuclear war. The fact that we emerged from this episode without triggering such a conflict is a credit to the will of humanity to avoid war and seek peace. In this case, we must focus on the efforts of those dozen or so men in the Kennedy administration who were instrumental in the decision-making process. Though the decision on how to deal with the problem presented by the Soviets was ultimately made by the President, these men provided invaluable insight and commentary by working out the various alternatives and options. The President wanted "people who raised questions, who criticized, on whose judgment he could rely, who presented an intelligent point of view, regardless of their rank or viewpoint." <1>

The men of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (Ex-Comm) held these very qualifications. They included Secretary of State Dean Rusk; Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara; CIA Director John McCone; Secretary of the Treasury Douglas Dillon; President Kennedy's National Security Adviser, McGeorge Bundy; Presidential Counsel Ted Sorenson; Under Secretary of State George Ball; Deputy Under Secretary of State U. Alexis Johnson; Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Maxwell Taylor; Assistant Secretary of State for Latin America, Edward Martin; Adviser on Russian Affairs, Llewellyn Thompson; Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric; Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze and, on a more intermittent basis, Lyndon Johnson, U.N. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson, Special Assistant to the President Ken O'Donnell, and Don Wilson, Deputy Director of the U.S. Information Agency. By examining the Cuban Missile Crisis and the problems faced by the Kennedy administration, we can see how this particular group of men worked together, and why they acted the way they did. The nature and direction of the entire decision-making process was shaped by the individual and collective personalities involved.

Before turning to a discussion of these individuals and how they interacted during the crisis, we must first review the events of the crisis itself. In September of 1962, President Kennedy ordered that aerial photography be taken of Cuba. On October 14, photos were taken of a launch pad that could fire ballistic missiles at a range of one thousand miles. Previously, the U.S. had agreed to allow defensive missiles to be placed in Cuba, but it had been unequivocally established that no missile with offensive capability was to be deployed. To Kennedy's surprise and disgust, the Soviets had done just that. On October 18, four days after the discovery of the Cuban missiles, Kennedy met with Gromyko. The Soviet representative assured Kennedy that they were deploying only defensive weapons. Kennedy did not tip his hand by revealing that he knew the Soviets were lying.

After much internal debate and discussion within the administration, Kennedy announced on October 22 that the United States was imposing "a strict quarantine on all offensive military equipment" being shipped to Cuba, and would "regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union." Kennedy demanded the withdrawal of the missiles under United States supervision. After four tension-filled days, the Soviet Union sent a reply offering removal of Cuban missiles in exchange for an American pledge not to invade Cuba. Before the U.S. could respond, a second letter came with additional but unacceptable demands. The United States, at Robert Kennedy's suggestion, opted to ignore entirely the second message and accept the first. Three days later Krushchev complied with the agreement and the Soviet ships turned around and returned home, ending the most potentially catastrophic confrontation of the century. While Kennedy and Krushchev were the two principal figures in the missile showdown, the Ex-Comm advisory group members played an important part in evaluating the various options and courses of action available.

The kinds of people involved in the Ex-Comm meetings were diverse and even conflicting in their opinions. Indeed, they ran the gamut of political viewpoints. From the most conservative, probably General Taylor as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, or Dean Acheson, to the most liberal, Adlai Stevenson, they encompassed a broad spectrum of political opinion. The conservative extreme, represented by Acheson and Taylor, favored an out and out military showdown. Acheson himself saw the entire affair as a test of wills, and believed the only respectable course of action for the United States was a decisive air strike. General Taylor, along with the other Joint Chiefs, strongly supported Acheson's position. At the opposite end of the hawk-dove continuum was Stevenson. He proposed withdrawal of U.S. missiles from Turkey and Italy in return for the Soviets doing the same in Cuba. The reaction to this from the other Ex-Comm members was swift and overwhelmingly negative. Robert Kennedy wrote that,

Stevenson has since been criticized for the position he took at this meeting. I think it should be emphasized that he was presenting a point of view from a different perspective than the others, one which was therefore important for the President to consider. Although I disagreed strongly with his recommendations, I thought he was courageous to make them, and I might add they made as much sense as some others considered during that period of time. <2>

Thus, even a proposal that was as seemingly as far out in left field as Stevenson's had its value in the context of the discussions. Many held initial support for a blockade while others wavered in their opinions. All angles and all approaches had to be considered. This was the principal task of the Ex-Comm members.

The fact that a high percentage of the Ex-Comm members were lawyers was an important factor contributing to the nature of the discussion. According to Abram Chayes, ". . . law was one of the critical forces moulding decision." <3> Robert Kennedy, Sorenson, Ball, Gilpatric, Acheson and Stevenson, six of the most influential members, were lawyers. Because of their profession, they tended to approach the whole problem within the

context of international law. Many have deplored the abundance of lawyers in foreign policymaking positions, contending that they tend to "[overvalue] legal considerations and very often [tend] to view policy issues as questions of law." <4> Nevertheless, the questions of legality figured prominently in the discussions over how to approach the missile crisis. Three important decisions -- to use a blockade as opposed to an air strike; to seek an O.A.S. authorizing resolution; and the manner of approach to the U.N. -- were all evaluated in light of their legality. As a group the lawyers, Acheson excluded, "exerted consistent influence for restraint and limit in the response to the Cuban missiles." <5> They could see the blockade justified under international law, but were not so sure about the use of military force, though, Katzenburg, Deputy Attorney General, made an argument that "a declaration of war was unnecessary and that U.S. military action could be justified in international law on the principle of self-defense." <6>

The second decision, to obtain O.A.S. approval, was viewed as a step that would even further legalize and legitimize U.S. actions. From the start Robert Kennedy believed that there was a legal basis for a blockade but would later conclude that its legality ultimately came from O.A.S. approval. Thus the presence of lawyers in the Ex-Comm group was an important influence on their approach to the problem. The fact that they insisted upon evaluating the courses of action open to them in terms of whether they conformed to established international law helped to limit their alternatives and reinforce support for a blockade. It also demonstrates that they approached resolution of the conflict with a sense of responsibility to the rest of the world; they were not totally free to act in any way they wanted. There were principles to which they, as leaders of a country which placed a high value on law and order, were compelled to comply.

Almost from the beginning of the Ex-Comm meetings, there existed a split in the group on the basic course of action: a blockade versus an air strike. This question constituted the central debate during the meetings and created two separate "camps" within Ex-Comm.

Those who staunchly supported a blockade included McNamara, Gilpatric, Ball, Thompson, Sorenson, Stevenson and Kennedy. Besides the legal basis for support of a blockade, and the fact that this course of action would be unanimously supported by the O.A.S., there were other reasons for promoting a blockade or "defensive quarantine" as it came to be called. Robert McNamara wrote that the reasons most clearly articulated by Robert Kennedy against the strike were that it "would have brought death to thousands of innocent Cuban civilians and to thousands of U.S. military personnel. Also, such attacks ran the risk of triggering the launch of nuclear weapons." <7> Kennedy himself wrote that a "surprise attack would erode if not destroy the moral position of the U.S. throughout the world." <8> It simply was not in our tradition to launch such an offensive.

Obviously, there were moral reasons, too, for wishing to avoid an air strike. Unlike the hawkish members in the Ex-Comm, Kennedy and his coalition were concerned about the human costs inherent in such a course of action. They saw grave consequences for such a drastic measure, and argued vehemently against it. Besides this moral basis for opposition

to the air strike, some favored the blockade because it offered more flexibility and fewer liabilities than a military attack. The attack would create an all-or-nothing situation for both the U.S. and the Soviet Union. It didn't allow time for the Soviets to freely consider their position and comply with American wishes. It provided for no diplomatic maneuvering by which a peaceful solution -- one that honored the delicate positions of both countries -- could be achieved. Robert McNamara, while a firm supporter of the quarantine, attempted to reason with the more aggressive faction. He pointed out that a blockade was more practical because if it didn't work they could always resort to an air strike. But those who supported the strike had their reasons, too.

Robert Kennedy wrote that in the early stages of Ex-Comm meetings, "there was a small minority who felt the missiles did not alter the balance of power and therefore necessitated no action. Most felt . . . that an air strike against the missile sites could be the only course," <9> During the time prior to the crisis, the Kennedy administration had been criticized for not taking a hard enough stand on Cuba. Many Republican members of Congress had been warning that the Soviet Union would do whatever it had to in order to gain a strong foothold in Cuba, including the placement of missiles. This Congressional pressure played a strong role in the consideration of an air strike. The attack itself called for a strike consisting of "five hundred sorties, striking all military targets, including the missile sites, airfields, ports, and gun emplacements." <10> Acheson made the most forceful arguments for the attack. He pointed out 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. <11>

By making the issue of the air strike one of national as well as international security, Acheson appealed to the President's sense of America as a world power with responsibilities beyond its national interests. In attempting to explain Acheson's failure to recognize and appreciate the moral implications of a military attack, Schlesinger writes that "Acheson detested moral anguish" and felt that the Kennedys were obsessed with the notion of a "Pearl Harbor in reverse." <12> Even more alarming to the dovish members of the Ex-Comm was the idea that the hawkish side entertained the notion of using nuclear weapons. According to Kennedy, "One member of the Joint Chiefs . . . argued that we could use nuclear weapons on the basis that our adversaries would use them against us in an attack." <13> From Robert Kennedy's account of the whole incident, it appears that the military men in Ex-Comm were almost pushing for the use of force at any cost. He wrote that "[President Kennedy] was distressed that [they] seemed to give so little consideration to the implications of steps they suggested . . . when the Russians answered they were withdrawing their missiles, it was suggested by one high military adviser that we attack . . . in any case." <14> It seems that besides deploring the over abundance of lawyers within the advisory group, we must also be concerned with the extent of influence of these military men. Their apparently extreme position could have led to an all out war had it not been balanced by the other members.

Even after the decision was made to enforce a blockade there were other problems to deal with. What type of blockade should it be? Should it include all vessels or just those transporting military equipment? Would the U.S. attempt to board a vessel that refused to recognize the quarantine? It was decided that if a ship refused to stop, "the navy was to shoot at its rudders and propellers, disabling the vessel but, hopefully, avoiding any loss of lives or the sinking of the ship." <15> To think that we might have found it necessary to fire upon the Russian ships, reminds us of how close we really were to the possibility of armed conflict with the Soviet Union and, possible, nuclear destruction. Herbert Matthews writes that, "The chances of a nuclear exchange between the U.S. and the Soviet Union were, at one point during the crisis, 'between one and three and even,' as Kennedy said." <16>

Thus, we have seen that the Ex-Comm members were saddled with a great responsibility during those days of the Cuban Missile Crisis. The composition of the group, diverse and far-ranging in its political orientations, determined, to a large degree, the nature of their interaction and the advice they offered to the President. And while President Kennedy was by no means bound by the conclusions of the Ex-Comm, he certainly relied heavily on them for direction. One can speculate on how different things might have been had Ex-Comm been dominated by a few more hawkish individuals, or if Taylor or Acheson had been more successful in bringing others over to their viewpoint. There is a possibility that Kennedy might have been convinced to act differently. Fortunately, however, there were strong arguments for restraint and responsible action. The balance between the aggressive and the more conciliatory elements within the group produced a creative tension that resulted in a successful plan of action. They succeeded in both maintaining the prestige of the U.S. and in preventing the escalation of a conflict which held the potential for nuclear war.

### Notes

1 Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1969), p. 117.

2 Ibid., p. 50.

3 Abram. Chayes, *The Cuban Missile Crisis: International Crisis and the Role of Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 6.

4 Ibid., p. 14.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., p. 15.

7 Robert S. McNamara, "Introduction," in *Thirteen Days* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1969), p. 14.

8 Kennedy, p.49.

9 Ibid., p. 31.

10 Ibid., p. 37.

11 Ibid., p. 38.

12 Arthur M. Schlesinger, *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), p. 508.

13 Kennedy, p.48.

14 Ibid., p. 119.

15 Ibid., p. 61.

16 Herbert L. Matthews, *Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1964), p. 115.

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