

Elie Abel Oral History Interview – JFK #2, 4/10/1970
Administrative Information

Creator: Elie Abel

Interviewer: Dennis O'Brien

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Biographical Note

Abel, a foreign and domestic news correspondent, discusses his 1966 book *The Missile Crisis*, and the role the media played during the Kennedy Administration, among other issues.

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of Elie Abel

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page 15 line 10 through page 16 line 1
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Elie Abel
Elie Abel
June 3, 1975
Month, Day, Year

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June 23, 1975
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GRADUATE SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM
Office of the Dean

Journalism Building

June 3, 1975

Mr. John F. Stuart
Assistant Director of Archives
The John F. Kennedy Library
380 Trapelo Road
Waltham, Massachusetts 02154

Dear Mr. Stuart:

My thanks for the Oral History Interview.

I have signed the ^{file} releases you asked for. In the case of page 13 line 42 to page ¹⁴42 line 6; page 18 line 29 to page 19 line 15 and page 32 line 3 to line 35 I have, on second thought, decided that July 1, 1977 is a little early to be opening those passages to the public.

I have taken the liberty, therefore, of altering the effective date to July 1, 1985, roughly ten years from now.

As for Colonel Wright's diary, it is not in fact in my possession. I believe it was deposited at the Boston University Library. But I will have to check this and get back to you. Much the same applies to what you describe as the file of the MacNamara-Anderson incident. I will get in touch with my friends at BU to see what can be done about that.

Sincerely,

Elie Abel
Dean

EA/mm
Enc.

ELIE ABEL
JFK #2

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Second Oral History Interview

With

ELIE ABEL

April 10, 1970
New York, New York

By Dennis J. O'Brien

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'BRIEN: Well, I thought we might today take up some questions concerning the missile crisis, the writing of your book. One question that comes out of the book for me, as well as some of the other interviews I've done on the Cuban missile crisis, is the role of Rusk in this whole thing. You know, he's been criticized for not taking, you know, a kind of executive leadership at that time. Is it possible, or did you have the feeling in your putting the book together that perhaps the State Department people on that Committee Executive Committee of the National Security Council] had gotten together prior or early in that week once the missiles were first discovered, and arrived at a kind of working agreement with each other at all?

ABEL: No. I doubt that very much because Rusk repeated the performance during several key decisions having to do with the escalation of the war in Vietnam and later with stopping the bombing. I talked to him about this fairly recently, in December [1969], I think, and I was mindful of the problem I had with him on the missile crisis. He was, I think, the last person I talked to when I was wrapping up the research on that book because he kept postponing it. Finally I got to him and said, "Look, I've got to see you. I'm going off to London. The book has to be delivered. I really can't finish this book without your testimony." By this time, I had gone through George Ball, everybody else involved, and no Rusk. Finally he did agree to see me and we sat down and went through a most bizarre session in which I kept asking specific questions about what he had said, or felt or recommended or done at a given point. And he'd say, "I can't talk about that." I'd say, "But

look, the president is dead. The missile crisis is behind us. Everybody considers it a kind of triumph for good sense. Why are you now so reluctant?" He just wouldn't play. He kept saying, "When I leave this building, I'm going to walk out of here, taking nothing with me but my hat and my date book. I'm not taking any documents with me. I have no interest in writing books. I was the president's personal adviser. I told him certain things that maybe I didn't tell other people." Well, in the end I suppose I bullied him into producing a document by saying: "Now look, I've talked to everybody else who had any part in this thing: people in the White House, the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency], the Pentagon, and foreign governments. You're the only one who's playing hard to get. Now, I said, "I have the impression from what other people told me that you had no point of view, that you were opaque and fuzzy and so forth." That got him angry which turned out to be the right tactic because, in the end, he said, "Oh, I made a recommendation all right, but it's between me and the president." Well, I goaded him sufficiently so that at one point he said well, he would see and I was to come back the following day. Then he produced the paper that was in his files. It was a written recommendation to President Kennedy to go for a blockade instead of an air strike or an invasion. It pretty much summed up the discussion within the executive committee, but he signed his name to it. This was Dean Rusk to the president. Well, it's an odd way to behave. I had a subsequent flashback of this Russian attitude when I started working on a book that's now in the works which has to do with Vietnam. We talked, among others--by this time George Ball was out of the picture with Nick Katzenbach [Nicholas deB. Katzenbach] and General Wheeler [Earle G. Wheeler] and General Westmoreland [William C. Westmoreland] and lots of people, and ran into the same kind of thing. Nobody knew precisely what Dean Rusk's position was, for example, on whether we ought to go for a bombing halt in March, 1968. Subsequently, the president, President Johnson said that Dean Rusk had, in fact, proposed it on the fourth of March. Rusk had told me the same thing himself, but not while he was in office, only after he left. When I said to him, "How is it that your own staff in the State Department didn't know that you had initiated this?" He said, "That was by design. That's the way I operate. From the time I first became Secretary of State," he said, and I'm paraphrasing now, I don't have the actual quote here, "I made it my policy that no blue sky should ever show between me and the president." Now what he meant by that, he subsequently made clear, was that he would make recommendations directly to the president. If the president acted on them, he would, of course, go back and say, "The president wants us to do thus and such." If, on the other hand, the president ever turned down a recommendation of his, he didn't want people to know that he'd made the recommendation because this would seem to suggest that there was friction between him and the president.

ABEL: You see, he had a very peculiar definition again of what was the proper relationship between him and the president. It was the same with both presidents he served. It caused a certain amount of bafflement naturally on his staff.

O'BRIEN: Right. Then there was no, in any way that you can see in the missile crisis, attempt to operate.... [Interruption]

ABEL: No. I don't think there was any prearrangement. You might check this kind of thing with George Ball, but it doesn't sound like Rusk's way.... He was never completely frank with his own people Katzenbach will tell you that. Nick, moreover I think, felt that there were times when Rusk somewhat overestimated his own influence on the resident, but this was more in the Johnson era than the Kennedy era.

O'BRIEN: Well, putting the book together, did you find any strong anti-Robert Kennedy feeling among people in ExComm that you perhaps couldn't put in the book because of...

ABEL: Yes. There was some, from Adlai Stevenson for one. But I did put it in the book. Adlai felt it quite strongly; he spoke of Bobby's bull-in-the-china-shops attitude. Acheson [Dean G. Acheson] was very scornful of this young man who had no credentials as a diplomat who was presuming to advise his brother not McCone, because McCone--Bobby was supposed to be sort of McCone's friend in the Kennedy establishment; not Bob McNamara, of course because he was personally very close to Bobby. The Russian ambassador also had a warm, close relationship with Bobby. David Ormsby-Gore [William David Ormsby-Gore] like-wise. No, I think the main hostility encountered was from two men who otherwise didn't agree on anything, Acheson and Adlai Stevenson.

O'BRIEN: Well, in regard...

ABEL: Both viewed him as a kind of interloper, a callow youth....

O'BRIEN: On the other hand, some of the people around Robert Kennedy have often said that Dean Rusk and McGeorge Bundy lost their minds during this thing. Did you see any evidence of this?

ABEL: I think losing their minds is...

O'BRIEN: Well, that's the phrase.

ABEL: Yes. It's an overstatement. I think Mac Bundy did switch positions a couple of times, and this raised a certain amount of scorn in a particular circle. I don't have the feeling, though, that the people who were around Bobby Kennedy knew very much about what was happening at the time. I think after Jack's death a kind of mythology began to arise, to build, but I never had the feeling that the people who were very close to Bobby were of any great consequence at the time of the missile crisis, except for Nick Katzenbach, who was himself involved as Deputy Attorney General and who, for example, helped draft the blockade declaration, that kind of thing. I never heard Nick talk that way. No, I didn't encounter that kind of thing particularly. I think you do find it subsequently, after Jack was dead, because Bobby began to acquire tons new followers who were not even in Washington at the time. You know, a mythology began to be constructed.

People like Jack Newfield and Adam Walinsky and Peter Edelman [Peter B. Edelman] and so forth; they were not around at the time of the missile crisis.

O'BRIEN: Sure. Did you detect anything in writing the book that might have pointed towards an attempt on the part of the White House, particularly the president and the attorney general, to guide this thing in the direction of a diplomatic, or at least away from, you know, an air strike solution?

ABEL: Yes. I think, however, that the president was being enormously careful not to appear weak or irresolute. This was a direct consequence, I think, of the Bay of Pigs disaster which weighed heavily on his mind for the rest of his life. I think it was a factor when this situation boiled up. Don Wilson [Donald M. Wilson] will tell you, and others who were close to Bobby and to Jack, that the hallmark of the president's attitude was, "There will be no more disasters. I've got to be very careful about what I do, I have to appear very strong and very determined." This did not, in his view, necessarily mean going to an invasion or an air strike. He was very careful in dealing with the professional military who, on the whole, were much more willing to go into military action. He asked them some very tough questions repeatedly. He called in the head of the tactical air force--his name is in the book, I don't now remember it--twice that I know of, and said to him, "Now you-keep pleading for an air strike. If we let you have one, can you guarantee that you would not kill too many Cubans and that you would, in fact, eliminate all the missiles?" Well, that's kind of stacking the cards. As a guy who was in the air force myself at one time, I know that no air strike is a surgical operation. But the president was acting very shrewdly, turning their own language back on them. They were the ones who talked about a clean, surgical air strike. And he kept saying, "All right. How clean will it be? How many people will you kill?" Of course, when pressed, they couldn't honestly assure him on either point. I think Bobby sensed very early that there was nothing more reckless or more stupid than just going into direct military action. My own feeling is that George Ball influenced him in arriving at this conclusion more than anyone else. I don't know whom else he could've talked to. I suspect that Ball was the first to speak out against precipitate military action. Bobby personalized it and said, you know, "My brother will not be the Tojo of the Sixties and so forth." That came fairly early. Now, this may have been because in his private conversations with his brother he had developed perhaps a keener awareness than those outside the circle, outside the family circle in this case, of his brother's own predilections not to go to unnecessary violence. But certainly Bobby was the one who, in the presence of the hawks so to speak, with the help of McNamara and eventually even of Dillon [C. Douglas Dillon], swung the argument away from direct military action.

O'BRIEN: Right. Well, in your interviewing of--and you did, let me see, you touched almost every participant.

ABEL: Yes. Right.

O'BRIEN: Well, in doing your interviewing here and all, were you able to get a fairly clear picture of who was playing the role of devil's advocate, who in a sense was arguing very seriously on policy positions? In other words, Stevenson's role is another one that's been....

ABEL: Stevenson's role is, I think, somewhat misunderstood and sadly misrepresented. I tried to clarify that. I don't know whether I succeeded. To begin with, Stevenson lived in a different world; this has to be faced. Stevenson was the man who, whatever the decision, was going to have to stand up in the United Nations Security Council and plead the case for the United States. He therefore had a perfectly natural build-in requirement--and I think if Arthur Goldberg [Arthur J. Goldberg] had been the ambassador at that time he would have taken the same position. He wanted a case that would be defensible. Remember, Stevenson was burned very badly in the Bay of Pigs when he stood up there and denied that any American airplanes were involved. So he wanted to be goddamned sure. He also, as a man of appreciable experience in international affairs, could foresee that maybe those old missiles in Turkey would at some point become part of this bargain. He wanted the president to consider such possibilities at a time when others were unwilling even to discuss the idea because it seemed to them to smack of surrendering some vital position with a gun at your head. There was some posturing of this kind. As for Stevenson--I haven't always agreed with Adlai about everything, but it seems to me his role here was really quite an honorable one, and maybe even a brave one. I talked to him a good bit after it was over and just before his death. He was sad. He confessed, for example, that his initial reaction when Kennedy, Jack Kennedy, first told him about the missiles was anxiety, fear that this young man was going to do something foolish. He was upset by Bobby's behavior in the first day or two. In the end, he said to me, I think in New York or perhaps in London during the spring or summer of '65, that Bobby had turned out pretty well, that Bobby had seen the moral issue clearly, had seen the importance of unveiling this crisis when they did so that the US would be in the strongest possible moral position. And, kind of grudgingly, he said that Bobby had surprised him agreeably. He hadn't expected Bobby to be quite so sophisticated as that.

O'BRIEN: How did Stevenson read the sending of McCloy [John J. McCloy] as well as the Alsop [Stewart J. O. Alsop] and Bartlett article?

ABEL: Well, the Alsop-Bartlett article obviously hurt him very deeply.

O'BRIEN: How did he read it though? Did he see...

ABEL: I think he saw it, mistakenly, I believe--as a plot by Mac Bundy and/or Bobby Kennedy or both to hang him personally. Of course, part of his problem was that Bartlett had at the time no large reputation as an investigative reporter. I don't mean to downrate Charlie. I think he does some pretty important things at times, but, you know, his reputation leaped upward at the time when his friend Jack Kennedy became president. So the assumption inevitably was made that he was getting it straight from the horse's mouth. As, I suppose, he was.

O'BRIEN: Did he get it from the horse's mouth or from people like Bundy or even like...?

ABEL: I don't know to this day. I never really pursued that. I've made it a personal policy not to inquire too closely into where other people get their stories. I was busy getting my own. But Stevenson was hurt by it, very badly hurt. My guess is that at some point he threatened to resign because the White House very promptly issued a statement which was clearly designed to soothe his hurt feelings.

O'BRIEN: Of all the people in ExComm that you interviewed, who did you find was most helpful in providing a kind of recollection of the crisis in its entirety and the events that took place?

ABEL: I would say George Ball, Llewellyn Thompson [Llewellyn E. Thompson], and Bob McNamara.

O'BRIEN: How about Gilpatric?

ABEL: Gilpatric was helpful, extremely so. He added a certain number of details. So yes, on the military side, on the Pentagon side, Gilpatric as well. In a way the most helpful of all, but not by way of being an original source, was Paul Nitze [Paul H. Nitze] and for a special reason. Paul Nitze is a compulsive note taker. He's one of the few people who cannot sit through a meeting without jotting down names, who said what. He has his own skeletonized form of note taking. And when I started researching this book I had such a terrible time trying to resolve conflicts of recollection, that I was looking for somebody who might have kept a record. [This was before Bobby made his notes available to me.] And somebody--I can't remember--some friend of mine said, "Have you talked to Paul? He sits at every meeting and makes notes on yellow pads, and I'll bet he still has those notes." Well, it turned out he did. I couldn't have read them myself, but we sat down together. Paul was then secretary of the Navy. We sat down in his office, and for a whole afternoon waded through these notes. He was quite willing to help. So from that point of view, as I say, it helped greatly to corroborate bits of testimony from other people. There wasn't a great deal that was original in it but at least certain elements of confusion about who was in a room at what moment, who said what in response to something else--he had the most complete record then available to me.

O'BRIEN: In putting this book together, was there anything in regard to the intelligence sources on the crisis that you could not put in there? In other words, of how the pictures were gotten, perhaps some technical aspects?

ABEL: Well, the pictures make an interesting story in themselves, which I touch on in the book; but there's no reason not to go into more detail about it now. It took me something like four months to persuade the CIA to talk to me at all about the missile crisis. When they did, I was not surprised to discover that it was McCone himself who wanted to talk to me; he would not leave it to a subordinate. I submitted at his request a

series of written questions. Then I was invited out to Langley. We sat down, he handed me some written answers which weren't very communicative. I pressed him some more and started asking him some of the kinds of questions you're asking me at this point in an effort to fill certain gaps in the narrative. One of the things that I was troubled by was why had that U-2 plane been sent to that particular location on a particular day, the fourteenth of October. I knew the general background. I knew about the SAM [Surface-to-Air Missiles] missiles having been installed in various places. I asked McCone: "If the whole of western Cuba, had not been overflows for the better part of a month, why San Cristobal on the fourteenth?" And he kept saying he didn't know; he couldn't remember. Then at one point, out of the blue, he said, "Oh, some fellow at the Pentagon had an idea." And I said, "What fellow?" He said he didn't know. Well, I went back to the Pentagon, I think, in the first instance to Sylvester [Arthur Sylvester], and then eventually had a meal with McNamara, and appealed to them to find out. They, in the beginning, said they didn't know but they would go on searching; they simply weren't aware of anybody in the Defense Intelligence Agency. Then, weeks or months later, I received in the mail one day a copy of a citation, showing the Legion of Merit had been awarded to a Colonel J. R. Wright. The citation, which I print in the book, says specifically what it was for. He was the guy who had the hunch that maybe San Cristobal because of the quadrilaterals placement of the SAM missiles was a place to have another look at. By this time Colonel Wright had retired. Somehow it seems fated that the man responsible for this stroke of genius or of surmise should have retired with the Legion of Merit but no promotion. There was some difficulty about finding him, and I was on my way to England. But I had the citation so I was able to give him full credit.

Perhaps a year after the book was published, I was still living in England, and one day received a letter from a Colonel J. R. Wright with a big, thick enclosure. Colonel Wright, living in Coronado, California, had been looking through the paperback bookshelf in his corner drug store when he saw this book. He leafed through it, and he saw his name in the index. He didn't know why his name was in the index, so he looked it up. And he discovered that I was the only person who had ever given him any public credit. Now I don't to this day understand why the Pentagon bootlegged this Legion of Merit thing, because it's perfectly obvious that the citation was not announced to the press at the time it was made; maybe they were trying to protect some secret. At any rate he then, unsolicited, sent me his Cuban missile crisis diary which ran to some eighty pages: I have it in my papers and I'll put it eventually in the Kennedy Library.

O'BRIEN: Great. That's good. There wasn't any indication that the satellite reconnaissance would play a part in this?

ABEL: No. No. In fact, it all seemed to me to be through very old fashioned reconnaissance. The first intimations about rockets coming in and that kind of thing were all from live human witnesses, at least one of whom had to get out of Cuba to communicate his story because there was apparently no clandestine transmission service available. That was one reason for a delay in getting the first reports back.

O'BRIEN: In terms of the Russians that play a part in this, well, Gromyko [Andrei A. Gromyko], Dobrynin [Anatoly F. Dobrynin]...

ABEL: Yes. Fomin [Alexander S. Fomin].

O'BRIEN: ...and Fomin as well. Any indication that, let's say, Gromyko had, or did not have prior knowledge of this? Dobrynin?

ABEL: Well, I find it hard to believe that Gromyko did not have. I find it at least conceivable that Dobrynin did not. Bobby, till his dying day, believed that Dobrynin was telling the truth as he knew it when he denied that there were any missiles there--and Dobrynin, incidentally, used very precise language--missiles which were capable of reaching or threatening the United States. Now maybe Bobby was being a little naive about that. On the other hand.... I have been in situations involving other Soviet diplomats in which I have had the feeling that certain people are told no more than they absolutely need to know in order to make a convincing case. Gromyko is another story, because Gromyko was the Soviets number one foreign policy technician and had been for so many years that to me it was inconceivable that he should not have known what kinds of equipment were going to Cuba.

O'BRIEN: You know, you mentioned a rumor in the back of the book or in the last of the book that talks about the attempt on the part of the Russians to get an airplane to Brazil to get the body of the dead ambassador back. Did you follow that rumor out to any extent?

ABEL: You know, I've forgotten about it. I'm sure it's in the book.

O'BRIEN: All I was going to say is that it's my understanding there was some intelligence reports about that that came in. They were pretty sensitive sorts of things that were circulated around.

ABEL: You know, I don't remember that at all. I remember that an ambassador had drowned, I think, or something of that kind, and a plane was sent. But I've forgotten the time element. I don't remember how it fits. Maybe I can find it in the book.

O'BRIEN: Well, that's okay.

ABEL: I've got one copy here. But I don't.... Wasn't that somehow confused with Gromyko's departure from the United States?

O'BRIEN: Yes.

ABEL: Let me have a quick look here, maybe that's the reference.

O'BRIEN: The thing that I was going to relate to that is Fomin. Did you track Fomin's movements down before the meeting with Scali? Was he here in the United States during all that time?

ABEL: I don't know. He and Scali, of course, had known one another for some considerable time.

O'BRIEN: Right. But he had just recently come back in, hadn't he?

ABEL: Fomin.... Well, that I don't know, but Fomin had been in the embassy for some time and was listed in the diplomatic list. I didn't happen to know him. A good many other people did. As you may know, the way the Russians tend to operate in this field, they kind of parcel out various contacts with informative and influential Americans among members of their embassy staff. Each member of the embassy staff tries to have lunch or dinner at intervals with certain Americans. Now Scali happened to be on Fomin's list from way back. They had met a number of times earlier. Come to think of it that's the only way this could have worked. You see, if Fomin had called me, whom he didn't know, out of the blue, and said, "I've got to talk to you right away," I would immediately have been suspicious and probably would have told him I just couldn't make it. There was a little man I used to see, in fact there were two. There was one guy who was quasi-press and another one who was supposedly a disarmament expert and he loved to talk with me at lunch about arms control and that kind of thing. But I guess my little friend was not involved because I didn't hear from him throughout that whole period. You should check this with Scali himself--but I understand that when Fomin first started seeing Scali, perhaps a year and a half before this episode, Scali checked him out with some of our intelligence people. And they said they thought that he was a pretty big fish in the Russian intelligence apparatus. So Scali was alerted. You know, Scali had the impression that this guy was not just a minister or counsellor in the embassy. He had, I believe, received some intimation, whether from the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] or the CIA, that Fomin was quite an important man. I think that knowledge played its part in this. If he hadn't believed that he might not have jumped when Fomin called on him that way.

O'BRIEN: Right. Was there anything in the conversations between Fomin and Scali, that you knew of that didn't get in the book?

ABEL: No, not that I know of. Scali gave me copies of his own, memoranda to Rusk and Hilsman [Roger Hilsman, Jr.]. Now he may have had something to add. I doubt it though as the memoranda showed evidence of having been written in great haste and, you know, just banged out on a typewriter on copy paper.

O'BRIEN: Well, that brings up an interesting point on this business of security and a person like yourself, a person like Scali who works with an agency like the State Department. Now are you people put through a security clearance?

ABEL: No, not to my knowledge. I have no doubt the State Department has a file somewhere--I've never seen it. They must have impressions about us written down somewhere.

O'BRIEN: Well, do various intelligence agencies like the FBI domestically or the CIA ever come to you, or did they come to you those years to solicit any information about direct contacts?

ABEL: Not in Washington. On some overseas assignments, yes. But most often it was done through the ambassador. For example, I was involved as a reporter in covering certain of the events in Eastern Europe that led up to the Hungarian Revolution. There it was not a case really of the embassy people coming to me and saying, "Tell us what you know," or, "What was the substance of your conversation with so-and-so?" It was simply that they had information that we wanted and, on the other hand, got around the country more than they did. There was, in short, a mutuality of interest. In a place like Budapest or Warsaw or even Belgrade in those days it was not unnatural that perhaps once a week you would sit down with the ambassador and chew things over, not in the formal sense of being debriefed or anything like that. You know, comparing notes. "Have you seen so-and-so lately? What's your impression?" There were some cases in which it wasn't so much military intelligence that they were looking for as diplomatic intelligence of a very special kind. For example, I was once in Rumania at a time when we had very strained almost nonexistent relations with Rumania. Bob Thayer [Robert H. Thayer] was our minister at the time, but it was a period in which he had almost no contact with the Rumanian government. Well, I came in--I was the first American journalist who had been allowed to visit Rumania in something like six years--and I was invited to meet the prime minister and had an interview with him. Our minister had not seen the prime minister except from a distance at May Day in many months. So the embassy was very interested, naturally, in what the prime minister had told me. Now they could have waited until next day's *New York Times* arrived, five or six days later, but they asked me and I saw no harm in giving them an intimation beforehand of what was going to be in tomorrow's *Times*, no more and no less. In Washington, I have at various times met with CIA officials. The most common format is that someone like McCone or Dick Helms might have lunch or dinner with a group of journalists, generally when he had something to sell. I remember Allen Dulles [Allen W. Dulles] doing this once at a time when he was trying to disabuse us of the notion that there was a missile gap. This was before the 1960 election. He didn't succeed, I'm afraid, because he was talking in-such elliptical terms that very few of us understood what he was trying to tell us. He got into this complicated business about intentions and capabilities and so forth. But that generally was done through this kind of diplomatic correspondents' and columnists grapevine. There was always one colleague who knew the head of the CIA rather better than the rest of us and he could call up and say, you know, "Can you come and have lunch tomorrow?" generally in a club, sometimes in a restaurant. Dick Helms is, on the whole, more approachable than the others, I think. He used to be a newspaperman himself. In his case, I've had lunch with him at the Occidental Restaurant.... It is oddly the same restaurant in which Scali and Fomin met. Dick liked to eat there and generally sat in a corner table in

the main dining room. There he got away from CIA for an hour, met with friends at lunch and went back again.

O'BRIEN: Is it... Oh, let's say, when you need information, you need background information, can you obtain it from the intelligence agencies?

ABEL: Not very easily. They have a very funny system. In theory they don't have an information officer. In fact they do have a designated press contact [at the time of the missile crisis I believe it was Stanley Grogan, a retired army colonel]. You can call him at the office or at home and he will take your query and sometimes he'll call back. Other times he won't. Most often, you don't get an answer. There are times when he will say, "Well, we have nothing on that," or "We can't give you anything on that." On the other hand there have been occasions when they did come up with answers. But I found on the whole, that it was easier to deal with the State Department intelligence and research people and only in rare cases to go to the CIA directly. Because whether it was Hilsman or Tom Hughes [Thomas L. Hughes] who succeeded him--I don't know who has the job now--these guys sat with the CIA every day in the intelligence community, meetings. They had access to the same information. They were, I think, a little more savvy about the diplomatic aspects and also the public relations aspects.

O'BRIEN: Well getting back to the missile crisis for a few short things. In the interviews with the people in Defense or State, did you ever find an alternative plan, let's say, a fallback position to the air strike position?

ABEL: Well, the only one that I found was an invasion of Cuba if the air strike didn't work. Those two were interlocked. I think I list all the alternatives in the book. There were six at one point, some of which were a little naïve, I thought, but, you know, they were boxing the compass in the early stages.

O'BRIEN: Was there any fallback position to a stiff Khrushchev reply?

ABEL: Yes, an air strike Tuesday morning.

O'BRIEN: And that was it. There was no alternative to that one?

ABEL: Apparently not. Now, it had not been ordered. The planes were in position. The crews had been briefed and so forth but it still would have required an affirmative order by the president. In fact on the Saturday night, October 28, I think the--the 27th or 28th--when Bobby went to Dobrynin to deliver the reply to the famous secret letter, he was authorized to tell Dobrynin, and he did, that unless the answer was affirmative we would have to take direct military action early in the week. I think that's the way he put it. Or so he told me himself.

O'BRIEN: Hilsman's a rather interesting figure through, well, not only in the missile crisis, but throughout his tenure in the State Department. He tends to rub people the wrong way.

ABEL: Yes. Yes.

O'BRIEN: Why is that?

ABEL: Well, he's a little cocky. He's perhaps a little quick to leap to conclusions and I think maybe he was not in the tradition of the quiet man who runs the intelligence operation. He was making speeches; he had very close relations with a number of people in the press, which few if any of his predecessors to my knowledge had ever had. I think people like Mac Bundy had a kind of distaste for Hilsman which they could scarcely conceal.

O'BRIEN: Well, Hilsman has some difficulty in those years with Rusk and, as I understand, the vice president as well.

ABEL: Yes.

O'BRIEN: Did you get any insight into this?

ABEL: I don't know about the vice president except that Roger had a lot to do with knocking off Diem [Ngo Dinh Diem]. I think there were some, including the vice president, who felt that this was a misguided policy and that Hilsman had pushed much too hard in that direction. Of course, there are many people who feel that we couldn't have been any worse off--we might have been a little better off--if Diem were left alive. But Roger has a way, as you said, of rubbing people the wrong way. However, I've never found a journalist who on the whole didn't have a reasonable working relationship with Roger, and this in itself made him a rare animal in the State Department. He was always willing to talk.

O'BRIEN: Is that, perhaps, one of the reasons that he...

ABEL: I think so. Yes. I think there was a feeling among certain other officials that he was trying to promote himself. Remember he got to be assistant secretary of the Far East after that. He had a lot of enemies in the CIA, I think, too. Interestingly Bill Bundy [William P. Bundy] replaced him as Assistant Secretary for Far Eastern Affairs and Bill Bundy of course--came straight out of the CIA.

O'BRIEN: Well, let's take some other rubs there as well. How about Bundy and Rusk?

ABEL: I don't think Bundy had, shall we say, unlimited admiration for Rusk, but Bundy was, I think on the whole, a very discreet man. I think there was no love lost between them but Bundy was not, in my view, the kind of guy who would

have used his personal influence with the president to undercut or to try to get rid of Rusk. And, of course, Rusk outlasted all of them, to everybody's great surprise. But I felt that Mac may have contributed to the president's impression--of the State Department as a bowl of jelly. Well, there are a number of people here, very personable guars like Bowles --we've talked about Bundy--but Rostow and a number of people on the White House staff as well as over in State, George Ball, like that, who come into conflict in those years.

O'BRIEN: Does anything stand out in your recollections of this?

ABEL: On the whole, I think Bundy was taken much more seriously than Rostow and with reason, in my view. Rostow's glibness, his facility with what sounded like very brave theoretical designs that in fact had very little to do with reality, I think, rubbed a lot of people the wrong way when he was in the State Department. And, you know, he was demoted. He was kind of dumped out of Bundy's shop into policy planning. Now policy planning virtually ceased to exist as a meaningful activity in the US government from that day on because neither Rusk nor Ball would give him the time of day. On Vietnam because the situation lasted so long, Rostow has more of a track record, and of course, there he had advocated that we go to the use of air-sea power against North Vietnam some four years before we, in fact, did. He once gave me hell for pointing that out. This was after Kennedy was dead, the time the escalation had started in the winter of, spring of '65. I did a piece one day kind of raising questions about the utility of air strikes and saying in so many words that this wasn't going to win the war in the south [which was at that time the official justification for the bombing and tracing it all back to the original Rostow- Max Taylor [Maxwell Taylor] visit to Vietnam in '61 under Kennedy. My piece was broadcast--and made the president very unhappy.

But Rostow happened to be in Aspen at the time this happened and the president called him on the phone and said, "Well, Professor"--this was always a term of scorn when used by Lyndon Johnson--"what is this secret plan of yours that you told Elie Abel all about but that you haven't told me about yet?" Rostow, of course, hadn't seen the program that night and didn't know what the president was talking about, and he said that. The president didn't bother to explain. He said, "Professor, I just want you to know that if you want to go back to being a professor, you go on talking to Elie Abel." Oddly that didn't stand in his way when Bundy resigned and Walt was moved up into that position. He told me this story himself with some bitterness long afterward as if to say, "Why did you have to make my life more difficult?" He never denied that it was his plan and that it was an old plan, but apparently the president had forgotten about the plan of '61.

O'BRIEN: Well, going back to August of 1963 in the beginning--we touched on it a moment ago here--a coup in Vietnam and Hilsman's involvement, you know. As a reporter, were you aware of those telegrams that were going out in August?

ABEL: No, I was not then aware of them. I became aware later. I think I was out of the country. I missed part of this. I used to go overseas quite a lot, and I heard about it much later. Well, I've heard the message described most often as the--how do they call it--the Hilsman-Harriman-Forrestal [Michael V. Forrestal] cable.

O'BRIEN: Forrestal.

ABEL: Mike, and I never discussed it. But he worked on Bundy's staff and he was specifically dealing with Vietnam. So I have no doubt that he would have signed off on whatever instructions were sent to Saigon. But the implication was that Hilsman was the originator of this move and that he drafted the original cable.

O'BRIEN: Right. Well, after those go out and things sort of die down and the coup talk sort of dies down a bit, have you run across anything that indicates that the White House or the State Department or anyone in on this, in this sense, picked it up again before the actual coup took place in November?

ABEL: No, I just don't happen to know about that. I'm sorry. There are clear limits to my knowledge of some of these inner matters. The missile crisis I think I do know quite a lot about because I worked very hard at reconstructing it, but I never did a comparable job on the Diem affair.

O'BRIEN: This is a kind of a sensitive question that I'll leave it completely up to you with the understanding that you do have complete control over the manuscript. I think it would be very helpful for someone that's going to be looking into the history of this period to know, particularly in regard to your writings, who some of your better sources were of more information, you know, not only on the missile crisis but in the years that you were working with the State Department as a reporter.

ABEL: Yes. Well....

O'BRIEN: Who could you call at the office, the straight one, the story man?

ABEL: Yes. Well, I think--I have to go back again--I mentioned George Ball and Tommy Thompson [Llewellyn E. Thompson] earlier. I always went back to them. They were of great use. There were specific people in various areas: Bill Sullivan [William H. Sullivan], for example, who later became ambassador to Laos and was one of Harriman's aides, Harriman himself, Cyrus Vance, all the people you might expect really, Paul Nitze. Now, as for the Pentagon people I didn't as a rule bother them very much. I was dealing more in the diplomatic area. But as it happened, I had a personal--I think I mentioned the last time I knew McNamara personally quite well and through him met a lot of his people. Some of them are still close friends; Cy Vance, for example, Fred Wyle who was Deputy Assistant Secretary under Nitze in International Security Affairs at the Pentagon.

O'BRIEN: Which brings up a rather interesting point. One of the things that we left has suggested to us that there is, of course, a kind of New York conspiracy, sort of international conspiracy which is really an old right-wing kind of...

ABEL: Exactly. It's that famous Eastern establishment...

O'BRIEN: ...charge.

ABEL: ...which to some people means one thing, and to some others means something else, but I know what you mean.

O'BRIEN: I think it would be relevant to just simply ask the question: Is there such a thing? Well, my answer's not going to be terribly original. I think Ken Galbraith [John Kenneth Galbraith] wrote a tongue-in-cheek piece for *Esquire* years ago in which he said, yes, there was an establishment and Dean Rusk was the head of it. Well, Dean seems to be out of it now. The University of Georgia somehow doesn't figure in this particular daisy chain.

ABEL: But the Council on Foreign Relations, [Inc.]--I think that comes as close to it as anything that I can think of. I had been in this town like two days--remember I haven't lived here for twenty-one years--then I found out that I was supposed to be sitting on a panel at the Council on Foreign Relations. I'd never even been inside the building, and you know, I received a note saying that the next meeting is next Thursday and Professor Ithiel de Sola Pool will present a paper and Eugene Rostow is the chairman and you are expected as a member of the panel. I'd never been asked whether I wanted to be on the panel. As it turned out, I was perfectly happy to. Three days later I had a call from Joe Johnson at the Carnegie Foundation saying that he had written a letter recommending me for membership in the Council. He hoped that was all right. Cy Vance seconded it, I believe, and I think in this sense there is that kind of contact. Sure, these people know each other. All of them have been in government service. I think this is what ties them together. Some were in military service; some were in the State Department; some were on special missions for one president or another. There's a whole older group that was involved with the Marshall Plan and the foundation of NATO. Well, that's more than twenty years ago now. We tend to forget that. But as a young reporter, I met most of these people. So when I went down through the list of Council members it was not unnatural that every second or third name on the list should be somebody I knew. But why is that so surprising? I think that the New Left in its search for a conspiracy theory misses the point that the number of people in this country with a serious interest; in international affairs is really quite small. Those who, through the accident of career opportunities or military service or a temporary appointment in the government, got to know!, each other in those days are likely to go on knowing each other because they do have a certain similarity of interests. This doesn't mean that they have a single party line. They include Republicans and Democrats, liberal Republicans and liberal Democrats and conservatives of both kinds. But yes, they do know each other. They tend to read each other's speeches. I mean, to this extent Agnew may have a point. It's really a very small point. But there are not that many journalists involved. There are a few journalists, some academics and a great many lawyers for some reason.

O'BRIEN: Right. On the international law thing. It really starts in the twenties. Here's another sensitive thing particularly for you since you are in journalism. I wonder if you might express comment on some of the working reporters during the

Kennedy Administration, some of the good ones, some of the people who were writing incisive stuff, also some of the people who were not writing very good stuff.

ABEL: Well, that's kind of hard to do. For one thing I don't, you know, I don't remember everybody's copy all that vividly. I think there were some who were awfully well informed and wrote well. I have no hesitation in mentioning some of them: Hugh Sidey of *Time* magazine; Alan Lotten of the *Wall Street Journal*. In a totally different vein, though she frequently caught the essence of things--Mary McGrory. I think Stewart Alsop was well-informed; Henry Brandon [Oscar Henry Brandon] of the *London Sunday Times*, very well-informed, very acute; Scotty Reston [James B. Reston] always, not all that close to the Kennedys, but they respected him. Max Frankel of the *New York Times*--then and now one of the very best. Peter Lisagor [Peter I. Lisagor] of the *Chicago Daily News* who is a very good professional and who is well-informed in any administration he's ever covered, but who I think did feel a little closer to the Kennedys than some others though he tried not to show it--was one of those who didn't get thrown off when Lyndon Johnson succeeded. Well, I suppose there are dozens more but on the diplomatic reporting side not all that many. Scali was always well-informed, but I thought at times pressed a little too hard, bang, bang, you know, great excitements when the excitements weren't all that great. Who else can I think of? My first days at NBC National Broadcasting Company in the Kennedy Administration, CBS [Columbia Broadcasting System] for some reason wasn't covering the State Department in a very professional way. It wasn't till Marvin Kalb [Martin L. Kalb] came back from Russia that they put him there. The *Washington Post*, of course, had a couple of guys, still has them, who are very well-informed; Murrey Marder, and Chalmers Roberts.

O'BRIEN: Well, this is about ready to run out on this side. I've got really about four more specific questions and then....

[END SIDE 1, TAPE 1]

[BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1]

O'BRIEN: Well, specifically, Chester Bowles back during the original Bay of Pigs thing was accused within the administration of talking too much to people in the department, the press. Did he talk to the press?

ABEL: Yes. He talked very directly to Scotty Reston who wrote a story, and that cawed most of the trouble. He didn't tell me a great deal except to leave me with the impression that he had opposed the decision, which I have no doubt he did. But he seemed to me a little eager to make that point very early, and this, fairly naturally, got back--not in my case, but when Scotty printed it in the paper you know, it was there, and I think he lost.... He never had many friends in the administration. I suppose his closest friend was Abe Chayes [Abram Chayes], the legal adviser of the State Department. But he was tolerated in the beginning, the toleration quickly ran out.

O'BRIEN: Another thing too. In '63--it was after the test ban--I can't recall, I think it was Frankel had a story on the test ban, really angry at the president. George Ball, in fact, did a memo, as I understand, about press leaks in the department, and started tightening up things. Did you feel that...

ABEL: No, but I think.... I can't now remember all that vividly. I was in Moscow for the signing of the test ban treaty, but I then stayed on in Europe for some weeks or months after that, and so I may have missed that whole episode. It's astonishing how when you're away from Washington for three days, you miss this kind of scuttlebutt. Incidentally, that test ban ceremony was interesting because the president was very careful to invite to it every American who had even the remotest connection with the lousy treaty negotiation. For example, Arthur Dean [Arthur H. Dean], who was actually out of government service at that time. He told me it was the greatest honor of his life when the president insisted that he and Mrs. Dean should be in Moscow for the signing of the treaty. Adlai came over. A gaggle of senators including Fulbright [J. William Fulbright] and Saltonstall [Leverett Saltonstall] and others. We all wound up staying in the same, kind of VIP, hostel called the Soviets Kaya, which is not a normal commercial hotel. The American "delegatsia" were all together. It's kind of amusing seeing Moscow through their eyes, going to the peasant market with Bill Fulbright. You know all those years he's been expertising about Russia and here he was bargaining for a melon with a peasant from Tashkent. Adlai and I happened to have adjoining bedrooms and we talked a good bit, several evenings we sat and drank together. It's a funny sort of feeling to sit with Adlai Stevenson in Moscow. I mentioned in the book that Khrushchev gave him a hard time when he got there over his performance in the missile crisis. He told me that himself. So everybody who was anybody, as I say--our friend who later headed the arms control, Bill Foster [William C. Foster], was there. It was an odd moment because there is a kind of Russian disarmament establishment as well. There are a certain number of familiar faces whom you used to see at Geneva. They were all there too at the big party in St. George's Hall in the Kremlin. Well, that's off the subject.

O'BRIEN: Very much on. Well, it's been suggested that TV came of age as a media, as a news media in those years, particularly the convention in '60 and on. How do you reflect it back over that and particularly in reporting of foreign affairs? Is it mature, let's say, in '61?

ABEL: Yes.

O'BRIEN: Is it a ma...

ABEL: I think there was a kind of maturing. I can only speak from the point of view of NBC. I joined NBC in the autumn of '61 as a fairly experienced newspaperman, hardly a novice [though I was a novice in terms of electronics and worrying about whether your nose was shining]. It happened to be, I think, a kind of vintage period in television. The reason was a purely practical one: the man then in charge of NBC, the president of NBC, Bob Kintner [Robert E. Kintner], had come over from ABC [American

Broadcasting Company]; he had taken over a company that was not in very good shape. In terms of ratings it was way, way-behind CBS. He made a calculated decision that he couldn't hope to match CBS's popular entertainment programs, but he wanted people to be aware of NBC's existence. So he went into the business of pre-empting regularly scheduled programs very, very frequently whenever any kind of new situation seemed to demand extensive coverage, and put us on the air. You know, we had lots of freedom. We did lots of exciting things. I think I was involved--the first year I was at NBC--in twelve or fourteen documentaries. Well, today they don't do ten a year. But in those days I alone as a newcomer was involved in that many. There were some fairly memorable ones. In a sense this book grew out of a television program. Very soon after the crisis was resolved, I guess on the 29th of October, we went on the air with I guess the first ninety minute documentary ever attempted on television called Clear and Present Danger, in which we tried for the first time to reconstruct a chronology of what had happened in the crisis. It was very hard to do because nobody knew anything at that point. We set out, I on the diplomatic side, Sander Vanocur at the White House, and Peter Hackes [Peter S. Hackes] at the Pentagon, to try to piece this together. The show opened with a rather effective eighteen minute sequence in which the three of us took turns kind of picking up the narrative thread. You know, Hackes would say what was happening in the military side and then he'd throw it to me, and I'd say at that moment they were meeting in Rusk's room and there was a message handed to him and so forth. That program was, I think, a very brave beginning for this kind of reporting in depth. I'm sorry to say that in recent years they haven't followed through on the promise that I think we first began to develop there--the use of television--to reach a mass audience with informed and sophisticated reporting about rather intricate international and national events. I think the reason somewhat perversely, is that the Kintner strategy worked too well. NBC became a success and pretty soon it was overhauling CBS in the standings in this derby the advertising agencies run. Right now they're ahead of CBS slightly, faintly, by one tenth of a percentage point. And at that point somehow, news and public affairs becomes much less important.

O'BRIEN: Was there an awareness that at this point at NBC there was going to be political ramifications. In other words, I guess the pop phrase today is the "new politics" which of course, this kind of thing in the news media certainly contributed to. Was there an awareness of that?

ABEL: Well, I think in a very general sense there was, namely that you were reaching millions of people who maybe had never been, reached before, and this was likely to have a kind of effect. The country would not be the same again as a result of this. But, you know, nobody, it seems to me, could have had a very clear notion of precisely how this was going to work out. There were still a tendency on the part of some to sneer at broadcast journalism; you know, serious journalism was the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*. I think it was a sign, maybe, that the broadcasters were beginning to take themselves more seriously when they went out and hired Bill Lawrence [William H. Lawrence] and John Scali at ABC, myself at NBC, people of that kind who had established reputations as reporters and weren't kids. The networks were going out to buy savvy, to buy reputations. It was in that sense quite an exciting period. There are still some things they do

well, but they seem now to be much less ambitious than they were. I think partly it's the result of Kintner's departure.

O'BRIEN: How do you assess the effect of this--changes in the media and the exposure--on the government, on the bureaucracy as well as the presidency?

ABEL: Well, that's kind of baffling, you know. One reason for it is that because the major news programs come on, or used to come on at 6:30, sometimes 7 o'clock, most senior government officials would not have come home by that time. So there was a crazy kind of gap developing between the people who were watching, in the tens of millions, and the officials who weren't and who didn't know what was being said. I think Rusk at a certain point started watching in his office before going home. Rusk was a great aficionado--I guess he still is--of the *Today* show, because somehow that fitted in better with his life style. He used to shave in the morning and drink coffee and watch the *Today* show. So for him that was the all important program. The *Today* show's audience is a small fraction of the Huntley-Brinkley show or the Cronkite [Walter L. Cronkite, Jr.] show audience. He didn't seem to be aware of that. So I think there was, in the beginning, a kind of gap there. Subsequently the State Department, among others, began to realize that millions of people were, in fact, getting very vivid first-hand impressions from television about matters of national and international importance and, they started logging, monitoring these programs, and they would mimeograph what we had said on the air the night before, so that the policy people in the government had access to it even if they hadn't seen the show.

O'BRIEN: Well, does the bureaucracy begin to start tuning to this and become...

ABEL: I suspect very late. I suspect there was a gap, a long gap.... I kept running into people, not just in the bureaucracy, but in the intellectual world, who after I'd been on the air almost every day for seven years, were still quite sure that I was with the *New York Times* because they didn't watch television. Sometimes their wives knew who I was because the women did watch. This, of course, applies not merely to the bureaucracy. I can think of a good friend of mine, a very distinguished American literary critic called Lionel Trilling on his campus. Lionel and his wife Diana [Stubin Trilling] came over to England while we were living there--he was visiting professor at Oxford for a year. One day there was a Columbia University alumni dinner in London. Lionel spoke and Jacques Barzun [Jacques M. Barzun]. I remember Diana Trilling came running up to me--this was '66, I'd been on the air for five years--and she said, "Oh, I'm afraid they've messed up the place cards." And I said, "what do you mean?" And she said, "They've got you down as representing NBC." And I said, "What's wrong with that, Diana?" She said, "You're with the *New York Times*." I said, "I resigned from the *New York Times* in 1959. Well, she, being a somewhat strong-minded woman, proceeded to argue the case with me.

O'BRIEN: Well, going back to the book *The Missile Crisis*, is there anything that isn't in the book that you feel that should be in this interview?

ABEL: Well, there is some.... There's one.... Well, there's more detail than I put in the book--I don't have here. I have it in my files at home which I'd be glad to supply some times.

O'BRIEN: Well, if you want us to, we can xerox them.

ABEL: That has to do with the extended conversation--you may remember the incident in which McNamara and Admiral Anderson [George W. Anderson] have a big fight in the Navy Flag Plot. That was an amusing and revealing episode. I pieced together, frankly, out of the recollections of McNamara and Gilpatric and one or two other people in the room, on the whole a much more lively and damning account of this conversation than. I then allowed myself to print, partly because Anderson kept denying that certain thing had been said. So in the end, I reduced it in scale somewhat. But I still have the file on that at home, and I did have in mind eventually depositing the whole thing in the Kennedy Library, which is something that I promised Bobby years ago I would do, but somehow never got around to. How's the Kennedy Library coming by the way?

O'BRIEN: Well, it's coming, but it's...

ABEL: ...slow.

O'BRIEN: But when it's going to arise...

ABEL: I see. They still have this warehouse, I take it, in wherever, Medford or someplace?

O'BRIEN: Waltham.

ABEL: Waltham.

O'BRIEN: Some of the papers are open and, in fact, some of the oral history interviews are open, some of the less sort of sensitive ones.

ABEL: Incidentally speaking of oral history Bill Leuchtenburg [William E. Leuchtenburg] came up to me the other day and said had I been interviewed on the Columbia oral history project. I said no, I was being interviewed for the Kennedy Library. I thought that was enough.

O'BRIEN: Well, if you'd like to make your transcript available to them from this interview, if you want to...

ABEL: Yes. We might do that some...

O'BRIEN: ...more than happy to provide an extra one for them.

ABEL: Yes. Yes. You know, he sort of has an interest in. that kind of very recent history and...

O'BRIEN: Well, I'm through with the prepared questions. Do you have anything to add?

ABEL: No, not particularly. On this, I mean things that might have been added, let me think about that a little bit. If--you know, I haven't really thought about the book very much in recent years. It keeps coming up, people want to interview me--a lot of students want to interview me about it, people who are doing a dissertation or something. But my memory gets foggy at times. But let me have a look through some of the material. There may be one or two more points. If there are, I'm perfectly happy to maybe write something up and send it to you.

O'BRIEN: Well, I get into New York on the average of about once every two weeks, so there's no problem. I can stop by...

ABEL: Are you still.... I mean are you doing this kind of thing more or less full time or...

O'BRIEN: Oh, yes. I'm going to do it full time until about September 1st, than go back to college teaching.

[END OF INTERVIEW #2]

APPENDIX

225 South Knott Avenue, Apt. 41
Anaheim, California.
November 15, 1966

Mr. Elie Abel
National Broadcasting Company,
4 Queen Anne Street
London W.I.
England.

It was with great surprise, and considerable pleasure, that I found my name mentioned on page 15 and again on page 17 of the Bantam edition of your recent book, "The Missile Crisis." Being intensely interested in all aspects of this very critical period in our nation's history, as well as being deeply involved in the vital period immediately preceding the period covered by your book, I recently purchased a copy from a local book store for my personal library. As many reviewers have already said it reads like a thriller, yet I, for one, know that there is no fiction in your fine reporting, and that the events which you so clearly depict actually did take place.

Sometime after that October, after the World had settled down again, it occurred to me that it might be useful to set forth, in as near a chronological sequence as possible, my activities during this most critical period. At the time, there was always the possibility of an investigation by the Congress, or by some other agency, into the sequence of events surrounding the crisis to determine who did what, and why we didn't find out about the missiles sooner. In such event, an account of the role I played in these events, while they were still fresh in my mind, might come in handy. Enclosed is a copy of the unclassified diary I wrote at that time. I doubt that this information was made available to you during your research although there was a copy of it with the records of the Caribbean Survey Group to which you probably did not have access due to its very high security classification, but you might be interested in reading it now. You can understand, this is "a worm's s eye view," because I was not privy to all of the conferences between the president and his many advisors, officials, and otherwise. By the same token, my conclusion is, which proved frighteningly correct, were based on "soft" intelligence and no matter how right one feels, one doesn't go to the President of the United States with this type of intelligence without "hard" information to back it up. It wasn't until the photos were in, and had been interpreted, that we could go to President Kennedy. Incidentally, it was three days after the first photos were shown to the president before I was told the results of the mission. By that time, I had already isolated three other targets for special coverage as possible missile sites, all of which proved positive, and included the first evidence of construction of IRBM launching facilities.

Much has been said about why the Russians put MRBMs in Cuba, all of which pure speculation, of course. Allow me, then, to add my own speculation to the mass. It is my opinion, and was at the time, that Mr. Khrushchev wanted to have these missiles fully

operational not later than November 1, 1962, just a few days prior to our off-year elections. At that time, the United States in particular, that he had MRBMs in Cuba. He would hope thereby to influence our voters at the polls to return a Congress made up largely of the opposition party and give the Administration a hostile Congress to deal with, especially on Foreign Policy. He had tried this before, unsuccessfully, and this was to be his biggest ploy. Although the timing of the disclosure of the missiles was looked on by some in our country as being purely political, I can assure you that there was nothing political connected with it. Had we known exactly what we had at an earlier date, we would not have hesitated, as we did not hesitate at the time, to have informed the president. If there was anything political in the timing, it was entirely on the part of the Kremlin. Khrushchev almost pulled it off, his troops in Cuba been more energetic, had they worked according to his timetable, and had the weather cooperated, he would have had his operational missiles ready before November 1, 1962. We may cuss the tropical hurricanes, but this time one of them may have saved us from some embarrassing nuclear blackmail. On the other hand, that particular storm prevented us from confirming the presence of missiles for almost two weeks.

I hope that this rather long epistle has not bored you, but I was so fascinated by your book that I felt that I must write you. Your book is the most accurate account of that fateful October that I have ever read or heard about. Please allow me to congratulate you for a job well done.

Sincerely,
JOHN R. WRIGHT, JR.
Colonel, US Army-Retired,

13 March 1962

1962 DIARY

In the interest of keeping the record straight, it now appears that the juxtaposition of my duties during the year 1962 and especially during the Crisis over Cuba, is in order. The time may come when such a record may be most useful in determining just where the responsibility rested for producing the critical intelligence on the Soviet build-up and their introduction of strategic missiles and bombers into Cuba during this period.

On 2 January 1962, I, along with the other personnel assigned to the Office of Estimates Intelligence Directorate, J-2, Joint Staff, was transferred to the newly organized Office of Estimates, Defense Intelligence Agency. At that time, I was assigned the duty of Chief, Latin American Division, Office of Estimates, DIA, with a staff of one civilian clerk-typist shared with Eastern Division, Office of Estimates, DIA. My Division was authorized four officers, one professional civilian and one clerk-typist. It was not known when these people would become available. Efforts to recruit qualified personnel for these positions were not successful.

On 23 January 1962, I received a telephone call from Colonel Karl T. Gould, Office of Estimates, DIA, instructing me to report at once to Brigadier Colonel William H. Craig for full-time duty on a special project. General Craig was then Deputy Chief, Special Activities Division, Plans and Policies Directorate, J-5, Joint Staff. I explained to Colonel Gould that I was the only one in the Latin American Division, that I was working on a new NIE, and other actions, and asked for guidance. Colonel Gould said that he was aware of this, but that he had not been asked, but directed, to make me available to General Craig. He didn't know how long the project would last, but that I was to be on it for an indefinite period of time. He said that someone would take over from me temporarily, probably Colonel Roy Nigra. That was all he knew at that time.

I reported to General Craig immediately. He informed me that he was relieved of all other duties in order to head up a group of officers from the Joint Staff to work on this "very high priority, sensitive project," and that General Wheeler [Earle G. Wheeler] had selected me to be the DIA representative. I was instructed to attend a meeting later that day, in one of the Joint Staff conference rooms, when he would talk to the rest of the group and brief us all on the project. There were a number of actions which had to be undertaken at once and be completed by 4 February. I was informed that the activities of the group were to be very closely held but that I was free to inform General Carroll and General Quinn of DIA of my activities.

Apart from the meeting with the rest of the group, I was designated Deputy Chief of the project in addition to my duties as DIA representative. In this I was responsible for getting the offices to be occupied by the group set up for work. It was necessary that all personnel assigned to this group be cleared for Special Intelligence in order that free discussion of intelligence information could be allowed in the normal course of our duties. Further, in order to provide the group with the intelligence required for the project at hand, it was necessary to have situation maps and other charts of a highly sensitive nature posted with current information from all sources. In order to achieve this desirable condition, arrangements were made to secure the area for the storage and display of highly classified materials. Special alarm systems were installed, combination locks were placed on all doors,

and map boards with curtains were erected. The area was inspected by representatives of SSO, JCS and the JCS Security Officer inspected the area for hidden pick-up devices. An operations-intelligence NCO was assigned and given the establishment of necessary files. Secure telephones were installed, disconnect devices were on all regular telephones. Security regulations formulated and published to all concerned. A list of knowledgeable persons was started and maintained.

In order that necessary intelligence could be obtained upon which to ___ the actions of the group, I developed a list of 20 Essential Elements of Information. This list was handcarried by me to General Quinn, Deputy Director, Defense Intelligence Agency on 13 February. At that time, I brought General Quinn up to date on my ___ and the actions of the group. He accepted the EEIs and stated that the full facilities of the DIA were at my disposal on this project. These EEIs were to become the basis for requirements levied upon the Intelligence Community during March and April, 1962, and resulted in obtaining the information necessary for the National decisions during the October crisis.

My normal point of contact in DIA for intelligence information was the Current Intelligence/Indications Center, Directorate for Processing, DIA—specifically the Latin American desk of Free World Branch of that office. Incoming information was delivered to Miss Margaret Peed, and after it was read by her, passed to me for whatever use I could make of it. I was not responsible for producing current items of intelligence on this material. I was responsible for keeping the special project group up-to-date on the latest intelligence information on their area of interest. I was not responsible for producing intelligence estimates on the area. I was responsible for liaison between the project group and those elements of DIA. And the military service intelligence offices, working on any part of the area of interest. I did do much talking with the current intelligence people and the estimates during this period, and I did review draft national estimates on the subject. But the responsibility rested with the elements of DIA having cognizance over these matters.

Nevertheless, my office did maintain the only situation map in the Washington area, and we kept the only files available to DIA after the crisis to prepare after action reports. Although it was not an assigned responsibility, files provided DIA with the only relatively complete source of information on what was received, the source of the information, and the basis for the subsequent judgment ___ DIA accomplished its mission during the period immediately preceding the October crisis. At the time of the crisis, I was the most knowledgeable person in DIA on Cuba. I was the only person in the military intelligence community who was reading all the agent and refugee interrogation reports, collating the significant material with other sources, and maintaining a detailed order of battle map. That I was able to provide DIA with this background was not the result of instructions, guidance, or in the normal course of my assigned duties. It was because I had an insatiable curiosity, some intelligence background, and a desire to get the job done in the most expeditious fashion regardless of what procedure was followed. By having developed personal contacts in places which could cut through the normal red-tape, I was able to jet information faster, from better sources, check the results in less time than I could have by following prescribed procedure. In the period of almost one year, I had two contacts with General Carroll, one with General Quinn, and one with Admiral Frankel. From these officers I received no guidance on my activities or procedures. They did allow me to go direct to those of DIA necessary to get the job done without interference, but they gave me no instructions at any

time. Since I was working directly for them during this period, I never saw General Hall, Director for Processing, on any occasion.

As a result of following the situation in Cuba very closely, about the middle of August 1962 I became convinced that the Soviets were introducing modern sophisticated weapons into Cuba. The first indication of this activity came from a group of refugees who had left Cuba early in August and had been processed through the joint CIA/DOD operated Caribbean Admission Center at OpaLocka, Florida. They reported the arrival in Cuban ports of a large group of Soviet ships during, the week 29 July to 5 August. They reported that these ships, five of which were passenger ships, brought Soviet soldiers and "missiles." They described what they saw and in addition to "missiles" reported the presence of "vans, cranes, trucks, long trailers, tracked prime movers, tanks, armored personnel carriers" which were unloaded by Soviet personnel under cover of darkness and under strict security measures including the exclusion of all Cubans from the area during the unloading. While these reports were unsubstantiated by other evidence, that pattern and the detail of the reports led us to believe that they were in all probability true. Further checking with the Scientific and Technical Branch of CIIC led me to identify the SA-2 surface-to-air missile system as the probable equipment involved. S&T did not agree as the type of radar identified by the refugee reports was not associated with the SA-2. I felt that these radars could have been misidentified since the observers were not trained to recognize military electronic equipment. Consequently, I requested the Special Activities Office, DIA, to have the photo interpreters at the National Photo Operation Center, after the next high altitude reconnaissance mission, look at these specific areas to see if SA-2s could be identified. These three areas were designated by me from locations described by the refugee reports as being locations where the equipment unloaded from the Soviet ships was seen being deployed. The date of this action was 15 August. On 17 August, Lt. Davis, USN, then on duty with SAO, called me aside in the CIIC office and showed me two photos which he had from NPIC. These photos had been made by a flight on 5 August, and they showed envoys of equipment at two of the three spots previously designated by me. Examination of the photos revealed military equipment in the process of being dispersed into open fields. Much of the materiel was still on the road, lined up in convoy formation, as though it had just arrived at the destination, but some long trailers and their prime movers had moved off the road. The trailers were covered with what appeared to be canvas so that their cargos could not be seen. Nevertheless, it was apparent that the cargos were long and slim objects. I was then convinced that these were missiles and most probably SA-2s. These objects had been missed in the readout of the 5 August photography until attention was directed to the specific area by my request. Subsequent photography, on 29 August, proved that these were indeed SA-2s. These photos were shown to General Carroll but the photo interpreters refused to confirm the presence of SA-2s on the basis of the 5 August pictures.

Despite the presence of SA-2s, no great interest in the Cuban developments was generated in the intelligence community. As time went on, additional locations were discovered through the medium of the high altitude photo flights, but still no great interest was developed. It was generally accepted that these missiles were for the purpose of improving the defense of the island against a possible attempt by exiles to invade for the purpose of overthrowing, the Castro regime. They posed no offensive threat by themselves, and were regarded as a logical step by the Soviets in other areas of the world. Even receipt of

motor torpedo boats equipped with missiles, the KOMARs, while deployed, was looked upon as being for the purpose of patrolling the Cuban coasts against possible invasion attempts or to prevent the escape of dissident elements. It was rationalized that the short range of these boats and their missiles posed no threat to any other country, except perhaps Haiti. It was not until late September that DIA realized that Cuba was becoming important and it was then that they set up the Cuban Situation Room to follow developments.

When the SA-2a appeared, I began to look for larger objects in the reports coming in from refugees. Up to this time, there had been many reports of "missile activity" of many kinds. Each of these reports which were definite enough to permit checking was checked against existing photography to determine its validity. At least 25-30 such reports were checked, but none revealed any activity which could be identified with missiles. Many were not checkable. None of these reports described any object in the medium or intermediate range of missiles. After the SA-2s were discovered, many of the missile reports were related to known SA-2 sites. After coastal cruise missiles were identified, some of the reports related them. However, it was not until 21 September that a report describing an object 65 feet in length was received in Washington.

In order to fully understand the process by which I discovered the presence of MRBM's in Cuba, it is necessary to know the atmosphere which prevailed in the intelligence environment at the time. For months, reports from refugees and from the exiles community in Miami had been received which were generously laced with rumors, many of which were obviously designed to goad the US into some overt action against the Castro regime. Several propaganda machines were in operation, both in this country and in other countries. Many exiles, hoping to regain their lost wealth in Cuba, were devoting large sums to developing a climate within the US which would demand that the US Government oust Castro by whatever means necessary and restore Cuba to these former owners. News articles, radio and TV programs, lobbying in Congress, and pressure on the president himself were all part of this effort. It was the job of intelligence agencies to cut through this propaganda fog and extract real picture. Further, only "hard" intelligence was good enough for policy makers estimates were simply not believe because they were not based on concrete evidence. Therefore, even had there been evidence to support a contention that offensive weapons of any sort were being introduced into Cuba, it would not have held up without concrete proof capable of close scrutiny in a court of law. Consequently, when the introduction of SA-2s told intelligence analysts that they more obviously for the purpose of hiding something much more dangerous to the security of the US, these analysts could not go to the policy makers for decisions affecting the security of the US without concrete proof.

It was in this climate that a report was received on 21 September from a recently arrived refugee, a mature former accountant, that during the hours of docking on the night of 12 September, while driving in Havana, that he had seen a series of 20 long objects measuring 65-75 feet in length, being transported to the airfield at Camp Libertad. This refugee stated that the objects looked to him like missiles, that they were covered with canvas tents the outline of fins could be seen under the canvas, and that the objects were so long that they extended over the cab of the prime cover. During the interrogation process, the refugee was asked to sketch what he had reported, which he had did. From a manual of Soviet equipment provided the interrogators, this refuge was able to pick out are object which he said closely resembled the objects he had seen. This object was labeled in the manual "SS-4

(SHYSTER) MRBM. This was the first report of an object of this length received in the Washington area. When I received this report, after it had been seen by the CIIC personnel, I immediately was alerted. In order to determine the validity of the report, I immediately called the ACSI Exploitation Branch, Mrs. Dorothe Matlack, and asked her to find out from Colonel Kail at the CAC how the interrogation of this refugee was conducted, specifically whether he had described the objects seen before being shown the recognition or after. Before the day was over I was, informed that the Colonel Kail had described over the telephone the procedure used: the source had reported the objects, described them, sketched them, had been given the recognition manual and asked to look it over and see if anything in it looked like what he had observed, had selected the plate marked "SS-(SHYSTER)" as being the object seen, and that he had then been subjected to cross-examination by several other interrogators in an attempt to break his story, but without success. He stuck to his story. He further stated that his brother-in-law, who worked on the Havana docks, had told him that a Soviet ship had docked in Havana on either 10 or 11 September and that the missiles had probably been unloaded from that ship. This report was shown to several people in DIA, but none of them took it very seriously, in the absence of other information to confirm it.

Meanwhile, high altitude reconnaissance flights were continuing to be flown, and each one revealed additional SA-2 sites being constructed. As the readouts of photography from these flights was received, my NCO would plot the locations the SA-2s on our situation map, together with any other significant information from these readouts. By the last week in September, some fifteen SA-2 sites had been identified and confirmed and plotted. Also, by this time, the location of many camps occupied, according to reports by Soviet personnel had been noted and plotted. These plots revealed a larger number of Soviet camps in the Pinar del Rio province than in any of the other Cuban provinces and _____ were in indication of larger amount of interest on the part of the Soviets in this province than in the others. It was at this time, looking at the situation map, that I began to put several things together. The pattern of the deployment of the SA-2s was most curious. There were apparent military reasons for most of the locations than known, but in the Pinar del Rio province there were six sites which did not have an apparent military reason. I tried to justify these sites using all know military installations and reports of military activity then in my possessions, but nothing proved out. About this time, my NCO recalled a recently received report of a large restricted area, reportedly controlled by the Soviets, from which all Cubans had been evacuated. At my urging, he retrieved this report from our files, and we then plotted the area described on the map. It fell within the area guarded by three of the Soviet missiles. Still, there was nothing to show that the purpose of this area was, but it occurred to me that it might be interesting to see just what targets could be covered by missiles having a range of 700 to 1100 nautical miles if located within this area. Accordingly, I put a pin in the center of the area, and using a radius of nautical miles and then 1100 nautical miles, drew concentric circles. The area enclosed by these circles was very revealing! From this location, the Soviets could cover the Southeastern part of the US including Washington, DC, Central American capitals, the Panama Canal, and the oil fields at Maricao, Venezuela. MRBMs located here could give the Soviets a decided military advantage.

Thus, the pattern of the SA-2 sites, the reported presence of MRBMs, and the large restricted area in Pinar del Rio when put together led to the hypothesis that the Soviets could be setting up strategic missiles in Cuba. Not completely trusting my own analysis of these

indications, I explained my thesis to the other members of the project group, and asked them to find the holes. They agreed that I had a very interesting hypothesis, but I was careful to note that I had no definite proof. A little later, I explained the same hypothesis to General Johnson who had by then become Chief of the project. On the afternoon of 28 September. I had occasion to visit the Vice Director of the Joint Staff, General Reynolds, on another and I took the occasion to explain the same hypothesis to him. After he had heard me out, he asked to whom I had given this information. I explained then that the idea had just been formulated and that he was the only one outside of the project who had heard it. He said that he thought it should be given to the Sec Def and the JCS at their next meeting on Monday. I informed him that Captain Hadden, USN, of our project group would give a briefing at the Monday meeting, and that the material could be included in his briefing. At his direction, this was done. I prepared the notes, and Captain Hadden gave the briefing. I was present as backup. This was 1 October 1962. The hypothesis; which was carefully explained is in theory at that time, evoked several questions from the SecDef. He was then as taking steps to confirm or deny the hypothesis.

Prior to the above meeting, I had furnished the SAO, DIA with a written copy of the analysis and the hypothesis thus formulated, and requested that area in Pinar del Rio be made a target for overhead reconnaissance. At the time, I stated that despite the presence of SA-2s in the area which were probably operational at this time. I felt that it was vital that we determine what was going on in this area and that it could be of serious consequence. I felt that it was in the national interest to risk the loss of another U-2 in order to obtain this information, and I so stated. This analysis became the intelligence justification for DIA's req to the USIB COMOR to target this specific area for an overflight. However, it was not until 14 October that an overflight of the area in question was made. The result that flight, the first one by SAC, was spectacular. It revealed the Soviets establishing MRBMs near San Cristobal, one of the anchor points of the large restricted area in Pinar del Rio.

The rest is history. My job was done. DIA took over in total. In the ensuing week I assisted in the effort by providing information from my vast background, by opening my files to DIA for do failed study, by assisting in compiling the Intelligence Community's report on the Cuban crisis to the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Committee, and by making myself available for such use as the DIA might make of me.

In retrospect, I was the only person in the entire Intelligence Community who was following the activities in Cuba on a daily basis, I had the only up-to-date situation map, and I had the most complete files of intelligence information on Cuba for the year 1962. I was apparently the only one to recognize the Soviet presence in Cuba for what it really was--a colossal gamble that the US wouldn't find out what they were doing until it was a fait accompli. I did all this in addition to my duties as Deputy Chief of a special project and with the assistance of only one person; an extremely fine operations NCO who prior to his assignment to the special project had had no experience in intelligence. The great volume of information which flowed through the intelligence agencies during this period was due almost entirely to the list of EEI which I developed in February and which formed the basis for many requirements levied on the Intelligence Community, without which the necessary information for the President to make the national decisions and to prove to the world the Soviet activities in Cuba would not have been collected.

JOHN R. WRIGHT, Jr.

Colonel, USA.

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