

## **13 DAYS: AN INSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE**

**With Robert S. McNamara and Theodore Sorensen; Moderated by Tom Oliphant**

**John F. Kennedy Library and Foundation**

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**JOHN SHATTUCK:** Good evening. I'm John Shattuck, the CEO of the John F. Kennedy Library Foundation. And on behalf of Deborah Leff, the Library Director, and our sponsors, Boston Capital, the Lowell Institute, and our media partners, Boston Globe, WBUR, and Boston.com-- I want to welcome all of you to this very exciting program at the Kennedy Library.

Tonight, we are inaugurating a series of forums about a crisis forty years ago this month, that took place over what historians agree were 13 of the most perilous days in world history. The Cuban Missile Crisis was the event more than any other that shaped the course of the Kennedy presidency and the way it would be remembered for generations to come.

It was the event above all that defined the nature of the cold war and demonstrated how to survive it. And in the great stream of events that took place over President Kennedy's thousand days in office, the Cuban Missile Crisis was the one that most revealed the strength of the President's character and the quality of his leadership.

The background of the Crisis was simple. Nikita Khrushchev expected the United States to invade Cuba and drive Fidel Castro from office some time before the end of 1962. Khrushchev thought he had a daring idea about how to deter the invasion, while, at the same time, demonstrating to the world that the Soviets could compete with the U.S. in missile power. He decided secretly to send offensive nuclear missiles to Cuba, and then to call Kennedy's bluff when they were installed.

As we know, President Kennedy did not let that happen. But the means he used to achieve that end were complex and subtle. And his leadership speaks across decades as Americans today confront another crisis under a different President. President Kennedy's approach to the Cuban Missile Crisis is important to understand today perhaps more than at any other time in the 40 years since October, 1962.

In his monumental biography of President Kennedy, Ted Sorensen wrote, and I quote, "Above all, Kennedy believed in retaining a choice. Not a choice between red or dead, or holocaust of humiliation, but a variety of military options in the event of aggression. An opportunity for time and maneuver in the instruments of diplomacy, and a balanced approach to every crisis which combined both defense and diplomacy."

Before introducing our distinguished panel, we'd like to show you a brief film of President Kennedy addressing the nation at the beginning of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

[video]

Our speakers tonight were at President Kennedy's side throughout the fateful 13 days of the Cuban Missile Crisis. They were, as you know, at the heart of the Kennedy Administration, and no one was more aware of their contributions than the President himself.

In his foreword to the classic *Decision-Making in the White House*, a book written by Ted Sorensen in 1963 when he was serving as the President's Special Counsel, President Kennedy wrote, and I quote, "The author of this book has been an astute and sensitive collaborator in the presidential enterprise. You have isolated the elements in presidential decision with such perception and precision."

Ted Sorensen, by his presence and his eloquence, links the legacy of John F. Kennedy to the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For 11 years, from 1954 to 1963-- 9 years-- he served as policy advisor, legal counsel, and speechwriter to Senator and then President Kennedy. He was deeply involved in every presidential major decision from the Cuban Missile Crisis, to the framing of the nation's civil rights legislation, to the decision to go to the moon.

And he worked tirelessly at the President's side through all the moments of that brief complex and shining time. And when it was over, he wrote the 1965 biography from which I quoted earlier, *Kennedy*, which became an international best seller. And remains the standard against which other studies of the Kennedy presidency are often measured

Former Secretary of State Dean Acheson once wrote of Robert McNamara, and I quote, "Except for General George C. Marshall, I do not know of any department head who, during the half-century I have observed government in Washington, has so profoundly enhanced the position, power, and security of the United States."

After serving in the U.S. Army Air Corps in the Second World War where he developed logistical systems, Robert McNamara went to work for the Ford Motor Company, becoming its president for one month, I believe, in 1960 before being snatched away to become the Secretary of Defense in the Kennedy Administration. He served Presidents Kennedy and Johnson in that position, leaving in 1968 to become President of the World Bank until his retirement in 1981.

Secretary McNamara and Ted Sorensen played central roles throughout the Cuban Missile Crisis. As a member of the Executive Committee, both were the first forceful proponents, or at least Secretary McNamara, was of an air attack on Cuba. But then, along with Robert Kennedy and Ted Sorensen, Secretary McNamara quickly changed his mind to support an embargo. Many historians have written that when McNamara and Sorensen backed the naval quarantine, the President was able to consider this a viable option.

President Kennedy relied heavily on Secretary McNamara to control the military leaders who uniformly advocated a stronger plan of action, that is to say, more military action. After the Crisis, the President famously remarked, "The military are mad. They wanted to invade. It's lucky for us we had McNamara over there in Defense."

Tom Oliphant, our moderator this evening, is no stranger to the Kennedy Library and, indeed, to the Cuban Missile Crisis because, at the age of 17, Tom tells me, that he was an exchange student in Northern Norway. And was immediately sent out by the American Embassy to describe what the American position was, and responded soon to a political council saying, "Northern Norway is on board." [laughter]

He had many other experiences following that. He has appeared frequently at our public forums. He is a national political columnist for the *Boston Globe* in Washington. During his 31 distinguished years at *The Globe*, Tom has covered every presidential campaign since President Nixon's election in 1968.

In addition to politics, he has written extensively on national economic trends and issues. He was part of the team of writers that covered *The Globe's* Pulitzer Prize-winning stories on school desegregation in Boston in the 1970's. He frequently appears on national news programs such as "The News Hour" on Public Television.

Please join me in welcoming again Ted Sorensen, Robert McNamara, and Tom Oliphant as they inaugurate this 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary exploration at this critical moment in our nation's history of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

[APPLAUSE]

**TED SORENSEN:** Forty years ago this month, the United States had prevailed in what historians have since called the most dangerous crisis in the history of mankind. And it prevailed clearly because of superior leadership. I do not demean or minimize Soviet Chairman Khrushchev's statesmanship in holding back the firing of the missiles when urged to do so by Fidel Castro, and in withdrawing the missiles when he realized that his gamble had failed. But the leadership demonstrated by John F. Kennedy, as documented time and again, is what made all the difference in enabling the United States to secure all of its objectives.

The dismantling and withdrawal of all offensive weapons, both missiles and bombs from Cuba, and their return to the Soviet Union, all under inspection and surveillance, first is to be by the United Nations, and Mr. Castro at the U.N. coming into Cuba for that purpose. Then the United States Air Force provided that surveillance instead.

All of this was achieved 13 days after the brilliant photo interpreters of the Intelligence community decided that those little scratches in the ground that they could see from tens of thousands of feet up in the air were actually the beginnings of intermediate nuclear missile bases, missiles capable of reaching any part of the western hemisphere.

What would the President of the United States have been expected to do in those circumstances? Well, first he would have been expected to convene the National Security Council, a traditional conventional decision-making body.

Second, these days, but even in those days, I suppose, the President would have been expected to take a poll and see what public opinion might favor, and to see if there were any other ways to explore means of exploiting this opportunity to show manhood and toughness in election year.

The third, given the fact that the missiles were there and were being prepared for completion and firing, he would have rushed into a decision, demonstrating that toughness in an early decisive action.

The fourth, he would have gone on the air and demonized his adversary, calling for a regime change in the Soviet Union, [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] and painting Mr. Khrushchev as a person of evil.

Six, if I'm counting these correctly, he would undoubtedly have engaged in other rhetoric that might well have gotten somewhat ahead of actual strategy.

Seven, he certainly would have refused to communicate with the enemy, much less negotiate. This was a matter of life or death, and one doesn't communicate with evil enemies in that situation.

Eight, he would have made certain that the United States did it by itself. No allies. Don't involve the United Nations. Don't bring in any backseat drivers. Don't pay any attention to what a lot of fancy pants in the State Department call International Law. [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER]

Nine, he would have bypassed the United Nations and any other international organizations, as well.

Ten, he would have rather quickly and easily considered only two options, easy ones. One is to bomb the hell out of those missiles. And the other extreme is to write a stiff diplomatic note. Too complicated to try to consider all of the options in between.

Eleven, we had the nuclear power, far greater nuclear power than the Soviet Union had. So why didn't we rely on our nuclear power to make this a decisive contest and to get a decisive outcome early?

Twelve, there was still at that time the problem of Fidel Castro, a nasty irritant and a thorn in the side of the United States, only 90 miles from our shore. The Bay of Pigs had failed. Castro had

been gloating. Here was the excuse. Here was the opportunity to invade Cuba after the missiles and take Cuba away from Castro, as one of Kennedy's advisors put it.

Thirteen, pay attention to-- as John said in his introduction-- pay attention to the recommendations of the Joint Chiefs, particularly when they were shared by the Congressional leaders who were convening to fight Kennedy before he went on the air. The recommendations of showing steel, a harshly military response, show those Commies what the United States was like.

One of his other advisors said, it goes back to Lenin. Lenin always advised the Soviets, go forward with a bayonet. If it encounters steel, you go back. If it encounters mush, you continue. And most of the Joint Chiefs thought that a naval quarantine accompanied by some diplomatic maneuvers was mush. But Kennedy clearly would have gone toward the bombing and invasion that they recommended, had he been picking the conventional approach.

Next, there was no need to show evidence of this threat to the American people or Congress or the United Nations, or even to our allies. That might compromise sources and methods of intelligence, and it might simply lead to more questions and criticism from our allies. So he would have kept the evidence to himself.

Next, having agreed with his advisors early in the game that the U2 surveillance was all important so that we would know what was going on at all times with these missiles, if a U2 surveillance plane were ever shot down, the United States military would have to respond and retaliate immediately and knock out any Soviet-- it would have to be Soviet-- surface-to-air missile that shot down our U2.

And then finally, as we reach-- I guess this is Number 16-- finally, as we reach the end of the second week, two letters arrive from Khrushchev. The first may have been a little jumbled, but the tone seemed hopeful. The second was hard and said that he would agree to pull the missiles out of Cuba if we agreed to pull NATO missiles out of Turkey. What a quick and easy way that was to end the crisis. Sell out Turkey; sell out NATO, accept Khrushchev's offer without any confusion, and pull the missiles out.

That's what an ordinary President might well have done, certainly what he would have been expected to do. The truth of the matter is, Kennedy did none of the above. Instead of convening a meeting of the National Security Council, he convened those particular advisors in government whose judgment he trusted the most. And had he not done so, had he convened only the NSC and people like Under Secretary of Defense Gilpatric, and Soviet Expert Llewellyn Thompson, and Attorney General Bobby Kennedy, and Secretary of Treasury Dillon, and I might add, even Special Counsel Sorensen would not have been sitting and participating in that decision-making.

The second, he did not take a poll, and he was scrupulous about not exploiting the crisis for political purposes, and making certain that no one on his team exploited it for political purposes.

Third, he did not rush into a decision. Instead, he took advantage of the fact that the Soviets did not know that we knew, and used the time gained thereby to consider options carefully, not to rush in before we knew what it really was we were rushing into and what the possible consequences might be.

Fourth, he did not launch a preemptive strike, as recommended by the military. He knew that a preemptive strike rules out all other options, that it violates International Law, that it kills innocent civilians, that it forces the other side into a position of escalation.

Fifth, he did not demonize his adversary. He did not call for a regime change. He instead set out to continue using a back channel of communications that had been open with Khrushchev a year beforehand and actually engaged through that channel, as well as through the United Nations in negotiations.

Negotiations, yes, he was willing to expose himself to the risk that some Republican might charge that he was a war wimp. Defined last week by former Congressman Andrew Jacobs, a war wimp, he said, is usually someone who talks a great deal about sending other people off to war, but has never gotten around to it himself.

John F. Kennedy was no war wimp. He had been a hero in World War II in his service in the United States Navy, and he was not afraid of pressure from the Chiefs or criticism from the Right about focusing too much on peace. He was a man who was devoted to peace. And those of you who were here last April when I talked about the Kennedy Foreign Policy know how strongly I feel about it and how strongly he felt about it, and demonstrated that at that time.

He, of course, did not bypass the allies. He sent high level briefers to the Prime Minister of Great Britain, the President of France, the Chancellor of West Germany to explain in detail the crisis that was faced, and what the United States was going to do about it, and why. He took the U.S. case to the United Nations. And perhaps most important, he took the U.S. case to the Organization of the American States, all of the Latin American countries, and obtained a unanimous vote not only supporting, but endorsing, sponsoring and participating in the blockade which gave it legal legitimacy under International Law and made all the difference in the world to both our allies and our adversaries at that time.

He kept his eye on the main threat. He did not consider Cuba or Castro as the main threat. The Soviet Union all over the world, particularly in Berlin, was our greatest risk at that time. His intention was to remove the weapons of mass destruction that Khrushchev had secretly and surreptitiously in undercover and deception placed outside the Soviet borders. Get rid of those weapons, that's what we needed to do, not get rid of Castro. He posed no comparable threat, irritating as he might be, to the United States.

To do that, he went through his reasons and specifics with the American people on television, and he presented the actual pictures of the missile sites at the United Nations with a brilliant intervention by our U.N. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson. He thought the evidence had to be shown if we were going to enjoy world support. He showed that evidence, and we enjoyed that support. We enjoyed it worldwide.

People forget that even in Africa, a neutral, peace loving continent, the nations of Guinea and Senegal denied Soviet planes on their way to Cuba landing and refueling rights, a very important early sign to Khrushchev that he was being isolated from the rest of the world, and that his gamble had failed.

When the U2 was shot down and the Chiefs pressed to retaliate immediately, Kennedy said, "Not so fast. Yes, we agreed that we would take out anyone who shot down our U2, but not so fast. Let's wait and make certain who authorized that shot. Let's see what happens with the correspondence and negotiations that we're now engaged in with Khrushchev." Had the United States done otherwise, had we bombed the intermediate range nuclear missile sites, had we bombed all of the other air fields and aircraft that the U.S. Air Force said would have to be bombed across the breadth and length of Cuba, requiring a follow-up invasion, which is what the Joint Chiefs and most of the Congressional leaders wanted anyway.

We now know, as Bob will tell you in more detail, that the local Soviet commanders had nuclear weapons which they were authorized to use against any American attack. And we also know that once one side steps on the nuclear ladder of escalation, it doesn't take long before both sides wrap the ... (inaudible) of that ladder and there's not much left in the world but ashes and smoke.

I certainly agree that John, with Dean Acheson's phrase, but I have to tell you that when Dean Acheson came to our meeting as an outside advisor, was asked what he would do, he recommended bombing the missile sites. He was asked, "Well, what would the Soviets do in response?" "Well," he said, "I know them pretty well. They will all feel compelled to bomb U.S. or NATO missile sites such as those in Turkey."

"Well, then, what will we do?"

"Well, under the NATO Agreement, we would then be required to bomb Soviet sites, inside the Soviet Union."

"Well, then what will they do?"

"Then we would hope by that time cooler heads would prevail." [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER]

Some years later he said in an interview in *Esquire Magazine* that the Kennedys got through the Missile Crisis just by damned good luck. And I was asked to comment on that by a reporter, and I said, "Yes, it is true that the Kennedys had a great deal of luck in the Missile Crisis. They were lucky they didn't rely on Dean Acheson's advice." [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER]

In any event, the decision was made to ignore the second letter under which Khrushchev offered a quick solution to the crisis that would have sold out our allies, and instead to respond to the first letter and respond in a way that enabled or persuaded Khrushchev the very next morning to accept the terms of a peaceful resolution.

Luck had, I'm sure, something to do with it, but leadership had a lot more.

[APPLAUSE]

**ROBERT McNAMARA:** Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I have long thought that Ted Sorensen was one of the two or three brightest people I've ever met. Therefore, you shouldn't be surprised when I open my remarks by saying I agree in total with what he said. [laughter] We avoided nuclear war-- I'm going to talk about luck in a moment-- but we avoided nuclear war.

We would have been in nuclear war had it not been for President Kennedy's leadership. Ted and I developed our remarks tonight without knowing what the other was going to say, and you will find I duplicate in part what he said. But some of these points are worth repeating twice.

I don't believe that today we as a nation, or we as a world, understand how close the world came to nuclear disaster 40 years ago. And I don't believe we've learned the lessons from that.

At the end of the 13 days, luck also, as Ted implied, played a part. But we wouldn't have survived the 13 days had JFK not shaped and directed the way in which his senior advisors confronted the crisis.

And he began within—literally-- within a few minutes of the time on Tuesday morning, October 16, when McGeorge Bundy presented him with the photographs showing the missiles were there. The missiles had been moved into Cuba under the cloak of deceit as Ted mentioned. That had considerable influence on the requirement that we move them out of there. They were targeting U.S. East coast cities putting 90 million Americans at risk.

And because we hadn't anticipated the action by the Soviets, as Ted implied we'd been told by senior Soviet diplomats they weren't there and they wouldn't be put there. So we hadn't formulated and debated alternative ways of addressing such a crisis.

But the President immediately recognized we have to force the missiles out. But he wanted to do that without going to war. And, therefore, within minutes after McGeorge Bundy presented him the evidence of the missiles in Cuba, he made three vitally important decisions.

First, he said that only a limited number of senior Defense Department, State Department, National Security Advisor's Office, and CIA officials would be informed of it. It would be established as what was called an "Executive Committee".

Secondly, they were told to limit the number of individuals in their departments who were informed of the information, as Ted said, to ensure that the Congress, the press, and the public wouldn't learn of the crisis until the President had decided how to respond to it.

And finally, thirdly, the Executive Committee was asked to assemble immediately to identify alternative courses of action that they would propose in kinds of each, without the President present. And not to bring a recommendation to him until it was either unanimous or until it was clear that they couldn't agree on a specific sort of action-- course of action. And then to offer the alternatives.

And particularly emphasized, "Take whatever time you need to make the decision." And it took us five or six days of heated argument, sometimes 18 hours a day to come to the point where we were in disagreement. And we could bring to him alternatives, and the pros and cons of each. No other decision of preventing war was important because those decisions he took within minutes of the time he received the information of the missiles in Cuba.

Why was it so important? Because when the Executive Committee met that Tuesday morning within perhaps two hours of the time he had received the photographs, it was almost unanimous in favor of an immediate attack. That's what we would have recommended unwisely. Had it been taken through the normal channels, as Ted said, the National Security Council.

And had we recommended that, and had he acted on it, nuclear war would have erupted without any question. And that's what he prevented.

Now by the end of the week the Executive Committee had agreed to present two alternatives to the President. One, as Ted said, was the quarantine to prevent the Soviets from delivering additional military equipment to Cuba. And the other was an air strike to be followed almost certainly by a sea and land invasion.

The President scheduled the final review of those two alternatives for October 21. It was held in the Oval Room, an absolutely gorgeous room in the family quarters of the White House, ringed with Cezanne paintings that Jackie had chosen, and persuaded the National Gallery to loan her.

I recall that meeting vividly. Perhaps 17 or 18 people were present, including two or three outsiders, such as Dean Acheson and Jack McCloy. The President asked Max Taylor, General Taylor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, to present the case for the attack. And for me to present the arguments against the attack, and in favor of the quarantine.

After the two presentations, he went around the room and asked each person what he would recommend. The majority favored the attack.

The President then turned to General Sweeney. General Sweeney was then the Commander of the U.S. Air Force Fighter Command. And he was the designated commander of the air attack on Cuba if one were authorized. The first day's air strike- the first day's planned air strike was to be huge, 1080 sorties, more than any single day's air attack on Kosovo.

And it was to be followed by a sea and land invasion. We had 180,000 troops mobilized in Southeast U.S. ports should it be necessary to take it to Cuba.

After each person had indicated their choice, the President then turned to General Sweeney, and he said, "Was he confident that his air strike would destroy all of the missiles and all of the nuclear warheads?" I could have kissed Sweeney for his reply. He said, "Mr. President, we have the finest Air Force in the world. If we can't do the job, nobody can. It's an attack we have practiced over and over again. But, when I say there's no chance for one or two or three nuclear warheads and missiles will survive, no, I can't say that."

What responsible President would have accepted the risk of even one nuclear warhead detonating on a major U.S. city? Hundreds of thousands of Americans would have been killed. And very likely, additional nuclear attacks on both sides would have followed. So I felt immediately after Sweeney's comment that whatever action we took would start with the quarantine. And it did indeed, on October 24.

But, by Saturday, October 27, I think perhaps the most critical day of the crisis, Khrushchev had not indicated he'd removed the missiles. The Executive Committee debated all day what to do. At the time, the CIA said they did not believe there were any nuclear warheads on the island of Cuba.

They estimated that the first 20 would arrive on a ship within three or four days. Reconnaissance photographs showed that the missiles were close to becoming operational. Therefore, if a military attack were to be carried out, it would have to be launched before the warheads arrived and the missiles became operational.

Much of Saturday, the 27<sup>th</sup> of October was spent arguing what to do about it. A big problem. We considered Khrushchev's offer, as Ted said, to take the missiles out of Cuba if we'd remove the U.S. Jupiters from Turkey. Both Turkey and NATO were strongly opposed to that action.

About four o'clock Saturday afternoon, October 27<sup>th</sup>, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Taylor, stated to President Kennedy, "The Chiefs unanimously recommended attack within about 30 hours. That is to say, Monday morning." And the majority of the President's civilian advisors shared that view.

But the President said, in effect, "I'm not going to take this nation to war over a pile of junk." It was acknowledged by all of us that the Jupiter missiles were obsolete, likely to be ineffective.

So at the end of the day, the President sent Bobby with a message to the Soviet Ambassador to the U.S. stating that we would agree to one of Khrushchev's proposals. We would agree not to invade Cuba if he removed the missiles. In addition, Bobby was to tell the Ambassador that the President had ordered the Jupiters out of Turkey, but that was not part of the deal. And if Khrushchev ever indicated it was, the Jupiters would be put back in Turkey.

Now, at the time, this is where luck came in. Events on both sides were slipping out of control. A U.S. U2 reconnaissance aircraft, as Ted said, was shot down on Friday. Khrushchev had anticipated that, if the U2 were shot down, it would be flying at about 75,000 feet. The Cuban anti-aircraft would not attack it. But the Soviets had serviced their missile there, and they could.

If it were attacked and shot down, Khrushchev reasoned we would think it a deliberate escalation on his part. He didn't want to escalate. And therefore, before the U2 flew over, he had issued specific orders to General Pliyev, the Soviet Commander in Cuba. In his autobiography, as a matter of fact, he says Cuba shot it down because the Soviets had ordered him not to do it.

At about the same time, another U2 on a weather mission over Alaska strayed across the Soviet border with the risk that the Soviets would interpret that flight as a prelude to a U.S. attack on the Soviet homeland. And would take action accordingly.

Most importantly, it wasn't until 29 years later, after Saturday, September 27, 1962, it wasn't until 29 years later that we learned the intelligence reports were totally wrong. At the time the Chiefs recommended attack, at the time the majority of President Kennedy's civilian advisors supported that, the Soviets had 162 nuclear warheads on the soil of Cuba, about 90 to face an invasion force, and about 70 with intermediate range missiles targeted on U.S. East Coast cities.

When we received that information in Havana in a meeting chaired by Castro in January 1992, I was so shocked. We're talking 29 years after the event. I was so shocked, I asked Castro three questions. I said, "Were you aware the warheads were in Cuba? Secondly, would you have

recommended their use? And thirdly, what would have been the effect on Cuba had you done so?"

And Castro's answer sent a chill down my spine. He said, and I quote, "We started from the assumption if there was an invasion of Cuba, war would erupt. We were certain of that. We had been forced to pay that price that we would disappear." That's the exact word he used. "We would disappear."

"Would I have been ready to use the nuclear weapons? Yes. I would agree to use the nuclear weapons. Indeed, I did recommend to Khrushchev that the invented invasion you were talking about, we used nuclear weapons. If Mr. McNamara and Mr. Kennedy had been in our place, had their country been invaded, their country was going to be occupied, I believe they would have used nuclear weapons."

I hope that President Kennedy and I would not have behaved as Castro suggested we would have. His decision would have destroyed his country. But human beings are fallible. We know we all make mistakes. In our daily lives, mistakes are costly, but we try to learn from them. In conventional war, they cost lives.

Any military commander who's honest with you would tell you that he's made serious mistakes costing lives in operations he's commanded in the war. Just look at what's happened in Afghanistan the last few weeks. We, the U.S., killed friendly forces, Canadians. We, the U.S., killed an Afghan wedding party. Those are minor incidents in war.

But military operations are much more complex than civilian operations. The variables are more. The causal relationship between actions and the variables, and response to the variable are less clear. So there's not going to be any learning period in nuclear operations. You make one mistake, you're going to destroy nations.

And therefore, I believe strongly that the indefinite combination of human fallibility and nuclear weapons will lead to destruction of nations. And that has vast implications for our current nuclear policy and the world's current nuclear policy.

I'm probably running over my time, but I want to say one last word about the President that I believe underlay and shaped his approach to the Missile Crisis. On countless occasions after the President's death, I was asked, "What would he have done about Vietnam, had he lived?" And for 30 year, I refused to answer the question. I saw no gain to our nation in speculation by me or, as a matter of fact, by others about how the President would have acted.

But by 1995, as I was writing a book about Vietnam, the title of which was *In Retrospect*, I felt differently. And in that book, I wrote and I quote:

"Having reviewed the record in detail and with the advantage of hindsight, I think it highly probable that had President Kennedy lived, he would have pulled us out of Vietnam. He would have concluded that the South Vietnamese were incapable of defending themselves, that Saigon's grave political weakness made it unwise to try to offset the limitations of South Vietnamese forces by sending U.S. combat troops in on a large scale."

I think he would have come to that conclusion even if he had reason, as I believe he would have, that South Vietnam and ultimately Southeast Asia would then be lost to Communism. That was what we feared. That was why we were in Vietnam. He would have been wrong, and we were wrong. But I think he would have, at that time, thought that way. And I think he would have viewed that loss as costly, as we don't see it now. It wouldn't have occurred. It wouldn't have been costly if it had.

But he would have accepted that cost, because he would have sensed that the conditions he had laid down, that it was a South Vietnamese war that could only be won by them, and to win it they needed a sound political base. Those conditions could not be met.

And he would have believed, therefore, that withdrawal would cause a fall of the dominoes, as Eisenhower predicted. But staying in would ultimately lead to the same result while attracting a terrible bloodbath.

Early in his administration, President Kennedy asked his officials and members of the National Security Council to read Barbara Tuchman's book *The Guns of August* that graphically portrayed how Europe's leaders had bungled into the debacle of World War I. And the President emphasized, "I don't ever want to be in that position. We're not going to bungle into war."

Throughout his presidency, Kennedy seemed to keep that lesson in mind. During the Bay of Pigs which Ted mentioned, in April 1961, against intense pressure from the CIA and the Joint Chiefs, he kept to his conviction as he had made explicitly clear to the Cubans beforehand-- the Cuban exiles beforehand-- that under no conditions would the U.S. intervene with military force to support the invasion. He held to this position even when it became evident that, without that support, the invasion would fail, as it did.

It was that belief that a primary responsibility-- as a matter of fact, I would say he believed the primary responsibility of a President was to avoid the risk of war, if at all possible. It was that fear which shaped his leadership during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

[APPLAUSE]

**TOM OLIPHANT:** And can you hear me? Never before has a moderator felt less significant. [laughter] But one must try. We're going to have a conversation up here for a little bit. And then as the spirit moves you, please move to one of these microphones and think, if you will, of a concise question, if you can, to ask about this momentous topic.

And we'll try to leave as much time as possible. I think this is one of those occasions when one wishes we could spend the night here. Sadly, we can't. But let's get going anyway.

Mr. Secretary, if I might-- The Cuban Missile Crisis occurred at a time of great tumult in the world. In Berlin. In Africa. In Southeast Asia, as you've just mentioned. The United States was embarked on a build-up of its nuclear forces. The Soviet Union was trying to do likewise. There was enormous controversy about exactly what was happening in Cuba, and what our intentions toward Cuba were.

And I was wondering, in that context, if you could address the question of why the Soviet Union would do something like that?

**ROBERT MCNAMARA:** That is an absolutely basic question. There's a meeting scheduled for Havana to be chaired by Castro. Arthur Schlesinger. I think Ted is going. I'm going. Our counterparts from Russia and Cuba are going to be there. I initially said I wouldn't go. We had five meetings on this subject between 1987-1992. And I said, "There wasn't anything to learn, so why go?"

I'm now convinced there was-- there is something more to learn. And I'm told that, from Soviet and Cuban archives and all comments as well, we'll learn much more that relates to the Crisis, the lessons to be learned, and particularly lessons that apply to today.

Now you mentioned the tumult. I don't think the average American today understands how we felt during the Cold War. And I'm not arguing with their right. Please don't misunderstand me. But, for the seven years I was Secretary, every single day we feared potential Soviet action.

You mentioned Berlin. The crisis in Berlin occurred a few months after President Kennedy took office. And as I remember in September of 1961, Berlin, West Berlin was under control of NATO. But it lay in the heart of East Germany, surrounded by the Soviets. The Soviets decided to take West Berlin away from NATO. And to do so, they began by stopping the airlift, which was absolutely essential to the maintenance of West Berlin. They threw what was chaff, tin foil in the air corridors and prevented the planes from navigating. So we had to stop the airlift.

And then we sent convoys across East Germany to sustain Berlin. So then they stopped the convoys. And then we introduced military escorts for the convoys. That worked for a while. And then they allowed a militarily escorted NATO convoy to enter East Germany, and refused its exit. So we had a military escorted convoy stuck in the middle of East Germany. We finally got the thing out. So I asked General Norstad, the SAC Supreme Airline Commander, to come to my office.

I said, "Look, Larry, day to day, we did B, they did C. We did D. How's this thing going to evolve?" He said, "We'll all do E. We'll do F. They'll do G. We'll do H. And they'll do I." I said, "What do we do then?" He said-- now this is September, 1961-- he said, "Well, I guess we'll have to use nuclear weapons."

That's what we lived under. And that was September '61. And then Cuba comes in October '62. And we had Vietnam going on all this time. And then there was the Middle East crisis in July of '67 when the hotline was used for the first time. And basically the message and Johnson said, "If you want more, you'll get it."

That was the environment we were in. And I don't think it's understood today. Nor do I want to imply to you that our interpretation of that environment, our beliefs as to what should be done, were correct. I'm not arguing that at all.

But what I do want you to understand is the tremendous tension that all of President Kennedy's advisors were under in relation to foreign policy and defense policy. And particularly the responsibility that he had. He had to decide what to do. It was very, very difficult. And that Saturday, October 27 showed his leadership, as Ted described it. We would have been in nuclear war had he not been there. But on the assumption that the Soviets had a sense of this tension as well in the world, what could have possessed them to do this? Do you think it is still left for history to disclose the answer or do you have a working hypothesis?

I don't know why Khrushchev did what he did. As I mentioned to Tom and Ted before we came in here, I'm supposed to lead off the meeting in Cuba. I've forgotten what day it is-- October 11, I think. And in a sense set the agenda. And I have drawn up 13 questions that I don't know the answers to, that I think relate to exactly the question you're talking about. Why did Khrushchev put them there? And what did he think would follow from having done that?

Let me just take the tactical nuclear weapons as an illustration. We never in the world believed he had tactical nuclear weapons. I'm told that one of the things we'll learn in Havana, Ted, is that he not only had them there, but after we forced-- you and the President and others forced him to agree to take out the missiles and the bombers, he didn't take out the tactical nuclear weapons. We didn't ask for it. We didn't know they were there.

Of course, one of the questions-- one of my 13 questions is why in Hell did he put them there? Well, my God, McNamara, don't you understand deterrence? He put them there to deter us. How could we be deterred when we didn't know they were there? [laughter] But most of all, what was his plan for using them? He believed we were going to attack Cuba. He put them there, no doubt, to repel our attack. What did he think we would do in response when the invasion went in? When he used those and decimated the U.S. invasion force?

What we would have done, the designated commander of the force was Admiral Dennison, NATO's SACLANT Commander and he sent the Chiefs and the President and me a message

that said, "I believe that the Soviets will have tactical nuclear weapons and request authority to equip our forces with tactical nuclear weapons." We said he was crazy as Hell.

So we would not have equipped our forces. We did not equip our forces with tactical nuclear weapons. But would the U.S. ever allow its military to be decimated by nuclear action, and not have responded? Of course not. So we would have responded out of Southeast U.S. air bases with nuclear warheads. And then what would Khrushchev have done with his intermediate range missiles there? And with his missiles and bombers in the Soviet Union? The world would have been in a nuclear war.

**TOM OLIPHANT:** If I could, Mr. Sorensen, that is just, I assume, the surface of some of the complexities that were swirling around President Kennedy at that time?

Feel free to talk on what Secretary McNamara just discussed, but I wanted to ask you if you could help us understand how the President made sure that he was in fact the Commander in Chief, leading the decision-making in this crisis, and not merely the passive receptacle for others' advocacy?

**THEODORE SORENSEN:** On the question you put to Bob, let me begin by saying it was one of the first questions raised by the President at that first meeting on the day that the missiles were discovered and that he brought us together.

Why is Khrushchev doing it? He's never done it before. Is he planning to come to the United Nations and make some dramatic revelation, and then he'll be able to outmaneuver us over Berlin? Or something else? Or is he planning to attack? Or what is the reason? All we've been able to learn since, which isn't much, is that it was largely a solo decision by Khrushchev. It was not a decision by the Kremlin or Presidium or otherwise as a whole.

Second, that an element of it was a certain amount of pride, ego, and nationalism which said, "If they're able to put nuclear missiles in Turkey looking across the Black Sea at us, we ought to be able to do the same thing to them."

In terms of how the President kept command and control, first of all, I do recommend that everyone read the book on the White House tapes of the Missile Crisis brought out by Zelikow and May. Believe me, it's a page-turner. It's an exciting book.

But you see throughout those pages, John F. Kennedy was, at all times, steering the conversation. Rejecting the frivolous or the irrelevant. Steering toward a solution that would work. Trying to take his traditionally objective, detached look. How will history regard this, as that's the reason that precipitated World War III? How will the rest of the world regard it if we hold back because of this refusal and, therefore, our refusal?

He was, as had been his habit, in touch not only with the heads of departments and agencies, but he was in touch with people down the line who had important operational responsibilities to make certain that they did not stray from the course that he had set forth.

**TOM OLIPHANT:** Just pick one example?

**ROBERT MCNAMARA:** I might say the movie *13 Days* is a little exaggerated. Nobody called the pilots about to go out on a mission.

**TOM OLIPHANT:** What we could say, "Please read these transcripts. And stow the videotape of the movie." Pick one example of the President steering this conversation? Could you give us, both of you, maybe first, Mr. Sorensen, a sense of the evolution of the President's dissatisfaction with the option of air strike first?

**THEODORE SORENSEN:** On the first day, the President, like virtually everyone in the room, including Bob and me and Bobby, thought that the air strike was the only way to get the missiles

out of there. At that time, people talked about the so-called "surgical air strike". Swoop down, hit the missiles, they're gone, and we're, all of a sudden, back to the status quo.

But, of course, as Bob quoted General Sweeney, it's not that easy. Not only in terms of getting them out, but in terms of the number of bombings that would be required to send U.S. airplanes safely on such a mission.

The Air Force made it clear there would have to be bombing, as I said in my opening remarks, and across the length and breadth of Cuba to get all the Soviet planes, all Cuban planes, all other dangerous weapons out of there. And the resulting chaos and disarray, which I think was Bob's term, would clearly require a follow-up invasion.

**ROBERT MCNAMARA:** One thing I'm not clear on is why the Soviets did what they did? So those are my 13 questions. But I doubt that many of you know what we've been doing. And why we were doing it. And let me take two or three minutes to describe that. When we were in Moscow in 1989, the Cubans were present.

And when they came in the room, by the way, if they'd had guns, I don't know whom they would have shot first. The Russians or the Americans. They were still mad as Hell because Khrushchev had removed those missiles without any conversation with Castro. But the Cubans invited-- Castro sent a message that said, "We want you to meet in 1990 in Havana. And I'll chair the meeting."

I refused for three years to do that. And the reason I refused was that I said to the Russians in Moscow, at the opening of the meeting, I said, "I am sure that you believe that President Kennedy was going to invade Cuba and destroy Castro."

And I want to tell you I don't think he was. I don't think he would have. He couldn't have done it without me knowing it. And I never, never, never heard him say that that was his objective.

But that wasn't what the Russians and Cubans had observed. It observed that under two Presidents then and under a third one later, Eisenhower and Kennedy, we, the U.S., had tried to assassinate Castro. We had supported the exiles to invade at the Bay of Pigs. And we had the damndest and the most absurd covert action program known as Mongoose, which was trying to, I'll call it destabilize and overturn the Cuban government. So I think it was perfectly reasonable for the Russians and the Cubans to believe that we intended to invade and destroy the government.

I'm not suggesting that that was their primary motive because, at the time, we had on the order of 5,000 strategic nuclear warheads. And they had on the order of 350. And we had, as Ted mentioned, in a sense, circled them with missiles. Most of our warheads were bombers. But we had this ratio of 17:1. So some say that Khrushchev put them there perhaps to save Castro, but also to strengthen his nuclear deterrence.

I think he may have thought that, but he didn't do it. This is a complex point, and I'm not going to develop it fully. But just let me say this. The placement of those nuclear missiles and warheads in Cuba did not change the deterrent relationship. Before they were put there, we did not believe we had a first-strike capability. We were certain we had a deterrent.

But even with 5,000:350, 17:1, it was Sweeney's answer in a sense, "What President would use his 5,000 to attack the 350 knowing that 10%, 20% would survive, and attack him?" After the weapons were put there, and the missiles were put in Cuba, they didn't have a first-strike capability. Each of us had a deterrent capability.

So, in a very real sense, the nuclear balance wasn't changed. This was and is a very, very controversial point. I put it forward the first morning, on Tuesday, as a reason and a sense not to go to war immediately. It was my introduction to the quarantine.

But to this day, many will say that placing those missiles changed the nuclear balance, and what I would suggest is think this through. Because it relates to what our current nuclear policy is. We plan to keep-- we have 6,000 strategic warheads to deploy today, and be launched in 15 minutes. We plan to keep 2,000 of those on deployment ten years from now, and keep 3-4,000 of the rest in the back room ready to move to deployment.

It doesn't make a damn bit of sense. And it's very, very dangerous. And unless you think through the Cuban Missile Crisis, you won't understand that point.

I'm sorry I took so long.

**TOM OLIPHANT:** No. Not at all. All you want in this forum.

Mr. Sorensen could-- and Secretary McNamara may want to join in this one, too. As a study in decision-making under unimaginable pressures, how does an idea that doesn't seem primary in the beginning, blockade or quarantine, rise up in the course of an intense discussion among the highest officials of the government?

**THEODORE SORENSEN:** On that first day or so, there was a range of options considered. One of them was do nothing. After all, European allies have been living on the nuclear bull's eye all these years. They didn't respond with an air strike. So maybe the Americans would have to get used to it.

Another option, of course, was a pure diplomatic route. And so on, in between. But in terms of more limited military options, which I think Bob was the first to introduce, the naval quarantine seemed a logical, limited first step that would put Khrushchev on notice that we were indeed responding. And he would have to prepare his strategy.

Over the next few days, it boiled down pretty much to those two. The air strike followed by invasion or the naval blockade. Robert Kennedy said, "The trouble with air strike is that, if we do it without notice, it's Americans doing Pearl Harbor in reverse. Super military power attacking a defenseless island nation and a lot of innocent civilians will be killed."

And then people debated the whole concept of notice. And whether it's possible to give notice while all the missiles are probably being hidden into caves where we would never find them. And whether it was possible to give notice without precipitating Khrushchev into firing the missiles. Whatever.

So I was asked if I would draft a note. That there would be a high-level emissary. Some former President or Secretary of State or whatever would deliver this written message to Khrushchev in his office in the Kremlin. And the letter was to give notice that, if he didn't withdraw the missiles, we were going to eliminate them by an air strike.

And, of course, I was warned, "Don't make this an ultimatum. And don't make this anything that might precipitate World War III. And don't make this anything that Khrushchev could evade or avoid. Or get out of. And don't make this anything that will cause him to push a button that will send a message to his commanders, 'They're on to us. Fire the missiles.'" And so on, down a long list of parameters, which made it impossible. You're right.

**TOM OLIPHANT:** Mr. Secretary--

**THEODORE SORENSEN:** So that's when the quarantine began to emerge as the choice.

**TOM OLIPHANT:** To an outsider, the rising of this choice seems to show civilian authority asserting itself in the presence of an inevitably military matter.

And I haven't asked you yet, and I think I should to speak a little bit about the relationship between civilian authority that you exercised and the military as you observed it during these days of such great tension.

**ROBERT MCNAMARA:** Well, many of you have seen *13 Days*, I'm sure. I refused to see it for a long time. But I finally did. And the producer who gave me a private showing said, "What do you think of it?" "Well," I said, "If it were historically correct, no one would come to see it, and you wouldn't make your money back. [laughter] But the basic point you report in that movie is correct, i.e., we came close to nuclear disaster and we should think more about how to avoid it in the future."

I said, "One of the great mistakes, I think, in the movie, or errors in the movie, is it portrays the Chiefs as excessively belligerent. They were not excessively belligerent. But we did have a major problem with them."

And the movie is quite correct on one marvelous scene. [laughter] LeMay was turning to the President, and LeMay says to the President, "Mr. President, you're in a Hell of a fix." [laughter] And the President turns to LeMay, and he says, "General, I want you to know something. You're in the fix with me." [laughter]

And it was sort of that kind of a relationship. The President was clearly exercising his rights and authority as Commander in Chief, and I was his designated deputy and officer to carry it out. And I tried to do so. At the end, this is a matter of historical record, I don't raise it to discuss it now. But at the end, he was just marvelous.

He had had real differences with the Chiefs. He said, "Bob, bring them all over here. Five of them. And you as my deputy command, and we'll sit down with them in the Cabinet Room." Which I did. And LeMay-- he was the finest combat commander I met. I served under him, and then over him, and alongside him in World War II. The finest commander I met in any service.

So the President is saying to the Chiefs how much he valued and benefited from their advice during the Missile Crisis. And he said, "We won, but I don't want anybody saying it." And LeMay said, "Won. Hell, we should go in and bomb them today." [laughter]

At the end, and this is a matter of public record so I'll mention it, although I don't say it with any pride. At the end, I went in to see the President. I said, "Mr. President, I know the problems you had with some of the Chiefs. And I know you don't want to go through that again. And I think, therefore, we should remove two of the Chiefs." No Chief before or later has ever been removed. MacArthur was removed, but he wasn't a Chief. He was a Commander.

And Kennedy said, "Oh, my God, Bob, that's going to be difficult." I said, "Hell, I'm doing it for myself, and I'm doing it for you." And by the way, if this is on C-SPAN, I would ask you to cut out this portion. [laughter]

So he said, "Well, I'll tell you what. You remove one of them. And you choose." So I said, "Okay. We'll remove the Chief in Naval Operations, George Anderson." So he was removed. And about a week later, I read in the *New York Times* that President Kennedy had appointed George Anderson Ambassador to Portugal. And he hadn't said a word to me.

In my relationship with the President, I just loved that man. He had a wonderful, wonderful wit. He didn't say a word. I didn't say a word. About six months went by. And he called me one day, and he said, "Bob, why in the Hell did you let me appoint George Anderson Ambassador to Portugal?" He said, "I have to remove him." [laughter]

But this relates to the civilian ...(inaudible).

I want to say this. I served in the military for three years. I was Secretary for seven years. I think they are among our most responsible citizens. Every one of us is indebted to them. I admire them immensely.

[APPLAUSE]

**TOM OLIPHANT:** If I might, Mr. Sorensen for a second, and as the spirits or spirit moves you, please by all means, we're getting close to where we'd be happy to call on questions from the floor.

But as the President made his decisions and judgments during the crisis, did you notice any feeling that, whether it was in the military or anywhere else, that he was in any way being steered or managed, or people were attempting to manage him toward a particular result, namely I'm thinking air strike?

There are a couple of incidents that to an outsider seem disquieting, like the decision to go to DefCon II apparently without the President's knowledge. And I'm just wondering how the President felt as he was making his decisions about those military people around him?

**THEODORE SORENSEN:** I think the President shared Bob's closing sentiment. That those were invaluable public servants. And since they were the ones that had to go out and do the fighting and dying, if we got into a war, that we'd better pay attention to what they recommend. They are the experts.

I don't think he felt they were trying to trap him or corner him into any particular avenue. They strongly disagreed with the route that he ultimately chose. In fact, there are reports of some rather vivid angry expressions on the part of the military when he chose the quarantine route over the bombing invasion route.

Nevertheless, I think that the tradition in this country of civilian control has at all times remained supreme and, when the Commander in Chief speaks, the military salute and they follow orders.

**TOM OLIPHANT:** The reporter in the camp resists the temptation to ask you one specific question and that, I gather from the public record, that at some point you were asked to think about two speeches. One announcing the blockade and other efforts held. The other, after an air strike.

And it's not clear to me from the record whether the air strike speech didn't get written because you sensed the drift of the decision-making, or because it was not possible to write it?

**THEODORE SORENSEN:** Certainly, the notice question that I had discussed earlier did make it very difficult to write. It was also so contrary to my convictions. And I knew contrary to John F. Kennedy's convictions. And I did not think it would ever be given. After all, we were beginning to run out of time.

There was concern that the whole matter was going to leak. It was over Friday night. I spent most of the night writing the quarantine option speech. That was discussed in detail Saturday morning, approved by the group, and that's when the President developed a cold and came back to Washington to make the final decision. So somehow the other one never got written.

**TOM OLIPHANT:** Thank you. Please speak.

**SHEILA DAVIDSON:** My name is Sheila Davidson. I don't represent anyone except myself. Secretary McNamara, you and Mr. Sorensen have both made an excellent case for how we should historically learn from the Cuban Missile Crisis.

And so I would like to ask you how do you assess the risk of world stability during the Cuban Missile Crisis versus the current Iraq situation?

**ROBERT MCNAMARA:** That's a very important question. A very timely question. And I'm not going to answer it. [laughter]

And I want to tell you why. It isn't that I don't have views on Iraq. I do. But I think it is irresponsible for an Ex-Secretary of Defense to state views which might be contrary to those of the President at a very delicate moment when he is seeking, and I hope succeeds, in persuading other nations to join in whatever decision he makes.

And I think I would complicate that process if I were to talk here tonight, or otherwise. I've turned down 15 television interview requests on that exact topic. So I apologize for not answering, but that's my reason. Do you want to try?

[APPLAUSE]

**TOM OLIPHANT:** In your presentation, as you went through the list of 13 or 14 or 15, it seemed to have some mild relationship to current events. It's very subtle. [laughter]

**TED SORENSEN:** I actually do not want to make a partisan comment against the current President when he's in the midst of a crisis. It so happened that the Republican Congressional Campaign Committee, at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis, after Kennedy made his speech, before the Soviets had withdrawn the missiles, issued a statement saying that Kennedy's entire approach to the Crisis had been brazenly false and ineffective.

It doesn't strike me as too ineffective when he got all the missiles and bombers out of there. But that was their partisan position at that time. And I don't wish to imitate it today. But I did try to indicate how Kennedy-- the decisions that Kennedy made, and it took some courage to make them during that crisis. And some in the audience may discern some differences from the current situation.

**TOM OLIPHANT:** Sir, thank you very much.

**ROBERT MCNAMARA:** May I add just one word to that. There were political controversies at the time. After it was over, after we had photographs of the missiles being removed from Cuba, checking their serial number, we flew reconnaissance aircraft 50 feet off the deck of the Soviet ships.

After it was over, Senator Keating of New York said, "I will eat my hat on the steps of the Capitol if you can prove there aren't missiles hidden in Cuba." It was a very intense period.

**JACK SIMONS:** Thank you for your patience. My name is Jack Simons. And I'm anxious to learn more about the management of decision-making. I understood you to say that the Executive Committee met for about five days, and then presented the President with the two options.

To what degree was President Kennedy involved in the deliberations as they went along? He certainly must have known what was going on. Did he come into the meeting every day?

**TED SORENSEN:** That's a version of mine. I think I perhaps am the best qualified to answer that question. As has been made clear, this all began on a Tuesday morning when the President was briefed, and that was the morning that he first called together the group that would later be known as ExCom.

And we met again that afternoon and that evening. We met again the next morning and afternoon. The President participated, but then because he had insisted that all of us maintain routine commitments and schedules, so as there would be no hint to the public or the press that there was a crisis brewing or, another way he put it was, "I don't want a lot of limousines gathering at the White House."

He kept a campaign commitment to go off and speak in Connecticut that day. He came back that evening. And the Attorney General and I drove out to the airport to meet him when he got off Air Force One and got into the car. And he immediately wanted to know what had happened, and what had been decided, what progress had been made?

And we pointed out to him that there was one advantage to his absence in some of the meetings that took place while he was gone. Namely, that, in the State Department in particular, subordinates like Russian expert Tommy Thompson, like the Latin American expert Ed Martin were more likely to speak out without first clearing everything with the Secretary of State.

Then, when the President was there, they would simply whisper something to the Secretary's ear or whatever. And we felt we were getting a more candid and open discussion if he could absent himself from time to time. And he did. And I think it was well that he did.

But at all times, through reports from Bobby and me, through memos and so on, he knew what the-- and from Mac Bundy, of course, he knew what we were talking about and where we were. And all decisions were ultimately his decisions. We simply made recommendations.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** My question is for the Secretary. You had speculated on what might have been had the President lived vis-à-vis Vietnam. Could you speculate on what might have happened had the assassination occurred prior to the Missile Crisis, and Johnson were the sitting President?

**ROBERT MCNAMARA:** I really shouldn't, I guess, but I will. [laughter] Because I agree with Ted's basic thesis, and I tried, and I independently developed the same thesis. I think it was President Kennedy's leadership, particularly leadership that bought us the time to think through the alternatives, argue, and debate that really shaped the final outcome.

Although at the end, events were slipping out of control. And I think it was his approach, as Ted said, he wanted us to meet without him being present. But, before the Missile Crisis, during the Missile Crisis, after the Missile Crisis, he made it clear to his key people, he wanted to know what they thought. He didn't want them to temper their advice or comments by what they thought he thought. So I never had any reluctance to say, "I think you're wrong. And this is why."

And by the way, a person who deserves immense credit for the final outcome is Tommy Thompson. Because it was he, along with a few others, at that meeting on Saturday, as you will recall, Ted, who pushed the answer to what Ted called and I have called the Friday Message. And I have it here. I would urge you to do what Tom suggested. Read Ernest May's book on the tapes, and particularly read what we call the Friday Message from Khrushchev.

It's an eloquent statement by a man under tremendous pressure, tremendous stress. He knew nuclear war was likely. He was trying to prevent it. Read that statement. It's tremendous. And, as I said earlier, I didn't think I'd learned anything at this Cuban meeting. But I think one of the things I'm going to learn, Ted, is it wasn't a Friday Message. The Saturday Message, the tough message, came first. And the soft message came afterwards.

Now just think this through for a minute. The tough message we believe was written by a committee in the Politburo, in effect, the senior advisors. It was tough as Hell. That came second. It was publicized before we got it. We hadn't yet answered the soft message which we thought came first. We could accept. So the debate was whether to do it.

And Tommy Thompson, this relates in part to your point. It's a long answer, but-- Tommy Thompson, at one point-- The President said, "We've got to answer the tough message. It was publicized. It came second. It's the latest. We've got to answer that."

Tommy said, "Mr. President, you're wrong." These were his exact words, "Mr. President, you're wrong. Answer the soft message." The President said, "Look, Tommy, that's what's wrong with

you. You're not a politician. You don't understand that no political leader can walk back from a publicly stated tough position to a weak position that hasn't been publicly stated. That can't be done."

Tommy said, "Mr. President, I lived—" He and Jane had actually lived with the Khrushchevs during vacation periods and so on. He said, "Mr. President, you're wrong. So we will reply to the soft message." And that's what happened. And he did.

**TOM OLIPHANT:** This is when I hate my job. What I have to tell the people is that we have to stop with those who are at the microphones now, and if you can be as brief as possible, we'd be grateful with a final question from me.

**TED SORENSEN:** I'm not a critic of President Johnson who I think was a large man with a large view and very deep compassion. But I have to tell you a story that I've never told. I don't know whether you were there or not, Bob. We've been talking, as you know, about Saturday, the 27<sup>th</sup>, that penultimate day when all the news seemed bad and we had to choose which letter to answer and all the rest.

After the final letter was sent off with Robert Kennedy to deliver it to Ambassador Dobrynin, there was a brief reconvening of the ExCom in the Cabinet Room. Bobby was not there because he was still with Dobrynin. The President was not there at the beginning. I'm not sure Bob, whether you were there or not.

But it was very clear that the hawks were rising. That they were gaining. They were finding their voices again. "We told you the quarantine wouldn't work. We told you you'd have to bomb and invade." And there was a debate, and some members are still protesting against that and the consequences.

And the Vice President sat in. He had very rarely sat in. Especially during the first week when the plan was being formulated, though he had participated in some of those meetings the second week. And all of a sudden, I remember this very vividly, and I'm almost sorry to tell it. I never have. He slapped his hand on the table and said, "All I know is, when I was a boy in Texas, and walked along a country road and a rattlesnake rose up, the only thing to do was take a stick and cut off its head." A little chill went around the room.

**ROBERT MCNAMARA:** One brief addition. We haven't-- neither Ted nor I have said what would have happened had Khrushchev not sent that message over the radio transfer saying he was taking the missiles out.

We've speculated some on that. And my belief is that what the Chiefs and others including the majority of civilian advisors on Monday recommended, Monday the 29<sup>th</sup> after the 28<sup>th</sup> message that we got-- If Khrushchev hadn't sent the message on the 28<sup>th</sup>, what would Kennedy have done on the 29<sup>th</sup>? When the majority of his military and civilian advisors were pushing for attack?

I believe he would not have authorized attack. He would have tried to push it off. He, as I suggest, believed the primary responsibility of the President was to avoid war if he could. And there were other things he could do other than immediately attack. He could tighten the quarantine, for example. He could add petroleum and lubricants to the list of items that we weren't to allow through.

I want to stress that he was constantly, as Ted implied, he was constantly seeking alternatives other than a major war. This is a very, very important point to think about with respect to Presidents.

**TOM OLIPHANT:** Thank you so much for waiting so long. I appreciate it.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I think we need to remember that President Kennedy had been warned by Senator Keating about the build-up of activities in Cuba. And this was at the time a very important political issue in the late summer and early fall of 1962.

So when your speech was written, I was in high school at the time. I remembered the part that said you had a constant surveillance of Cuba because Keating had said the President had not done a very good job. What I'm interested in is what was the discussion about Senator Keating, and where did he get the information that he obviously had before many of the others had?

**TED SORENSEN:** Let me say a few words about that, and I'll ask Bob to give any technical back up. During that time, exiles were pouring out of Cuba. Bitterly anti-Castro exiles who hoped very much, as they have ever since, that they could stir up a war between the United States and Cuba, and a U.S. invasion of Cuba.

They had no expertise in missiles. I do not believe they could tell the difference between a surface to air missile such as the kind that shot down the U2, and an intermediate range missile that could reach hundreds, thousands, 1500, whatever, 15,000 miles away.

But they all talked to Senator Keating who kept saying on the Senate floor that he wanted to rise and warn the American people and the American Senate and the American President. And why was the President not paying attention to these missiles in Cuba?

But there was no reliable evidence of offensive weapons in Cuba, according to our intelligence analysts and we were keeping the U2 planes flying. And you're absolutely right, that opening line in the speech, as promised, we have kept close surveillance of Cuba. That was in response to any Keatings out there that might have said, "You weren't watching them until we told you to."

But as I told Tom and Bob in the little waiting room this afternoon to come in here, after the Saturday afternoon meeting. Now we're talking October 20 when he came back from Chicago, when the President made his decision. He beckoned to me and Bobby as the meeting broke up to come join and talk with him privately out on the Truman porch at the back of the residence of the White House.

And the first thing he said to me was, "Can you imagine Ken Keating is the Winston Churchill of our time?" [Laughter]

**TOM OLIPHANT:** For those of you who enjoy trivia, two years later, Robert Kennedy defeated Senator Keating in the election for Senator from New York. You're last, and thank you for waiting.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Just one quick question. Do we still need nuclear deterrents?

**ROBERT MCNAMARA:** We will need nuclear deterrents as long as a potential adversary possesses substantial numbers of nuclear warheads. And I don't want to suggest that I think Russia is necessarily a potential adversary, but they have on the order of 6,000 deployed strategic nuclear warheads.

I think it would be very unwise, under these circumstances, to do what I think should be our objective which is to remove all nuclear weapons from the face of the earth [APPLAUSE] or at least reduce them to the point where the number remaining would not be capable of destroying nations. That is not the course that NATO, Russia, the U.S., the declared nuclear powers are on today. This is what we need to debate.

The lesson of the Cuban Missile Crisis is intelligent, responsible, experienced leaders cannot avoid the risk of nuclear war. It's there. It's inherent in what is connoted by the phrase, "for the war." We make mistakes in military operations. Mistakes with conventional weapons kill thousands, tens of thousands. They don't destroy nations. Mistakes with nuclear weapons will. We've got to prevent that.

**TOM OLIPHANT:** If I could exercise the moderator's prerogative at the end, and ask Mr. Sorensen to comment on the Secretary's answer as well as to aversion of it that he alluded to earlier, namely that what you were dealing with in a sense during those two weeks was nuclear weapons on the one hand and you were dealing with them as fallible human beings on the other?

And the Secretary seemed to say that he believed that what he learned is that the combination is almost, by definition, unworkable given the fallibility of human beings. What do you think?

**THEODORE SORENSEN:** Well, of course, he's right. Allow me to make two points. First, I mentioned in my comments that as a military response to the missiles in Cuba, Kennedy chose a naval quarantine, a use of conventional forces. What was he going to do with the nuclear forces?

They were almost too big and dangerous and powerful for that situation. But we knew that, in our own back yard, if you'll pardon the expression, the Caribbean, that our naval supremacy was such that the odds of our having a favorable outcome of using those conventional, deploying those conventional forces was more certain of bringing a desirable result than our resorting to nuclear weapons.

But the fact of the matter is that on Saturday, October 27, 1962, two men, John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev, truly in the words of the old song "held the whole world in their hands." If they had stumbled, the whole world would have been blown up.

I don't think we should take any pride in that. I don't find any satisfaction in the fact that we managed the crisis well. There never should have been a crisis in which the whole world might have been destroyed. And let's make sure there never is again.

[APPLAUSE]

**TOM OLIPHANT:** If I could, in moderator life, it doesn't get any better than this. Thank you for your kind attention. Thank these two great men for their continuing devotion to history. And John F. Kennedy.

**JOHN SHATTUCK:** Well, you have been treated to an evening beyond the brink. And it is an extraordinary honor for the Kennedy Library to have hosted this kind of discussion of living history, history that is clearly relevant to everything that is happening today. However guarded the answers and comments may have been, I think we all know how complex the history that we've just absorbed is.

In closing and before once again thanking our extraordinary panel, I just want to draw the audience's attention to two things. We have a special exhibition in the Kennedy Library that opened today on the Cuban Missile Crisis. And I really invite those of you who can to come and see it. It is unfortunately not open now, but it contains many of the documents and background materials that have been discussed tonight. And it brings all of this to life.

And then, let me put in a shameless plug for the continuing series of forums that we're going to present to you throughout this month on the Cuban Missile Crisis. There are four to come. This Sunday, October 6, the *Cuban Missile Crisis: An Historical Perspective*, featuring a number of prominent historians.

And then October 20, *On the Brink: The Cuban Missile Crisis*, with a number of extraordinary participants at the time, including, once again, Ted Sorensen. But also Sergei Khrushchev, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and the Cuban Ambassador or the Head of the Intersection. And on Thursday, October 24, we will be hosting a forum on Iraq. *Curbing Iraq's Use of Weapons of Mass Destruction*. And that will be as contemporary as the events are at that moment.

And then finally on Monday, October 28, *The Cuban Missile Crisis and the Media*, where the story will be told by many of those whose names are household words: Sander Vanocur, Marvin Kalb,

Newton Minow, and Robert Pierpont. And moderated by CNN's Judy Woodruff, who will look at the way in which the media depicted and interacted with this crisis.

But, above all, let me conclude just by thanking, once again, this extraordinary panel: Ted Sorensen, Secretary McNamara, and our wonderful moderator, Tom Oliphant, who did a great job.

[APPLAUSE]

Thank you and good night.