

Robert A. Lovett Oral History Interview – JFK#4, 11/19/1964
Administrative Information

Creator: Robert A. Lovett

Interviewer: Dorothy Fosdick

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Biographical Note

Robert A. Lovett (1895-1986) was a member of the General Advisory Committee and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. This interview focuses on the Cuban Missile Crisis and Lovett's personal recollections of John F. Kennedy, among other topics.

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Robert A. Lovett– JFK #4

Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
44	Being contacted by John F. Kennedy [JFK] about the Cuban Missile Crisis
45	Suggestion of a response to the presence of missiles
46	Possibility of invading Cuba
47	Positioning of the blockade around Cuba
49	Pressure from disarmament groups
50	Meeting with JFK
51	Advisors' suggestions to JFK about military force against Cuba
52	Concerns over the Soviet Union's reaction
53	Meeting with Robert F. Kennedy concerning the presidential announcement about the quarantine
54	JFK's correspondence with Khrushchev
56	Impression of JFK
58	Last meeting with JFK

JOHN F. KENNEDY LIBRARY

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Person Interviewed: . The Honorable Robert A. Lovett

Address of Interviewee: 59 Wall Street, New York City

Date: November 19, 1964 (afternoon)

Interviewer: Dorothy Fosdick

Others Present:

Organization Interviewee Associated With: Brown Brothers Harriman & Co.

Subject Matter Covered in Interview:

Reflections on President Kennedy's use of advisers; last meeting with the President, late September 1963.

JOHN F. KENNEDY LIBRARY -- ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Q. The Cuban missile crisis of 1962 was one of the major events in the Kennedy administration, with ramifications which have continued down into the present and will continue into the future. President Kennedy brought you into it at a very early stage. I believe it is important to have for the record your recollection of this crisis - your perspective on it - in some detail.

First, how were you brought into the discussion and when were you first contacted by the President?

A. As I recall it, on Wednesday, October 17th, I received a telephone call from the President, saying that he might want me to come down and discuss a very serious matter which had arisen and that he would communicate with me later on. The following morning, Thursday, October 18th, at a relatively early hour, I was attending a meeting of the Carnegie Institution of Washington held uptown here in New York. I was called to the phone and the President said that he wanted me to come down to Washington at once. I asked him if "at once" meant really right away and he said "yes, where are you" and I told him that I had a car parked in a side street in New York and that I would have to put it in the garage unless he wanted me to end up in jail. He laughed and said to get down to Washington as fast as I could and I went at once to the airport, took the shuttle, and arrived shortly after lunch and went direct to McGeorge Bundy's office, in accordance with the Presidential instructions. Bundy had Cline of the CIA group there and he was equipped with some small maps of Cuba and some photo interpretations indicating that Russian missiles had been sent in to Cuba, along with Russian operational personnel.

I was informed that a reconnaissance flight made presumably

by a U-2 plane on Monday, after a spell of bad weather, had disclosed installations - or indications that installations were being made - suitable for the handling of missiles. The missile sites were located with apparent accuracy on the map and corresponded with the traditional type of surface-to-air emplacements with which I was familiar. In questioning Messrs. Bundy and Cline about the photographs, it seemed to me that the evidence to justify violent and effective action by the United States was too thin to make positive statements stand up under pressure in the U.N. and, accordingly, I suggested that one of the first things that the President should order was a lower level, tree-top photographic mission, preferably run at the times of day when shadows would help identify the objects and give data permitting calibrated measurements. With such accurate material in our hands, I felt the President could be assured of a more accurate factual basis on which to measure the extent of the risk involved before making a determination of the course of action required to meet the problem.

Bundy told me that the President wanted me to receive the same briefing which had been given him by men from the Department of Defense and that this briefing would be held in the Map Room adjacent to Bundy's basement office. Before the briefing started, I had a long conversation with Bundy on the assumption that the missiles were either ICBMs or MRBMs and tried to lay out a series of courses of action for discussion with the President scheduled for later that afternoon and early evening following the briefings which would give an opportunity to question the technicians from the Pentagon.

Assuming that we were faced with a clearly critical problem and considering the geographical situation of Cuba and its economic vulnerability, I suggested that the response to this startling new threat quite obviously would fall into three stages.

First, was the imposition of a tight blockade (for which we

should find a better word to permit easier acceptance among our friends) and using the blockade or quarantine concept, to exclude from Cuba not only all offensive weapons but also apply, in effect, economic sanctions through denying her energy fuels, machinery, spare parts, etc., but not interfering with food stuffs or medicines.

Secondly, if this were not effective, we could step up one degree higher and take out the identified missiles by a series of air attacks, using conventional demolition and incendiary bombs in repeated and perhaps continuous attack. I mentioned that any aircraft strikes would inevitably result in spillage and, if the locations were near centers of population, civilian population would suffer heavy casualties. My notes indicated that I also cautioned that such air strikes might not be as effective as claimed in advance because there is a natural tendency to measure the destructiveness of certain forms of bombing by the undoubted effectiveness of such attacks against factories, warehouses or built-up areas whereas in open country against smaller targets it is much less. I recall that this reservation was made because of my recollection that in certain Cuban areas caves were plentiful. The geological information available to the Freeport Sulphur Company from their nickel ore explorations had indicated a large number of such underground caverns to be in existence.

The third and final step, which it might be necessary to take, was obviously the landing of troops and invasion from a beachhead and the direct seizure of any such weapons and the defeat of Castro and his troops. This obviously would be a bloody and lengthy business and would - in my opinion, based on World War II and the Korean experience - require far more troops than the average citizen would think necessary. My notes indicated that I had guessed it would take something over 150,000 troops, together with appropriate landing craft, supporting logistical assistance, etc., and I queried whether this force could be made available in much under three weeks

to a month. I pointed out that the first attempt had to be fully successful in order to overcome the specter of the Bay of Pigs.

There was considerable discussion about the attitude and opinions expressed by others and one incident occurred which had a special meaning to Bundy and myself. On a small table near his desk there was a picture of Henry L. Stimson who had been Bundy's boss, as well as mine, and for whom both of us felt a deep admiration and affection. All during my conversation with Bundy, the old Colonel seemed to me to be staring me straight in the face and it began to get so powerful a reminder that I turned to Bundy and said "Mac, I think the best service we can do to President Kennedy is to try to approach this as Colonel Stimson would." Bundy fully agreed and that is precisely the bench mark at which I aimed throughout the subsequent meetings.

Following the discussions with Bundy, I went into the Map Room and there the briefers went over the situation with respect to the estimates of the type of missiles, the number of Russian personnel, etc., and also indicated that some high-grade, well-defined, low-level photos had just come in that confirmed the information originally received in the high-altitude photographs. In the middle of the briefings on the military logistics and the availability of Army and Marine assault troops, a message was given me that the President would like to see me after Mr. Gromyko had terminated his visit. Gromyko appears to have been upstairs or expected late that afternoon.

The Navy represented, as I recall it, by Admiral Ritchie, in charge of the deployment of naval vessels, answered with great frankness all of the questions which were put to him with respect to the possibility of imposing an efficient blockade and indicated that movement of certain troops from the West Coast were in process at this time. Air units were

0047

being moved into Florida at nearby bases and the Army estimates of the forces required, as I recall it - and I am not entirely sure that my recollection is correct here - was about 100,000 troops for the beachhead and supporting units. George Ball was present during part of the session, as was Walt Rostow, McNamara, McCone and several officers who provided certain detailed information. After the briefing session, which disclosed most of the information which we had in hand, together with the availability and disposition of certain of our forces, there was a good deal of discussion as to which course of action should be followed in the interest of our own national security and with an eye to our responsibilities and our commitments in other parts of the world.

With Colonel Stimson in mind, the answer seemed to me to be reasonably clear. It was an astonishing and rather shocking affair to find our Intelligence Services so deficient that it was possible to inject into an island some 90 miles off of our coast large weapons of this character without our having some word of it in a reliable and accurate form from ground level observers. But the photographs, as well as such other bits of information as we were able to collect, made it clear that we had a major threat on our hands and, in consequence, a difficult decision for the President to make.

The quarantine or blockade approach as a first step seemed to me to have great advantages, largely because it did not commit us to doing anything more if our show of national will, determination and military alertness could persuade the Russians to withdraw their missiles and personnel without great bloodshed which would inevitably result if the air attacks had to be made in massed and repeated strikes and particularly if troop landings were resorted to. A major consideration in this matter seemed to me to be the fact that no overt act, which could clearly be called

aggression, had taken place. In short, we were exactly in the position of any number of European countries who have a common border with another country whose political, economic or social problems made warfare a possible route for them to take in search of a solution. We would look ridiculous as the most powerful military nation in the world if we grabbed a sledge hammer in order to kill a fly. We would obviously invite charges of being trigger happy, unreliable, timid, and so on down the list of clichés which the full Communist propaganda effort would undoubtedly unleash on us.

The unpleasant doubt which I felt, according to my notes at the time, lay in the area of the willingness of the Administration to follow through on a course of action undertaken by it. That is to say, if we imposed a blockade and kept out all missiles and military equipment but permitted oil, petroleum and other energy products and machinery to enter, we would be accomplishing only part of the program. I was fearful that we would be under pressure from the bleeding hearts, the unilateral disarmament groups and the peace-at-any-price-units that were always ready to spring to the battlements, to relax or withdraw the blockade long before we had gotten the full value of the withholding of certain essential industrial items and particularly fuel from the Cuban economy. In retrospect, it seems to me that this is precisely what happened but in a lower order of importance in view of the commitments obtained from the Russians and our willingness to overlook their agreement to permit us "to inspect." I am afraid that the government withdrew the blockade and terminated the pressure too soon to get the full value of our effort, but I hasten to add that I have never seen the exchange of letters between the President and Mr. Khrushchev and, therefore, this opinion is merely one of instinctive apprehension that we have again fallen into the habit of failing to taste the full flavor of victory.

0049

I suppose one of the most difficult things a President has to face is the determination of what degree of power to apply in any given situation. Obviously, in order to make a determination, he needs very precise factual information and, in so far as humanly possible, very accurate predictions of the various consequences which he might have to face if the course of action which he selects turns out badly. In other words, the old rule of looking at the end of the road before you start down it is of cardinal importance to the Chief Executive. This fact of life, in my opinion, led almost inevitably to the desirability of taking a relatively mild and not very bloodthirsty step first because we can always increase the tempo of combat but it is very hard to reduce it once battle is joined. Accordingly, by the end of the briefing and back in the room where the picture of Colonel Stimson kept staring at me, I felt reasonably at ease in my own mind as to what my response would be to the President if he asked for my advice.

Q. Following the situation and intelligence briefing, did the President then call for you to come and talk to him?

A. Yes, he did. It was late in the afternoon or in the early evening when he phoned down and asked me to come up to his office. When I went in, there was the President, Dean Rusk, Llewellyn Thompson, and that was all. At his suggestion, I went into Mrs. Lincoln's office to avoid the press which seemed to have taken over that section of the office building. I learned that the reason for this was that Gromyko had just left.

When I went into the President's office, he was sitting in his rocking chair, with Rusk and Thompson on his left and the sofa, on his right, vacant. He motioned Bundy and me to it. He asked me if I had gotten the briefing and all the facts available, and I said that I had. He grinned and said, "I ought to finish the story by telling you about Gromyko who, in this very room not over ten minutes ago, told more bare-faced lies

0050

than I have ever heard in so short a time. All during his denial that the Russians had any missiles or weapons, or anything else, in Cuba, I had the low-level pictures in the center drawer of my desk and it was an enormous temptation to show them to him."

The President then asked me what I thought of the situation and I outlined briefly the philosophy which I felt would be appropriate here for the President to take, as well as the military steps which seemed to be called for. I urged the quarantine route as the first step for reasons I have given above and the matter was discussed in some detail with Rusk and Thompson joining in. At about this stage of the discussion the door onto the rose garden opened and the Attorney General came in and joined the discussion. The President asked me to repeat what I had previously said, and I did so. Robert Kennedy asked two or three very searching questions about the application of any blockade and indicated that he felt as I did about the necessity for taking a less violent step at the outset because, as he said, we could always blow the place up if necessary but that might be unnecessary and we would then be in the position of having used too much force. He did not support one of the arguments which I had made to the effect that it might be contended in the United Nations that we were guilty of an act of aggression if we ordered an air strike or an invasion whereas the imposition of a quarantine could, I thought, be justified far more easily on the grounds that we were trying to prevent an aggression by removing the tools which might make it possible in the hands of the Cubans. I was, however, delighted to see that he was apparently of the same opinion that I was.

He also indicated that the President had received advice from another source that a full-stage invasion should be made and that still another adviser had strongly pled for an air strike. I remember commenting that the President would undoubtedly receive two or three more opinions as I

0051

had observed it was a normal occupational hazard in dealing with military matters to get three men together and get at least four opinions.

A considerable amount of the discussion with the President centered on the possible reaction of the Russians and Thompson talked on this point at some length. There seemed to be a consensus - by this time various members of his staff had come in on three or four occasions to tell the President that it was past dinnertime - that those were risks which had to be taken in the national interest and as a matter of national and world security. The whole subject of the protection of the western hemisphere was gone over at some length and finally the Secretary of State and Ambassador Thompson withdrew and the President went over again three or four other elements in this picture. The Attorney General and I were asked to stay and join him for dinner.

As I had been through a rather rugged day, which started at 6:30 in the country, I asked the President's leave to return to New York at some reasonable hour and he smilingly agreed. I caught the last shuttle out to LaGuardia and got home after midnight.

Q. Did you have subsequent meetings with the President, and were any two or three of them of particular interest?

A. Yes, there were a number of meetings. I commuted almost daily to Washington during the remainder of that week and the first half of the next following week. Three occasions stand out in my recollection. The first was the meeting on Sunday, October 21st. The President had phoned and asked me to be down there in time for a meeting at the White House in his upstairs sitting room at two o'clock. He suggested that I come down a bit early and get brought up-to-date before this large meeting which was to include the Chief of Staff of the Army, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs

0052

of Staff, the Chief of Naval Operations, the Chief of Staff of the Air Force, the Department of State, the Central Intelligence Agency, etc. The President said that Robert Kennedy wanted me to lunch with him and that I would be met at the airport if I would come down before noon. He said that he would have me met but he neglected to say that the welcoming committee would consist of Ethel Kennedy and a small daughter who had the good taste to dress up in an Uncle Sam suit and thereby make identification reasonably easy. Mrs. Kennedy was standing at the doorway of the Eastern Airlines shuttle with her small daughter in tow and said that she was the representative of her husband and would I accept her escort in lieu of the Attorney General's. I told her this was not a hardship but a boon and went out to their house in McLean, Virginia, where I saw the rest of the family and joined the Attorney General. As a digression, which I hope posterity will forgive, I must say that I never saw a finer-looking group of children in my life than the platoon of young Kennedys which surrounded the porch on which we gathered.

From the Attorney General I learned that the main subject for discussion at the meeting after lunch was the language and method of the Presidential announcement of the quarantine. This statement was scheduled for Monday, October 22nd, and the purpose of the meeting was to go over it and polish it. I anticipated some trouble because of Adlai Stevenson's presence in the meeting as I knew that the bitter experience he had had earlier in the Bay of Pigs must necessarily be in the forefront of his mind, as well as the problem of negotiating with the Russians, whatever course of action this country took. As things turned out, there was no difficulty.

A number of matters were discussed at this Sunday meeting,

0053

which was presided over by the President. About halfway through the meeting, he motioned me to leave the room with him and go out on the porch overlooking the White House grounds and the Washington monument. He had previously mentioned an exchange of messages with Khrushchev through the Embassy channels or U.N. (I am not sure which) - at all events no detail was given - but it was clear that some negotiating would be needed promptly. He asked me whether I thought that it could be handled in the U.S. United Nations Delegation, and I said that I did not think so. I suggested that he get hold of McCloy, who was then in Europe and I thought probably on the way to Hamburg, and have him return because McCloy's association with Khrushchev had been very frank and useful and I knew that McCloy, as a consequence, received a good deal of respectful attention from Ambassador Federenko, the Soviet representative in the United Nations. The President asked Rusk what he thought of this and also asked Robert Kennedy and Bundy their opinion, as we stood on the second floor balcony. Rusk said that he would speak to Adlai Stevenson and make sure the suggestion was worked around in such a way that it would be not only acceptable to Stevenson but also given the public atmosphere of a recommendation from Stevenson.

There was a long meeting in Washington on Wednesday, October 24th, by which time it became clear that the Russians were going to back down in a big way. The President had a letter which was written by Khrushchev, indicating an almost hysterical wish to get out of the mess he had got himself into. All aspects of the problem and the basic requirements in the negotiation were gone over at some length and, with the exception of some details as to the proof of removal in the absence of on-spot inspection, the end of the major crisis seemed to be in sight. As I recall it, the full arrangements were completed on October 28th, and my recollection of this is perhaps confirmed by the fact that the silver mementos which the

0054

President sent to his special advisers indicate in bold lettering October
16th to October 28th in the calendar of the month.

0055

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Q. Mr. Lovett, we might now conclude the interview with one or two final questions.

In addition to your help to President Kennedy in the Cuban crisis of 1962 and in other special inquiries undertaken at his request, you served for some period of time in his Administration on the General Advisory Committee on Arms Control and Disarmament policy and activities, the Clay Committee on Foreign Assistance Programs, and the Randall Committee on Military Pay. Perhaps you would reflect for a moment on the President's use of advisers and your impressions of the President when you acted in an advisory capacity.

A. President Kennedy was certainly one of the most remarkable men I have ever been associated with, not only because of his enormous personal charm, a debonair quality and his wry humor but also because he possessed an extremely intelligent mind whose quickness seemed to be sharpened by an intuitive quality. He had a real thirst for knowledge which was wide ranging and engaging in its keenness. These qualities, coupled with the courage to look facts in the face, made him one of the most delightful men I have ever met and infused the office of President with a brightness and energetic atmosphere which was magnetic.

Our relationship was, from my point-of-view, an unusually pleasant one and it was touched with a special Kennedy form of teasing humor which I loved. In one of our first conversations he said that he would want me to come down rather frequently on a wide variety of subjects, none of which he identified. I asked him if he could tell me what sort of things so that I could get better prepared and he grinned and said that he didn't think any special preparation would be necessary; that the government had spent an

awful lot of money in training me in both the military departments and in the Department of State and that, as Chief Executive, he thought it must be obvious that one of his duties was to try to get his money's worth. As our occasions of meetings increased, I found that the natural respect which I had acquired for him grew into a real admiration for his qualities and his attitude toward the future and a strong affection for him as a person.

He was very good in telephone conversations. He used the phone frequently and, because of his ability to boil down a subject to its essentials, he was able to pose the question on the phone in understandable terms and, if it was the sort of problem to which you could not give an immediate answer, he was content to have you say that you would like to look it up or think it over and would call him back. In fact, President Kennedy had a quality which I have rarely seen in any holder of the Chief Executive office; that is, the willingness to have the person whose advice he sought answer with complete frankness and, if necessary, bluntness without leaving any apparent scars where a course of action he was considering taking was opposed or where something that he had done was queried as being perhaps unwise or maladroit.

Perhaps the overriding impressions which I have of him are related to two rare qualities; his true and natural love of excellence and, secondly, a real generosity of spirit. He was considerate in every action I saw him take and he did not fall victim to the pervading virus of vanity which so frequently seems to attack the holders of great positions of power in any government.

Q. What was the last occasion on which you saw President Kennedy?

A. In the summer of 1963 I had planned to go abroad on the fortieth anniversary of my annual business trips to the Continent on behalf

0057

of my partnership. I reported to the President on some other matter in July and we got talking about the attitude of de Gaulle who was being referred to from time to time in the American press as a "nuisance". I think I commented that, in my view, he seemed to me to be more of a menace. Certainly de Gaulle was not merely anti-American but, in his own words, was against les Anglo-Saxons - both the British and ourselves. Having spent most of my adult life in international banking, specializing in the old "Latin union countries" in particular, I decided it might be fun to go back and see some of the friends whom I had made and with whom I had worked over the past forty years and find out from them what their attitude was toward de Gaulle. I had selected a list of about twenty names of French industrialists and bankers, whom I had come to trust and to know well over the forty-year period, and decided that I would stop by and see them to learn what their views were on de Gaulle. I mentioned this to the President and he was so intrigued with it that he asked me if I would do a little research in depth for him as a corollary to the vacation which I had planned. I, of course, agreed to do so and to report to him on my return.

When I got back in September - having seen, I believe it was, twelve of the men whom I had worked with over the years and who were inclined to speak with perfect frankness to me as just another businessman - I went down to Washington and read the President excerpts from the verbatim notes which I took. I had transcribed them with a good deal of difficulty in the first half of September, 1963 and had to do them in long-hand because I knew that there was too much dynamite in them to use a local stenographer.

The stories are no longer news but it is interesting to note that the actions of de Gaulle to oppose the American positions wherever possible were clearly indicated. I gave a fairly detailed report also to McGeorge Bundy at the President's request on one trip to Washington when he was leaving for

0058

an out-of-town trip and asked me to give Bundy the high spots, with particular reference to the Vietnamese statement which was issued by de Gaulle while I was in Paris.

As this matter was purely a personal request of the President, I made no formal report to the Department of State, intending to do so after a further conversation with the President if he so instructed me.

Within a few weeks I ended up in the hospital in New York for serious major surgery, from which I returned to our apartment for convalescence only a few days before the President's assassination. So I never saw the President again after a bright, sunny afternoon in late September.

Dorothy Fedick
Dorothy Fedick

0059