**The Cuban Missile Crisis Myth You Probably Believe**

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*by Sheldon M. Stern*

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Several months after the publication of *Averting ‘The Final Failure’: John F. Kennedy and the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings* (Stanford University Press, 2003), my narrative history of the Cuban missile crisis ExComm meetings, I received a call from a production company preparing a television program about letters by American presidents. They asked if I might be interested in discussing John F. Kennedy’s missile crisis letters to Nikita Khrushchev. I explained that these letters were not really JFK letters at all, since they had been composed by committee rather than by Kennedy himself. I suggested instead that we might discuss one of the most famous incidents relating to the Kennedy-Khrushchev correspondence: on the evening of October 26, the Soviet leader sent a letter offering to remove the missiles from Cuba if the U.S. pledged not to invade the island nation. But, early on October 27, Khrushchev demanded that the U.S. also withdraw its Jupiter missiles from Turkey. According to the traditional view, Robert Kennedy suggested accepting the proposal in Khrushchev’s first letter and simply ignoring the second message. This strategy, which presumably led to resolving the crisis, came to be called the “Trollope Ploy”—a reference to a plot device by nineteenth-century British novelist Anthony Trollope, in which a woman interprets a casual romantic gesture, such as squeezing her hand, as a marriage proposal.

The producer seemed interested in including a “revisionist” perspective in the program and we later did fifteen minutes of filming in which I carefully explained that the Trollope Ploy is a great story, but the ExComm tapes prove that it never really happened. When the program was broadcast, however, the editors cut quickly from my five seconds to actor Martin Sheen—who had played JFK in a 1983 dramatization of the missile crisis. Sheen recapitulated the standard account of the Trollope Ploy and praised its brilliance in helping the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. avoid nuclear war. The filmmakers apparently decided that the conventional explanation was less complicated and made a more dramatic story.

In fact, even among historians and ExComm participants the Trollope Ploy remains an all but immovable fixture in the legend and lore of the Cuban missile crisis. Stewart Alsop and Charles Bartlett, writing in the *Saturday Evening Post* less than two weeks after the crisis and exploiting leaks from the Kennedy brothers, first created the notion that Robert Kennedy “had dreamed up the ‘Trollope Ploy’ to save the day.” Several years later, anticipating a run for president in a nation bitterly divided by the Vietnam war, RFK was eager to take credit for hitting upon a path to peace in 1962: “I suggested, and was supported by Ted Sorensen and others, that we ignore the latest Khrushchev letter and respond to his earlier letter’s proposal…that the Soviet missiles and offensive weapons would be removed from Cuba under UN inspection and verification, if, on its side, the United States would agree with the rest of the Western Hemisphere not to invade Cuba.” [1]

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., writing three years after the crisis, also claimed that RFK “came up with a thought of breathtaking simplicity and ingenuity: why not ignore the second Khrushchev message and reply to the first?” Ted Sorensen, an ExComm participant, had initially suggested in 1965 that JFK himself had “decided to treat the latest [October 27] letter as propaganda and to concentrate on the Friday night [October 26] letter” and had delegated RFK and Sorensen to come up with the right wording. However, when Sorensen completed the manuscript of *Thirteen Days*, published in 1969 after RFK’s assassination, he did not challenge Bobby Kennedy’s claim to have first suggested this strategy.[2]

Some controversy has continued about who actually initiated the Trollope Ploy. Some ExComm participants and scholars have suggested that Llewellyn Thompson, former Ambassador to Moscow, came up with the idea. Others have pointed to National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy or Assistant Secretary of State Edwin Martin. Dean Rusk, the secretary of state, believed that Thompson “originally suggested” the idea but argued that RFK first “brought it out at the table.” Several historians have insisted that “the idea was hardly Robert Kennedy’s alone … [and] entered the discussion gradually and was embraced by several members” and that the Trollope Ploy “is a little too elegant to explain the muddle and confusion of the debate on Saturday, October 27.” There has, nonetheless, been a long-standing consensus that the Trollope Ploy was “a brilliant way to handle it,” “an ingenious ploy,” “an extraordinary diplomatic move,” and that RFK met with the Soviet ambassador on the evening of October 27 “to execute the Trollope Ploy.”[3]

President Kennedy himself immediately seized on the political benefit in this explanation of the settlement of the crisis since the secret agreement to remove the U.S. missiles from Turkey was just that—top secret—and remained so for decades. Only hours after Khrushchev publicly agreed to remove the missiles, JFK phoned former Presidents Eisenhower, Truman and Hoover—and deliberately misinformed them. He accurately reported that Khrushchev, on Friday, had privately suggested withdrawing the missiles in exchange for an American promise not to invade Cuba; but, on Saturday, the Kremlin leader had sent a public message offering to remove the missiles if the U.S. pulled its Jupiter missiles out of Turkey. President Kennedy informed Eisenhower, “we couldn’t get into that deal;” assured Truman, “they … accepted the earlier proposal;” and told Hoover that Khrushchev had gone back “to their more reasonable [Friday] position.” Eisenhower, who had dealt personally with Khrushchev, asked skeptically if the Soviets had tried to attach any other conditions. “No,” Kennedy replied disingenuously, “except that we’re not gonna invade Cuba.” The former president, aware of only half the truth, concluded, “this is a *very*, I think, conciliatory move he’s made.” Such deceptions shaped the administration’s cover story and helped generate the notion of the Trollope Ploy—which was indelibly fixed in public consciousness by the 1974 television film, “The Missiles of October,” based on RFK’s book.

In fact, listening carefully to the recently declassified ExComm tapes proves conclusively that the notion of the Trollope Ploy was actually invented to conceal the real agreement to remove U.S. missiles from Turkey. It is a myth; it simply did not happen that way—much like the resilient fable that Lincoln dashed off the Gettysburg Address on the back of an envelope.

At the morning ExComm meeting on Saturday, October 27, [4] barely twelve hours after receiving Khrushchev’s Friday evening letter--the first of the two letters--JFK read aloud a press statement just handed to him: “Premier Khrushchev told President Kennedy in a message today he would withdraw offensive weapons from Cuba if the United States withdrew its rockets from Turkey.” The president and the ExComm were clearly startled and puzzled. “He didn’t really say that, did he?” Sorensen recalled. “No, no,” Bundy insisted. But JFK speculated, “He may be putting out another letter,” and called in press secretary Pierre Salinger. “I read it pretty carefully,” Salinger asserted, “and it didn’t read that way to me either.” “Well,” the president concluded, “let’s just sit tight on it.” Rusk finally articulated the emerging realization in the Cabinet Room: “This appears to be something *quite* new.”

President Kennedy had actually been probing the Turkish option for more than a week and asked, “where are we with our conversations with the Turks?” Assistant Defense Secretary Paul Nitze responded firmly, “The Turks say that this is *absolutely* anathema” and view it “as a matter of prestige and politics.” JFK understood the world of prestige and politics as well as anyone in the room, but told Nitze, “Well, I don’t think we can” take that position “if this is an *accurate* [report].” Bundy argued that if Khrushchev had backed away from the “purely Cuban context” in last night’s letter, “There’s nothing wrong with our posture in sticking to that line.” “Well maybe they changed it overnight,” JFK persisted. “He’s in a difficult position to change it overnight,” Bundy reasoned, “having sent *you* a personal communication on the other line.” “Well now, let’s say he *has* changed it,” JFK snapped, “and this is his latest position.” “Well, I would answer back,” Bundy retorted testily, “saying that ‘I would prefer to deal with your interesting proposals of last night.’” Someone egged Bundy on, whispering, “Go for it!”

JFK’s reply represents a turning point in the discussions—leaving no doubt about his evolving position: “Well now, that’s what we oughta be thinkin’ about. We’re gonna be in an *insupportable* position on this matter if this becomes his proposal. In the first place, we last year tried to get the missiles out of there because they’re not militarily useful, number one. Number two, it’s gonna—to any man at the United Nations or any other *rational* man, it will look like a very fair trade.” “I don’t think so,” Nitze countered, as someone muttered “No, no, no” in the background. “Deal with this Cuban thing. We’ll talk about other things later.”

Salinger soon brought in a news ticker report which JFK read aloud, confirming Khrushchev’s new public offer to link the missiles in Cuba and Turkey. “Now we’ve known this might be coming for a week,” Kennedy asserted impatiently, “*This* is their proposal.” “How much negotiation have we had with the Turks this week?” JFK grumbled again, “Who’s done it?” “We haven’t talked with the Turks,” Rusk tried to explain, “The Turks have talked with us.” “Where have they talked with us?” JFK demanded. “In NATO,” Rusk replied. “I’ve talked about it now for a week,” the president protested again. “Have we got any conversations *in Turkey* with the Turks?” Rusk reiterated, “We’ve not actually talked with the Turks.”

Under Secretary of State George Ball declared that approaching the Turks on withdrawing the Jupiters “would be an *extremely* unsettling business.” “Well,” JFK barked, “*this* is unsettling *now* George, because he’s got us in a pretty good spot here. Because most people will regard this as not an *unreasonable* proposal. I’ll just tell you *that*.” “But, what ‘*most* people,’ Mr. President?” Bundy asked skeptically. The president shot back: “I think you’re gonna have it very difficult to explain why we are going to take hostile military action in Cuba … when he’s saying, ‘If you get *yours* out of Turkey, we’ll get *ours* out of Cuba.’ I think you’ve got a very tough one here.” “I don’t see why we pick *that track*,” Bundy repeated, “when he’s offered us the other track in the last 24 hours.” JFK interrupted irritably, “Well he’s *now* offered us a new one! … “I think we have to assume that this is their *new* and *latest* position, and it’s a *public* one.”

Rusk guessed that the personal Friday night letter had been sent by Khrushchev “without clearance,” and a consensus quickly developed that “The Politburo intended *this one*.” “*This* should be knocked down publicly,” Bundy demanded. “*Privately* we say to Khrushchev: ‘*Look*, your public statement is a very *dangerous* one because it makes *impossible* immediate discussion of your *private* proposals and requires us to proceed urgently with the things that we have in mind. You’d *better* get straightened out!’” CIA director John McCone, backed by several others, affirmed, “This is exactly right!”

Ball subsequently revealed, at the late afternoon ExComm meeting, that the Soviet UN Ambassador had told Secretary General U Thant that Khrushchev’s private Friday letter had been “designed to reduce tension but so as far as *he* was concerned,” the public Saturday message, just as the president had argued that morning, “contained the substantive proposal.” Bundy continued to resist, “I think if we *sound* as if we wanted to make this trade to our NATO people and to all the people who are tied to us by *alliance*, we are in *real trouble*.” The national security adviser admonished the commander-in-chief: “I think that we’ll *all* join in doing this if this is the decision. But I think we *should* tell you that that’s the *universal* assessment of everyone in the government that’s connected with these alliance problems.”

JFK nonetheless maneuvered to put the Turkish option on the fast track, but RFK insisted that even considering the Turkish trade “blows the possibility of this other one, of course, doesn’t it?” “Of what?” JFK asked impatiently. “Of getting an acceptance of the [Friday] proposal,” RFK replied. Rusk soon proposed new language for JFK’s message to Khrushchev: “‘As I was preparing this letter, I learned of your broadcast message today. That message raises problems affecting many countries and complicated issues not related to Cuba or the Western Hemisphere.’” After the crisis in Cuba is resolved, “‘we can make progress on other and wider issues.’”

President Kennedy recognized immediately that Rusk’s wording did *not* reflect his persistent stance on pursuing a Turkey-Cuba trade—his advisers appeared to be trying a rather transparent end run around his position. “Well, isn’t that really rejecting their proposal of this morning?” JFK countered irritably. “I don’t think so,” Bundy replied, supported by Rusk. “It’s rejecting the *immediate* tie-in [on Turkey],” Treasury Secretary Douglas Dillon affirmed, “But, we’ve *got* to do that.” “We’re *not* rejecting the tie-in,” President Kennedy responded forcefully.

“Mr. President,” Ambassador Thompson admonished, “if we go on the basis of a trade, which I gather is somewhat in your mind, we end up, it seems to me, with the Soviets *still* in Cuba with planes and technicians and so on. Even though the missiles are *out*, that would *surely* be unacceptable and put you in a worse position.” President Kennedy replied with practical and determined logic: “But our technicians and planes and guarantees would still exist for Turkey. I’m just thinking about what we’re gonna have to do in a day or so, which is 500 sorties in 7 days and possibly an invasion, *all* because we wouldn’t take missiles out of Turkey.” Perhaps recalling his own wartime experience, JFK continued, “And we all know how quickly everybody’s courage goes when the blood starts to flow and that’s what’s gonna happen in NATO.” If the Soviets “grab Berlin, everybody’s gonna say, ‘Well, that was a pretty good proposition.’ Let’s not kid ourselves,” he repeated for the third time, “that’s the difficulty. *Today* it sounds great to reject it, but it’s *not* going to after we *do* something!”

If the Turks were adamant, JFK continued, then the U.S. ought to get NATO to “put enough pressure on them. I just tell you,” he lectured, “I think we’re better off to get those missiles out of Turkey and out of Cuba because I think the way of getting ‘em *out* of Turkey and *out* of Cuba is gonna be *very*, *very* difficult and *very* bloody, one place or another.” Bundy finally seemed to be coming to terms with the president’s resolve: “If you…are yourself *sure* that this is the *best way out*, then I would say that an immediate personal telegram of acceptance [of the trade] was the best thing to do.” But JFK objected to forcing the deal on Turkey and NATO. “I’d rather go the total blockade route which is a *lesser* step than this military action. What I’d *like* to do is have the Turks and NATO *equally* feel that this is the *wiser* move.”

Sorensen pressed the president to delay replying to Khrushchev’s public Saturday offer and instead respond privately to the secret Friday letter: “There’s always *a chance* that he’ll accept *that*. … We meanwhile won’t have broken up NATO over something that never would have come to NATO.” “The point of the matter is,” Kennedy snapped again, “Khrushchev’s gonna come back and refer to his thing this morning on Turkey. And then we’re gonna be screwing around for another 48 hours. … He’ll come back and say, ‘Well we’re glad to settle the Cuban matter. What is your opinion of our proposal about Turkey?’ So then we’re on to Monday afternoon, and the work goes on. … He can hang us up for *three days* while he goes on with the work.” “For three weeks!” Dillon muttered. “Let’s start with *our* letter,” JFK continued. “It’s got to be finessed … we have to finesse him.” President Kennedy, nonetheless, had no illusions about Khrushchev’s response to U.S. pressure to go back to Friday’s proposal, “which he *isn’t* gonna give us. He’s *now* moved on to the *Turkish* thing. So we’re just gonna get a letter *back* saying, ‘Well, he’d be glad to settle Cuba when we settle Turkey.’”

Thompson repeated that Khrushchev might still accept the Friday deal since he could still say that he had removed the U.S. threat to Cuba. “He must be a little shaken up,” RFK pointed out, “or he wouldn’t have sent the [Friday] message to you in the first place.” “That’s *last night*,” JFK retorted impatiently. “But it’s *certainly* conceivable,” RFK replied, “that you could get him *back* to that. I don’t think that we should abandon it.” JFK halfheartedly agreed that there was no harm in trying. “All right,” he finally conceded, “Let’s send *this*” letter dealing with Cuba first. But, he cautioned that the key question remained, “what are we gonna do about the Turks.”

“Actually, I think Bobby’s formula is a good one,” Sorensen observed; “we say, ‘we are accepting your offer of your letter last night and therefore there’s *no need* to talk about these other things.’” The president seemed willing to go along with this scheme on the slim chance that Khrushchev would at least agree to a cessation of work, but he clearly remained unconvinced and unenthusiastic: “As I say, he’s not gonna [accept] now [after his public offer on Turkey]. Tommy [Thompson] isn’t so sure. But anyway, we can *try* this thing, but he’s gonna come back on Turkey.” Bundy jumped on the bandwagon as well: “That’s right, Mr. President. I think that Bobby’s notion of a *concrete* acceptance on our part of how we read last night’s telegram is *very* important.”

After news arrived that a U-2 had been shot down over Cuba by a Soviet surface-to-air missile, the president tried to placate the opponents of a Turkish deal by reiterating that “*first* we oughta *try* to go the first route which you suggest and get him back [to the Friday offer]. That’s what our letter’s doing.” But, at the same time, he again underscored his lack of conviction about that strategy and made clear that he was determined to keep the Turkish option alive: “Then it seems to me we *oughta* have a discussion with NATO about these Turkish missiles.”

At the end of the late afternoon ExComm meeting, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, Deputy Defense Secretary Roswell Gilpatric, Ball, Bundy, RFK, Rusk, Sorensen and Thompson joined President Kennedy, at his invitation, in the Oval Office. JFK revealed that his brother Bobby was about to meet with Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin and requested advice on what to tell the Soviet diplomat. The group quickly agreed that RFK should warn Dobrynin that military action against Cuba was imminent and make clear, consistent with Khrushchev’s Friday letter, that the U.S. was prepared to pledge not to invade Cuba if the missiles were withdrawn.

But, the president also continued to press for a deal on the Turkish missiles. Rusk, finally recognizing JFK’s determination, suggested that RFK advise the ambassador that a public quid pro quo for the missiles in Turkey was unacceptable, but the president was prepared to remove them once the Cuban crisis was resolved. The proposal was quickly accepted. Robert Kennedy was instructed to tell Dobrynin that any Soviet reference to this secret proposal would make it null and void.

JFK clearly had no faith in the strategy of accepting Khrushchev’s Friday offer and ignoring his public Saturday message and instead worked secretly with Rusk to put together another fall-back plan. The secretary of state arranged to have former deputy UN Secretary General Andrew Cordier put in place an emergency back channel strategy by which U Thant would announce, after receiving private word from Rusk that negotiations had failed, a UN plan through which the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. would mutually agree to remove their missiles from Turkey and Cuba. JFK was prepared to gamble that if the U.S. publicly accepted this supposedly neutral plan, it would be very difficult for the Soviets to reject it. Khrushchev’s unexpected decision the following morning made the Cordier gambit moot and Rusk did not reveal this closely-held secret for over twenty-five years.

Listening to the October 27 meeting tapes proves that ExComm participants and scholars have read far too much cunning and coherence into the discussion of the Trollope Ploy. President Kennedy, as the tapes document, stubbornly and persistently contended that Khrushchev’s Saturday offer could not be ignored precisely because it had been made public. In fact, JFK’s eventual message to Khrushchev did *not* ignore the Saturday proposal on Turkey, but left the door open to settling broader international issues once the immediate danger in Cuba had been neutralized. JFK ultimately offered the Kremlin *a calculated blend* of Khrushchev’s October 26 and 27 proposals: the removal of the Soviet missiles from Cuba, an American non-invasion pledge (contingent on UN inspection), a willingness to talk later about NATO-related issues *and* a secret commitment to withdraw the Jupiters from Turkey. The Trollope Ploy is essentially a myth.

Robert Kennedy did tirelessly press his brother not to give up on Khrushchev’s Friday proposal. JFK, although skeptical and reluctant, finally agreed to try this scheme despite repeatedly predicting that the Soviet leader would inevitably “come back” to his public offer on the Turkish missiles. The president had no illusions about forcing Khrushchev to settle for the terms in his earlier message and assented to this strategy largely to placate unyielding ExComm opposition. In fact, as revealed by RFK’s meeting with Dobrynin and the other secret steps taken later that day and kept from much of the ExComm, JFK was determined not to allow this chance to avert nuclear catastrophe slip away. As he had reminded the gung-ho Joint Chiefs on October 19, an attack on Cuba could prompt the firing of nuclear missiles against American cities and result in 80-100 million casualties—“you’re talking about the destruction of a country.”

In fact, President Kennedy’s inclination to pursue the Turkish option actually seems to have hardened in response to the dogged intractability of his advisers at the October 27 meetings. The ExComm toughened JFK’s determination simply by repeatedly and all but unanimously *opposing* his preferred course of action—a deal on the Turkish missiles. The later conclusion, based on the incomplete transcripts prepared by Bundy in the 1980s, that “Llewellyn Thompson certainly persuaded the President that it [the Trollope Ploy] might actually work” is *not* corroborated by the definitive primary source—the ExComm tapes. This celebrated diplomatic slight of hand, in essence little more than a cosmetic concession to the full ExComm by JFK, ultimately served to conceal the real agreement that secretly—and peacefully—resolved the Cuban missile crisis.[5]

- See more at: http://hnn.us/article/7982#sthash.ojGLcrOr.dpuf