

How JFK Prevented Thermonuclear Holocaust

by Jeffrey Steinberg

Aug. 25—Faced with the prospect of human extinction in a thermonuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union, during the 13 days in October 1962 known as the “Cuban Missile Crisis,” President John F. Kennedy showed extraordinary courage and left no stone unturned to achieve the desired end: a de-escalation of the crisis and an actual breakthrough in U.S.-Soviet relations, out of the gravest moment of crisis humanity had ever faced.

Long before American U-2 spy planes confirmed, in early October 1962, that the Soviets were installing nuclear-armed missiles in Cuba, just 90 miles away from the continental United States, President Kennedy had established a deeply personal exchange of private communications with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchov. That extraordinary private dialogue played a significant role in averting nuclear armageddon.

Through that dialogue, Kennedy and Khrushchov reached a personal understanding that, between them, they held the future survival of humanity in their hands—despite their ideological and political differences, which were vast. Already, at that time, both the United States and the Soviet Union possessed

arsenals of thermonuclear weapons and long-range delivery systems that would assure the elimination of life on Earth should a full-scale thermonuclear war commence.

On Oct. 22, 1962, after days of secret deliberations with his closest national security advisors, including the Joint Chiefs of Staff, President Kennedy went on national television to present to the American people the evidence of the presence of Soviet thermonuclear weapons and missiles on Cuban soil. He announced that he was establishing a naval blockade—what he called a “quarantine”—around Cuba, knowing that Soviet ships were en route to the island and were carrying more weapons.



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President Kennedy and Chairman Khrushchov during their meeting in Vienna, Austria, June 1961.

Hardline advisors to the President were pressing for even more drastic measures and would argue against any kind of diplomatic solution throughout the thirteen days of the crisis.

President Kennedy demonstrated iron will in deploying the naval quarantine, and he had no intention of backing down on his demand for the Soviet ships to turn around, and for the existing nuclear weapons and missiles to be removed from Cuba. He was, however, committed to pursuing every avenue for war-avoidance.

The day after he delivered his television address, President Kennedy had his personal envoy, Norman Cousins, make direct contact with Pope John XXIII, seeking his assistance in reaching out to Khrushchov for a solution.

On Oct. 24, the Pope sent a personal message to Khrushchov, through the Soviet embassy in Rome, imploring him: "The cry of humanity is for peace, peace."

Clearly a combination of factors, including the Papal pleading, got to Khrushchov.

John Kennedy was working through many trusted channels. His brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, held a secret meeting with the Soviet Ambassador in Washington, Anatoly Dobrynin, conveying the idea of the U.S. withdrawing the nuclear weapons from Turkey, in exchange for the withdrawal of the Soviet missiles from Cuba.

On Oct. 26, 1962, *Pravda* published, in full, the Pope's letter to Khrushchov. Two days later, Kennedy and Khrushchov reached the agreement that ended the Cuban missile crisis. Among the pledges made by Kennedy that avoided thermonuclear war was the promise that the United States would never invade Cuba. Kennedy made that pledge public in the press conference he gave immediately following the agreement with Khrushchov.

Unpublicized but crucial to the resolution of the crisis, was Kennedy's agreement to remove medium-range ballistic missiles from Turkey.

Prospects to End the Cold War?

On Dec. 11, 1962, Premier Khrushchov wrote a lengthy, substantive secret letter to President Kennedy. He began:

DEAR MR. PRESIDENT, It would seem that

you and we have come now to a final stage in the elimination of tensions around Cuba. Our relations are already entering now their normal course since all those means placed by us on the Cuban territory which you considered offensive are withdrawn, and you ascertained that, to which effect a statement was already made by your side.

That is good. We appreciate that you just as we approached not dogmatically the solution of the question of eliminating the tension which evolved, and this enabled us under existing conditions to find also a more flexible form of verification of the withdrawal of the above mentioned means. Understanding and flexibility displayed by you in this matter are highly appreciated by us, though our criticism of American imperialism remains in force because that conflict was indeed created by the policy of the United States with regard to Cuba.

Khrushchov went on to confirm:

that we have removed our means from Cuba relying on your assurance that the United States and its allies will not invade Cuba. . . .

Within a short period of time we and you have lived through a rather acute crisis. The acuteness of it was that we and you were already prepared to fight, and this would lead to a thermonuclear war. Yes, to a thermonuclear world war with all its dreadful consequences. We took it into account and, being convinced that mankind would never forgive the statesmen who would not exhaust all possibilities to prevent catastrophe, agreed to a compromise.

Khrushchov extended his wishes that President Kennedy would be re-elected and would serve another six years during which time U.S.-Soviet relations could advance considerably:

We believe that you will be able to receive a mandate at the next election too, and that you will be the U.S. President for six years,

which would appeal to us. At our times, six years in world politics is a long period of time and during that period, we could create good conditions for peaceful coexistence on earth and this would be highly appreciated by the peoples of our countries as well as by all other peoples.

Khrushchov concluded with the proposal to continue and deepen the personal dialogue:

Now it is of special importance to provide for the possibility of an exchange of opinion through confidential channels which you and I have set up and which we use. . . . Let us, Mr. President, eliminate promptly the consequences of the Cuban crisis and get down to solving other questions, and we have them in number.

Khrushchov enumerated the question of the pending nuclear test ban treaty, the larger issue of disarmament and the unsettled issues of Germany and Berlin. He concluded:

Please, excuse me for my straightforwardness and frankness, but I believe as before that a frank and straightforward exchange of opinion is needed to avoid the worst. Please convey to your wife and your family wishes of good health from myself, my wife and my entire family.

In the wake of the Kennedy-Khrushchov exchange and the solving of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the White House and the Kremlin established a teletype "Hotline," and, on July 25, 1963, the two superpowers signed the first Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty.

In June 1963, in a commencement speech at American University, President Kennedy issued a call for an end to the Cold War altogether:

For, in the final analysis," he declared, "our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal.