

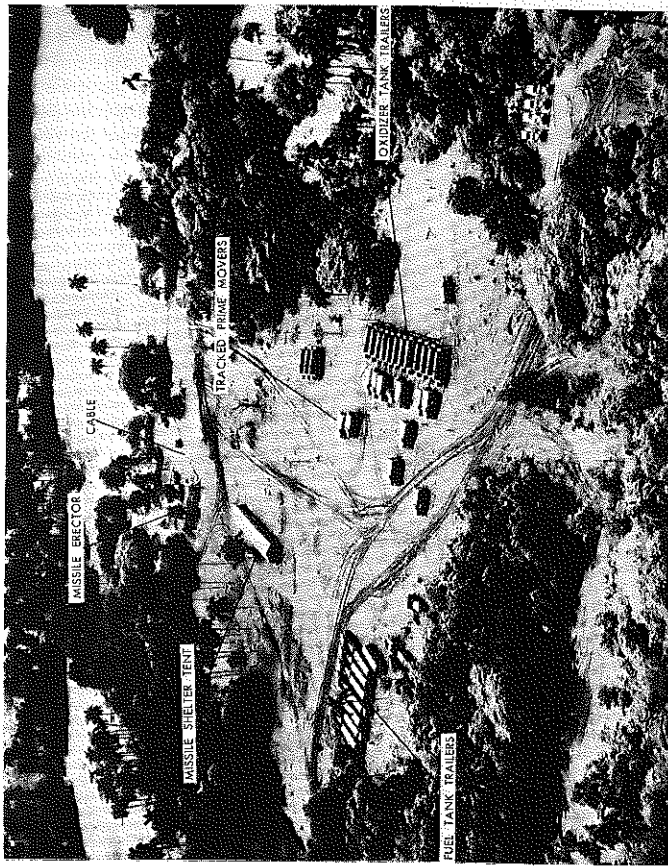
## The Cuban Missile Crisis

A series of crucial policy decisions that provides an extraordinary counterpoint to the Bay of Pigs decision was made in October 1962, during the historic thirteen days of the Cuban missile crisis. This crisis has been referred to as “the most critical in our nation’s history” and “the greatest danger of catastrophic war since the advent of the nuclear age.” The policy-making group included most of the same key men who participated in the Bay of Pigs decision, but this time they functioned in a much more effective way and showed few symptoms of groupthink, which were counteracted.

### Background of the crisis

Within a year or so following the Bay of Pigs invasion attempt, the Soviet Union worked out an arrangement with the Castro regime to set up missile installations in Cuba, presumably to be armed with nuclear warheads. More than twenty thousand Russian troops, well equipped with tactical weapons, were sent to Cuba to protect the installations. Shortly after detecting missile sites scattered throughout Cuba, United States military intelligence experts estimated that the installations represented about one-third of the Soviet Union’s entire atomic warhead potential. If fired at American cities, the missiles might kill about 80 million Americans.

During the months preceding the crisis, the CIA had been receiving reports from agents in Cuba asserting that the Russians were setting up offensive atomic weapons, in addition to the defensive conventional weapons that they had publicly acknowledged supplying. But this information was not definitive. United States intelligence specialists and the rest of the government continued to assume that newly arrived Soviet personnel and equipment in Cuba were merely intended to reinforce the Cuban air defense system, as the Russian leaders repeatedly claimed. This shared consensus—as unwarranted



A photograph taken in October 1962 by a U-2 plane flying over Cuba showing supportive buildings for ballistic missiles, fuel tank trailers, and a missile erector in San Cristobel. Extensive vehicle trackage, coupled with the construction of cable lines to control areas, indicates the quick tempo of Soviet activity.

as the consensus about Castro's weakness that had evolved before the Bay of Pigs invasion—evidently kept the Kennedy administration from taking the initial warning signs seriously. But White House complacency was rudely shattered on October 16, 1962. On that day the President was informed that CIA photo interpreters, while routinely checking photos taken by a U-2 plane flying over Cuba, had discovered a group of recently completed buildings for ballistic missiles in San Cristóbal. In this startling photograph, specialists could clearly identify a launching pad and an offensive missile lying on the ground.

### The mission of the Executive Committee

When word reached President Kennedy, he promptly called together a group of high-level advisers, which later was called the Executive Committee of the National Security Council. The membership of this group overlapped with that of the policy-making group that had approved the Bay of Pigs invasion plan. In fact, five of the key men on the Executive Committee attended most of the crucial meetings on both decisions: President Kennedy, Secretary of State Rusk, Secretary of Defense McNamara, Assistant Secretary Paul Nitze, and White House Foreign Policy Coordinator McGeorge Bundy. Another key member was Attorney General Robert Kennedy, who had attended the initial briefing session on the Bay of Pigs plan and later had a hand in strengthening the consensus in favor of executing that plan. Other key members of the Executive Committee during the Cuban missile crisis were General Maxwell Taylor (newly appointed chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, White House staff member Theodore Sorensen, and John McCone (who had replaced Allen Dulles as chief of the CIA). A few additional experts and officials, whose judgments the President wanted to consider, also attended practically all the meetings. Among them were Roswell Gilpatric, George Ball, and Llewellyn Thompson.

When the members were called together on the first day of the crisis, "the President made it clear that acquiescence was impossible" and that the group was expected to decide on a course of action that would get the missiles out of Cuba before they became operational. A diplomatic approach, either directly to Khrushchev or indirectly through the United Nations would have been preferred by a few members of the committee, but "the President had rejected this course from the outset." John Kennedy, along with many other officials in the United States government, took the position that the Soviet missiles could not be allowed to remain in Cuba not only because of the military threat but also because of political damage to America's position in the world. Key members of the administration also believed that ignoring the missile build-up would impair Kennedy's personal prestige and would compromise his attempts to implement his foreign and domestic policies. Leading Republicans, including Senators Goldwater and Keating, had been strongly pressuring



The Executive Committee of the National Security Council meets in the White House during the Cuban missile crisis. The participants—identified clockwise from President Kennedy, bending over table at right—are Secretary of State Dean Rusk; Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara; Roswell Gilpatric, Deputy Secretary of Defense; General Maxwell Taylor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Paul Nitze, Assistant Secretary of Defense; Don Wilson (hidden), Deputy Director of the United States Information Agency; Theodore Sorensen, Presidential Counsel; Townley Smith (seated by bookcase); McGeorge Bundy, White House Foreign Policy Coordinator; Secretary of the Treasury Douglas Dillon; Vice President Johnson; Llewellyn Thompson as the adviser on Russian affairs; William C. Foster; (hidden) John McCone, chief of the CIA; and George Ball (also hidden), Under Secretary of State. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy is standing at far left.

Kennedy to use United States military power to put a stop to the missile buildup in Cuba. Only one month earlier, in response to these political pressures, the President had publicly stated his belief that all the missiles in Cuba were purely defensive weapons. He had pledged to take action if any offensive missiles were introduced. As one political analyst put it, "If Eisenhower had inadvertently embarrassed Khrushchev personally and politically by his clumsy handling of the U-2 affair in . . . 1960, Khrushchev foolishly repaid Kennedy tenfold and under far more dangerous circumstances."

President Kennedy's initial decision (before the first meeting of the Executive Committee) was that some form of coercive action would have to be taken to eliminate the missile threat. This judgment has been attacked by a number of political critics. They claim that Kennedy unnecessarily created a dangerous crisis to protect his prestige and that he took a serious gamble by letting the Kremlin decide whether to preserve peace by removing the missiles. Other critics, however, regard Kennedy's reasons for his initial decision to resort to coercive action well warranted by the circumstances.

Whether the President was right or wrong in setting up his objective is not relevant to a discussion of group decision-making. What is relevant is the fact that the President let the Executive Committee decide how to get rid of the missile threat. We are concerned with the decision-making activity of this group. If the participants' accounts of what happened at their meetings are correct, we are led to conclude that this policy-making group met all the major criteria of sound decision-making. The decision-makers (1) thoroughly canvassed a wide range of alternative courses of action; (2) surveyed the objectives and the values implicated; (3) carefully weighed the costs, drawbacks, and subtle risks of negative consequences, as well as the positive consequences, that could flow from what initially seemed the most advantageous courses of action; (4) continuously searched for relevant information for evaluating the policy alternatives; (5) conscientiously took account of the information and the expert judgments to which they were exposed, even when the information or judgments did not support the course of action they initially preferred; (6) reexamined the positive and negative consequences of all the main alternatives, including those originally considered unacceptable, before making a final choice; and (7) made detailed provisions for executing the chosen course of action, with special attention to contingency plans that might be required if various known risks were to materialize.

These criteria refer to the quality of the decision-making procedures, regardless of whether the outcome (which in this instance hinged largely on the way the Kremlin responded) was successful. Foreign policy decisions of "good" quality—that meet the seven criteria—generally have a much better chance of being successful in the long run than those that do not. But a decision does not necessarily have to have a successful outcome to be rated as a "good-quality" decision, according to the definition provided by these criteria. The definition carries a rather anomalous implication, which needs to be spelled out in order to indicate why the Cuban missile crisis serves as a counterpoint to the Bay of Pigs and other fiascoes. The reason is not that the

Cuban missile crisis turned out to be a success story. If the Soviet leaders had chosen to respond belligerently to the naval blockade and if, following the disaster, an objective analyst was still alive who could evaluate the same evidence that is now accessible, that analyst would be obliged to conclude, on the basis of the seven criteria, that despite the horrible outcome, the decision-making procedures of the Executive Committee were of "good quality."

President Kennedy's initial decision to resort to some form of coercive action to get rid of the missiles in Cuba may have failed to meet some of these criteria. Had he not precluded the alternative of relying upon the traditional methods of diplomacy and accommodation to negotiate with the Soviet Union and with the Castro government, President Kennedy might have succeeded in finding a way not only to eliminate the missile threat but also to terminate Cuba's military alliance with the Soviet Union. Some social scientists now regard Kennedy's two-power military approach as a serious error. Irving Horowitz, for example, claims that Kennedy's view of the missile crisis was unduly influenced by a games-theory model that led him to initiate an unnecessarily dangerous "game of chicken" in response to a relatively minor threat to America's security, forcing an unwarranted showdown between two major powers at the risk of starting an all-out nuclear war.

Whether or not Kennedy's initial decision to preclude a diplomatic approach is judged to have been an act of brinkmanship, the Executive Committee could be criticized for conforming too readily with the President's way of defining its mission. The government leaders in the group might have been able to influence the President to change his initial judgment if they had become convinced that the President was wrong in excluding a purely diplomatic approach. But, except for this possible deficiency, the Executive Committee by and large did a good job of examining and evaluating alternative courses of coercive action in order to supply the President with the answers to the policy questions he asked them to answer. Even Horowitz, who is among the most severe critics, acknowledges that the final recommendations of the Executive Committee "emerged from a political bargaining process which involved not only the military factors and strategic analysis, but also considerations of morality . . . and international political consequences."

### Decisions made during the thirteen-day crisis

For five days, starting on October 16, 1962, the Executive Committee met continually, often holding formal sessions several times a day, in order to arrive at a strategic plan. At first the best choice seemed to be to threaten a surgical or massive air strike, in the hope that the verbal threat would induce the Soviet Union to withdraw the missiles. But the group recognized from the start that the Soviet leaders might refuse to acquiesce to this threat, and their refusal might lead to a rapid, uncontrolled escalation that would bring on a nuclear war. After debating the alternatives day after day, a majority of the

group finally decided on October 20 that the best choice was to institute a naval blockade. This choice, they felt, had the advantage of being a low-level action that would serve as a nonhumiliating warning and would still "maintain the options," as McNamara put it, permitting a gradual, controlled escalation later on, if necessary.

The crisis continued for another eight days, and the same group continued to meet daily until the crisis was finally resolved by Khrushchev's offer to withdraw the missiles. On October 22, President Kennedy gave his dramatic speech revealing to the world the hitherto secret evidence of the offensive missile sites in Cuba and announcing the United States government's decision to quarantine Cuba. Khrushchev promptly denounced the blockade as "piracy." Eighteen Soviet ships—some of them almost certainly carrying nuclear armaments—continued relentlessly on their course toward the quarantine zone. During the next few suspenseful days the United States repeated its threat to board Soviet ships, forced several Soviet submarines to surface near the quarantine zone, and actually did board a Lebanese vessel chartered by the Soviet Union. These actions were calculated to postpone a direct military confrontation while demonstrating the firm resolve of the United States government to counteract the missile build-up in Cuba. Then, on October 24 and 25, shortly before reaching the quarantine zone, most of the Soviet cargo ships (including all those with large hatches, presumed to be carrying nuclear missiles) turned around and headed back toward Russian ports.

Despite the success of the blockade, the situation was still considered dangerous because work was continuing on the Soviet missile sites in Cuba, and they were rapidly becoming operational. The Executive Committee began to consider a response that would make its contingency plans operational. These plans involved taking further graduated steps toward more direct forms of military action, possibly resorting to air strikes against the missile sites or even an invasion of Cuba. Before taking further action, however, the committee decided that additional warning messages—but not a formal ultimatum—should be sent to the Soviet leaders, urging them to remove the missiles immediately in order to avoid the outbreak of war. As this new crisis was reaching a climax, Khrushchev made it known that the Soviet Union would respond favorably if the United States were willing to make some concessions in turn. The crisis was finally resolved on October 28, when the Soviet leaders agreed to remove the missiles in exchange for assurances that the United States would not invade Cuba.

### Dissension within the group

From the various accounts of the thirteen days of agitated deliberations, it is apparent that the members of the Executive Committee continuously

disagreed with each other despite strong pressures to develop a consensus. For example, on the fourth day of meetings, according to Sorensen: "The President was impatient and discouraged. He was counting on the Attorney General and me, he said, to pull the group together quickly—otherwise more discussions and delay would plague whatever decision he took. He wanted to act soon." When the consensus was not forthcoming in the next meeting, Sorensen departed from his usual conduct at these meetings and tried to push the members toward a unified response by telling them "that we are not serving the President well, and that my recently healed ulcer didn't like it much either." Here we have an instance of strong pressure toward group concurrence of the type that frequently is observed in groups dominated by groupthink tendencies. But the members of the Executive Committee were able to resist this pressure. They continued their lively debates about the alternatives open to them, notwithstanding the impatience and ulcers that their disunity might cause.

The next day, the majority finally agreed on the naval blockade as the initial course of action. Nevertheless, the group did not develop a consensus involving shared illusions of invulnerability. On the contrary, most members thought that even the best possible alternative was fraught with the enormous danger of touching off a nuclear holocaust in which the Soviet Union and the United States might destroy each other. Nor did the members show any other sustained symptoms of groupthink, although, from time to time, there were transient tendencies to invoke stereotypes and to exert pressures toward conformity. By and large, the members of the group proved to be extraordinarily successful in retaining their critical resources as independent thinkers, despite all the strains and pressures of the thirteen-day crisis.

What can we learn about the conditions that enabled this Executive Committee to avoid becoming victims of groupthink? Part of the answer has to do with the traumatic impact of the earlier fiasco in which most of the leading personalities on the Executive Committee had participated. Bitterness still lingered from the humiliating failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion, which had been launched a year and a half earlier. The Kennedy team was no longer so naive about seemingly authoritative military briefings or so insensitive to the dangers of oversimplifying foreign-policy issues. But the changes were not simply a matter of each man's resolving to do better next time. Important procedural changes had been introduced into the organized policy-making process—changes calculated to prevent the policy-makers from accepting uncritically glib arguments put forth by enthusiastic proponents of an ill-conceived plan. Before continuing with our examination of how the Executive Committee functioned during the Cuban missile crisis, we must first backtrack a bit to consider the transformations initiated in the White House during the months following the "worst defeat" of President Kennedy's entire career, after his initial anguished question, "How could we have been so stupid?" was replaced by "What can we do to avoid being so stupid again?"

changes is necessary to see how they might increase the problem-solving efficiency of a government administration. Many of Kennedy's innovations avoided the usual drawbacks of traditional bureaucratic practices, such as maintaining such strict secrecy that the flow of information to the decision-making body is restricted. The President's procedural changes also set up the conditions that promote independent thinking by curtailing the adverse influence of groupthink-tendencies. Four major procedural changes were carefully followed when the administration subsequently had to make vital decisions that might affect national security, as in the case of the Cuban missile crisis.

### *New definitions of the participants' role*

Members of the policy-making group were given a new and much broader role: Every participant was expected to function as a skeptical "generalist." Henceforth advisers from the various government departments were supposed to participate in policy discussions not primarily as spokesmen for the agency they represented but as critical thinkers. They were charged with examining the policy problem as a whole, rather than approaching the issues in the traditional bureaucratic way whereby each man confines his remarks to the special aspects in which he considers himself to be an expert and avoids arguing about issues on which others present are supposedly more expert than he. Furthermore, the two men whom the President trusted most—his brother Robert Kennedy and Theodore Sorensen (neither of whom had been present at the initial Bay of Pigs planning sessions)—were given a special role. As intellectual watchdogs, these two men were told to pursue relentlessly every bone of contention in order to prevent errors arising from too superficial an analysis of the issues. Accepting this role avidly, Robert Kennedy, at the expense of becoming unpopular with some of his associates, barked out sharp and sometimes rude questions. Often he deliberately became the devil's advocate. Sorensen felt his responsibility for preventing errors so keenly that he would spend many a night pondering possible flaws when new plans affecting national security were under discussion.

### *Changes in group atmosphere*

The group meetings of government policy-makers were organized in a completely different way. In accordance with the group rule that sessions should be devoted to frank and free-wheeling discussion, the usual rules of protocol were suspended. No formal agenda was imposed upon the group. To broaden the scope of information available to the core group of decision-makers, departmental spokesmen and outside experts were invited to give their views and then were carefully questioned about the grounds for their conclusions. With an eye to obtaining fresh points of view, new advisers were brought in periodically. Recognizing the usual tendency for visitors to remain silent,

### Legacy of the Bay of Pigs

At a time of shattering defeat, mutual respect and a sense of group identification have important positive functions in maintaining morale. A cohesive group can survive a catastrophically bad decision, belatedly learn the lessons of its bitter experience, and live to make better decisions next time. Just such a success story seems to fit the facts of how the Kennedy administration faced the adversities of the Bay of Pigs fiasco. Despite the barrage of justified attack against them, the President and the key men in his administration showed no signs of demoralization or ineffectual response to the shattering defeat.

One of Kennedy's first acts after the defeat of the Cuban invaders was to announce to the press that he bore sole responsibility for the fiasco. He strongly opposed any attempts to shift the responsibility to the others who had participated in the deliberations. Those who worked closely with him realized that although he seemed outwardly composed, he was deeply perturbed. With great self-control he managed to avoid lashing out at Richard Bissell and Allen Dulles, the two CIA chiefs who had cooked up the foolish plan and had misled him into thinking that it would work. (He did, however, quietly accept their resignations.) Kennedy displayed his irritation from time to time, but it was against people who were not members of the in-group. For example, he attacked newspaper reporters and editors for having failed to censor news of the impending Cuban invasion. He felt they should have done this in the interest of national security. Kennedy's biographers agree that this attack was unquestionably a mistake and embroiled the President in a lengthy, inexperienced feud with the press.

While scorn was being heaped on them at home and abroad, the key members of the Kennedy team supported each other and this mutual support helped them to avoid being demoralized. They were able to take constructive action, to repair some of the damage, and to cope with new international crises in Laos, Vietnam, the Congo, and Berlin. Their behavior after the fiasco appears to be a good illustration of the favorable consequences of group cohesiveness under conditions of temporary defeat, in contrast to the unfavorable consequences that create poor decision-making at times when nothing has happened to disrupt the group's optimism about the success of its policies.

The problem facing the leader of a cohesive group is how to obtain the morale gains of high cohesiveness without the losses caused by groupthink. President Kennedy seemed to be aware of this problem, although neither he nor any of his associates ever formulated it in this way. One of the President's first acts after the debacle was to set up a commission of inquiry to find out exactly what had gone wrong. Then, acting partly on his advisers' recommendations and partly on his own hunches, Kennedy introduced a series of sweeping changes in the decision-making procedures of his team to ensure that there would never again be a fiasco like the Bay of Pigs. An analysis of these

members of the group deliberately asked them to give their reactions during the discussions.

### *Meetings of subgroups*

As a special device to facilitate critical thinking, the Executive Committee was sometimes broken up into two subgroups. The separate subcommittees would meet independently to work on a policy decision and then would come together for debate and cross-examination in the reassembled group. The members of the White House staff, in addition to attending the meetings of the ad hoc policy-making group, also met separately with the President, "away from the inhibiting presence of the grandees in the Cabinet Room."

### *Leaderless sessions*

Occasionally, President Kennedy deliberately absented himself from the meetings of the policy-making group, particularly during the preliminary phases when the full range of alternatives was being discussed for the first time. One reason for his absence was to avoid exerting undue influence on the way his advisers conceptualized a problem. Robert Kennedy, who strongly supported his brother's resolve to allow some sessions to be leaderless, commented, "I felt there was less true give and take with the President in the room. There was the danger that by indicating his own view and leanings, he would cause others just to fall in line." When the President was absent, either Secretary Rusk or Robert Kennedy chaired the meeting, but each of these men seemed aware that he should not try to direct the group or attempt to replace the President as the most influential voice in the group.

### *A new group norm manifested during the missile crisis*

Largely as a result of the four new procedures and related changes in leadership practices that consistently encouraged open-minded inquiry and debate, the members of the Executive Committee avoided succumbing to groupthink, despite the fact that they formed a cohesive group with all the usual social pressures operating to induce conformity with group norms. In effect, striving to be thorough in their appraisals of alternatives became a new type of norm. This norm was established at the initial meeting on the Cuban missile crisis, and from then on the members of the group seemed to be aware of the danger of premature closure, even though one or another of them expressed feelings of annoyance and impatience at times—as did President Kennedy—about the delays in arriving at a consensus.

At first President Kennedy, like most other government officials, was surprised and angered by the unexpected news of the offensive missiles in

Cuba, particularly because it had become apparent that Khrushchev was lying when he had recently reassured the United States government that all the weapons Russia was supplying to Cuba were purely defensive. Adlai Stevenson, who spoke with the President on the first day, was disturbed to hear the President tell him that "we'll have to do something quickly. I suppose the alternatives are to go in the air and wipe them out or take other steps to render the weapons inoperable." If the President had presented his initial position forcefully, the group members might have conceptualized their task as deciding which type of air assault to recommend—the limited surgical strikes favored by the President or the more extensive air assaults favored by the Joint Chiefs—without giving much consideration to any of the less drastic or less dangerous options. But instead of inducing the group at the opening session to focus on the air-strike action he favored, President Kennedy emphasized the need to canvass alternatives. His message was that "action was imperative," but he wanted the members to devote themselves to making "a prompt and intensive survey of the dangers and all possible courses of action." That very day the group began examining the pros and cons of the most obvious alternatives. Robert Kennedy intervened at one point, taking on his customary role of intellectual watchdog, to urge the group to add more alternatives: "Surely," he asserted, "there was some course in between bombing and doing nothing."

In response to this prod from the Attorney General, the group considerably broadened the spectrum of alternative responses to be considered. By the end of the first day of meetings the committee had seriously discussed at least ten alternatives: (1) do nothing; (2) exert diplomatic pressure on the Soviet Union by appealing to the United Nations or to the Organization of American States to set up inspection teams; (3) arrange for direct communication between President Kennedy and Khrushchev, possibly at an immediate summit conference; (4) secretly approach Castro to warn him of drastic United States action and to split him off from the Soviet Union; (5) institute low-level military action by setting up a naval blockade to prevent Russian ships from bringing missile armaments to Cuba; (6) launch an air assault that would bombard the missile sites with pellets to render them inoperable without causing any casualties; (7) carry out a limited surgical air strike, with advance warnings to allow Cubans and Soviet personnel to escape being killed while the missile installations were being destroyed; (8) carry out a limited surgical air strike without any advance warning; (9) carry out a massive air strike against all military targets in Cuba to prevent effective anti-aircraft fire and possible retaliation against targets in the United States from as yet undetected missile sites; (10) launch an all-out invasion to "take Cuba away from Castro."

The group discussed the advantages and disadvantages of each alternative, including the first two, which had been rejected from the beginning by the President. During the first day McGeorge Bundy urged a traditional diplomatic approach but soon dropped this position and later became an

advocate of an air strike. McNamara also ignored the President's exclusion of a noncoercive response and argued that no coercive action was necessary because "a missile is a missile" whether it is launched from Cuba or from the Soviet Union. Nitze and others soon convinced McNamara, however, to accept the President's definition of the situation as requiring a coercive response. Their major arguments were that with a huge stockpile of atomic missiles close to the United States, the Soviet Union's capability for launching a nuclear attack would be doubled and the warning time would be drastically reduced from fifteen minutes to only two or three minutes. Perhaps the speed with which Bundy and McNamara were induced by others in the group to abandon their initial position and to conform with the leader's stricture was a manifestation of groupthink tendencies. If so, this incipient tendency must have been short-lived. After the first day all indications point to a relative absence of concurrence-seeking. The members of the group vigorously debated a variety of alternative coercive actions and freely voiced their misgivings with little regard for traditional protocol, most noticeably when the President was not there.<sup>1</sup> Sorensen recalled:

one of the remarkable aspects of those meetings was a sense of complete equality. . . . We were fifteen individuals on our own, representing the President and not different departments. Assistant Secretaries differed vigorously with their Secretaries; I participated much more freely than I ever had in an NSC [National Security Council] meeting; and the absence of the President encouraged everyone to speak his mind.

When the President attended the meetings, his skepticism and his disregard for traditional deference to the military judgments of the Joint Chiefs of Staff also contributed to the atmosphere of objective inquiry and debate. For example, he was unwilling to accept the judgment of General Curtis Le May, the Air Force chief of staff, who, while arguing for a massive air assault rather than a blockade, assured the President that the Russians would not retaliate. President Kennedy's skeptical retort was, "They, no more than we, can let these things go by without doing something. They can't, after all their statements, permit us to take out their missiles, kill a lot of Russians, and then do nothing." Further questioning of the Joint Chiefs' arguments for their strong recommendation to carry out an air strike elicited answers that shook the confidence of the President and others in this alternative. In their answers the military experts acknowledged that they could not be sure that all the missiles would be wiped out even by a massive air assault or that during the attack itself nuclear missiles would not be launched against American cities before the sites were destroyed.

General Le May, however, may have deliberately given the President and his civilian advisers the impression that air strikes could not be surgical. He and the other Joint Chiefs had decided to promote a massive attack against Cuba. They were convinced that that was the only proper solution to the missile crisis. In this instance, according to Graham Allison, the information

search by participants in the Executive Committee was incomplete and remained so during the first week. But by the beginning of the second week the nonmilitary participants found out independently from civilian experts that a surgical air strike was feasible, and they then added it to the list of options to consider in the event that the blockade failed.<sup>2</sup>

Whenever he presided, the President took pains to call on men in secondary positions such as Nitze, Ball, and Thompson, to obtain their individual views, recognizing that lower-ranking officers "would not voluntarily contradict their superiors in front of the President, and that persuasive advisers such as McNamara unintentionally silenced less articulate men." From time to time, President Kennedy brought in United Nations representative Adlai Stevenson and representatives from other government agencies along with a number of distinguished outsiders—Dean Acheson, former Secretary of State; Robert Lovett, former Secretary of Defense; and John McCloy, former High Commissioner of Germany. The President and others in the group encouraged these outsiders to go along with the same procedural norms that were being followed by the insiders—to present their own points of view frankly, to ask difficult questions, to make the others defend their assumptions. This unusual way of proceeding must have created some consternation among the outsiders. One unimpressed visitor, who evidently missed the firm guiding hand of a leader and the mutual support of a strong group consensus, was Dean Acheson. He was used to the entirely different style of presidential leadership that had characterized the policy-making groups headed by President Truman. Acheson testily complained that "discussions within the Executive Committee after a couple of sessions seemed to me repetitive, leaderless, and a waste of time."

Yet, contrary to Acheson's exasperated appraisal of the group meetings, the members managed to work out a complicated plan of action. On the basis of their probing discussions of the risks and drawbacks, they were able to spell out a series of alternative scenarios that could ensue from their blockade decision. These scenarios enabled the policy-makers to specify a graded series of stronger military actions that could be taken in response to possible countering moves by the Soviet leaders. For example, the group developed contingency plans specifying what would be done if the Russians refused to allow Soviet ships to be searched or if they launched a submarine attack against American ships in retaliation for the sinking of one or more Soviet ships that might try to break through the blockade.

Fortunately, none of these dire contingencies arose, and none of the escalatory steps was taken. But the fact that the backstop plans were worked out with such great care, rather than allowing them to be so vaguely defined that they would have to be improvised if the Russians were recalcitrant, may well have reduced the chances of accidental escalation arising from excited misjudgments. Indeed, there were times when it looked as though the Soviet Union was going to ignore the blockade and force the United States Navy into

an armed confrontation with Soviet ships and submarines. Delicate operational handling was required in order to head off the most horrendous of all the scenarios the group had rehearsed.

As a result of the thorough review of all the drawbacks, the recommendations the group gave to the President included much more than strategic military guidelines. The group worked out in considerable detail ways of handling a variety of political, legal, and diplomatic ramifications, which, if neglected, could cause a blockade attempt to fail. In order to diminish political pressures from military-minded Congressmen, the President and his advisers planned in advance a briefing session with leading Congressmen, who, as it turned out, reacted in much the same angry way the President had when he had first learned about the nuclear missiles. Even Senator Fulbright, who had taken a firm anti-militaristic stand earlier concerning the invasion of Cuba (just as he was to do later during the Vietnam War), urged at this particular time a much stronger "military action rather than such a weak step as a blockade," because he regarded the Cuban missiles as an unprecedented threat to American security. President Kennedy, in a very distressing session with the Congressmen, had to spell out many of the contingency military plans and remind the irate Congressmen of the enormous risks that had led the group to settle on the blockade solution.

The legal aspects were painstakingly pursued by a number of lawyers in the group, who felt that accepting the strong recommendation, made by Dean Acheson, to ignore legality when vital matters of national security were at stake would be a serious mistake. At considerable cost in time and effort, a subcommittee of the Executive Committee worked out a successful plan to obtain a two-thirds favorable vote from the Organization of American States, which set up a legal, hemisphere-wide blockade. The members of the Executive Committee realized that without this vote, the blockade could be labeled as an act of war in violation of international law. Avoiding this was especially important because Soviet leaders were known to take legalistic formulations seriously in such matters and would feel justified in accusing the United States of piracy if the United States boarded Russian ships.

Recognizing that support of the major powers of Europe and other parts of the world might be essential, members of the Executive Committee spent considerable time discussing the diplomatic repercussions of United States coercive action. Turkey, for example, had to be prepared for Soviet pressure or even possible air attacks because the United States missile sites located there were likely to be equated with the Soviet installations in Cuba. African countries also became involved in the far-reaching plan, because the committee realized that the Russians could circumvent the naval blockade by flying atomic warheads into Cuba if they could refuel their planes in West Africa. Accordingly, it became necessary to dispatch United States ambassadors to see the Presidents of Guinea and Senegal in order to prevent this alternative route from materializing. In retrospect, speaking of the elaborate prepara-

tions made as a result of the group's deliberations, Robert Kennedy was able to assert, without contradiction from public affairs commentators, that "nothing, whether a weighty matter or a small detail, was overlooked."

### Subjective discomfort

The Executive Committee did not give birth to its elaborate plans without undergoing a considerable amount of subjective discomfort, sleeplessness, and protracted turmoil. Of course much of the discomfort must have been evoked by the ever present threat that the crisis might escalate to all-out thermonuclear war, and it probably was augmented by the group discussions. The participants were keenly aware of the enormous risks they were taking; they repeatedly acknowledged all the uncertainties and dire contingencies that could arise from a military confrontation with the Soviet Union. This time there were none of the illusions of safety that the White House group had shared while planning the Bay of Pigs invasion, no comfortable rationalizations that minimized the dangers, no shared myths about the invulnerability of the group or of the nation.

Knowing that one misstep could precipitate a devastating nuclear war, the members' need for emotional support from the group was undoubtedly very high, but most of the time the lack of consensus frustrated this need, depriving the members of a sense of unity that would have enabled them to feel more confident about a successful outcome. Sorensen vividly described his own agonizing responses to the crisis:

In no other period during my service in the White House did I wake up in the middle of the night, reviewing the deliberations of that evening and trying to puzzle out a course of action. Not one of us at any time believed that any of the choices before us could bring anything but either prolonged danger or fighting.

Dean Rusk spoke grimly about the possibility of "nuclear incineration" and disclosed his disquieting train of thought by professing surprise at being "still alive" the morning after President Kennedy announced the United States blockade of Soviet ships. Robert McNamara, noted for his cool, computer-like capacity to think about the unthinkable, has said that he personally experienced "the most intense strain I have ever operated under." He added a comment about the cohesiveness of the group resulting from common exposure to danger, which, as McNamara put it, "forges bonds and understanding between men stronger than those formed by decades of close association."

All accounts of the sessions are filled with comments about unpleasant arguments and distressing agitation. Robert Kennedy's memoirs of the Cuban missile crisis are punctuated by constant references to the unpleasant



bickering and agitated feelings stirred up by heated debates over every course of action that anyone proposed. For example:

And so we argued, and so we disagreed—all dedicated, intelligent men, disagreeing and fighting about the future of their country, and of mankind. Meanwhile, time was slowly running out.

\* \* \*

The next morning, at our meeting at the State Department, there were sharp disagreements again. The strain and hours without sleep were beginning to take their toll. . . . Those human weaknesses—impatience, fits of anger—all are understandable.

The picture that emerges is quite different from the placid sense of unanimity and the shared sense of unlimited power that had characterized the policymaking group when it approved the plan to invade Cuba a year and a half earlier.

### Vigilant appraisal: the antithesis of groupthink

Along with strong subjective feelings of insecurity and exasperation, there were several unusual objective features of the Executive Committee's sessions. In all accounts of the Cuban missile crisis are consistent indications of four characteristics of vigilant appraisal, which contrast sharply with the manifestations of concurrence-seeking during the deliberations about the Bay of Pigs invasion.

#### *Acknowledgment of grave dangers even after arriving at a decision*

At every meeting during the Cuban missile crisis, the participants openly acknowledged that whatever course of action they were contemplating would be highly dangerous. The threat of catastrophic destruction of the United States by Soviet missiles, whether launched from the new sites in Cuba or from Soviet submarines or aircraft, was constantly the focus of the group's attention, particularly when the members were discussing contingency plans involving an escalation of military force. This group never attained that complacent sense of security that so often emerges when a groupthink-dominated group arrives at a consensus. After the members had decided that a blockade would be much less risky than a direct air attack on Cuba or a full-scale invasion, the members continued to discuss the possibility that the blockade might fail and leave the United States in an even more vulnerable position if the Russians succeeded in completing the Cuban missile sites. Out of the renewed discussion provoked by their vigilant appraisal of the risks, the group evolved a new set of contingency plans to follow up the blockade, if necessary, with stronger military action. But these additional contingency plans, while in-

creasing somewhat the group's confidence in the blockade decision, still did not eliminate profound concern about "the difficulty of halting an escalation, once started."

Other potentially damaging consequences for the United States were also subjected to vigilant scrutiny. A prolonged blockade would give the Russians time to make counterthreats and stir up world opinion, which could lead to mass protests and possibly even the fall of some Latin American governments. Castro might take counteractions by executing a number of Bay of Pigs prisoners each day the blockade continued. At home, American military leaders might become frustrated and demand more military action as the unrelieved tensions built up. Reflecting all the qualms of the members of the Executive Committee, the President summed up the shaky status of the recommended course of action when he announced to the group that he reluctantly decided to accept it: "There isn't any good solution. Whichever plan I choose, the ones whose plans are not taken are the lucky ones—they'll be able to say 'I told you so' in a week or two. But this one seems the least objectionable."

On the first morning the blockade went into effect, the group was informed that Russian ships were moving steadily toward the interception line set up by United States naval vessels. This was another occasion when the participants openly acknowledged the risks. At one point during this session, according to Robert Kennedy, the President expressed "the danger and concern we all felt hung like a cloud over us" by asking, "Isn't there some way we can avoid having our first exchange with a Russian submarine—almost anything but that?" Just a few minutes before, the group had received distressing news from the Navy. A Soviet submarine was moving into position between United States naval ships and the two Russian freighters that the Navy expected to board within less than one hour. When the President asked his question, Robert Kennedy had a distressing thought—and he assumed that this was what his brother was thinking too—which took the form of a much more unnerving question: "Was the world on the brink of a holocaust?" He noticed that his brother was showing extraordinary signs of emotional tension: His face seemed drawn and haggard, drained of all color; his hand went up to his face to cover his mouth. The two brothers stared at each other across the conference table. At that moment, Robert Kennedy had a peculiar sense of dissociation, as he became wholly preoccupied with a flood of vivid memories of the worst personal catastrophes of their lives:

For a few fleeting seconds, it was almost as though no one else was there and he was no longer the President. . . . Inexplicably, I thought of when he was ill and almost died; when he lost his child; when we learned that our oldest brother had been killed; of personal times of strain and hurt. The voices droned on, but I didn't seem to hear anything.

This momentary dissociation, during which Robert Kennedy vividly recalled experiences of overwhelming stress that he and his brother had undergone, is a typical anxiety reaction under conditions of severe stress.

Similar reactions have often been observed in combat soldiers and surgical patients at moments when they are momentarily overwhelmed with the realization that real danger is at hand.

By speaking frequently about the grave risks and reminding the group of the intolerable consequences of miscalculations when two nations find themselves approaching the brink of war, the President made it clear that he would not assume the role that members of a beleaguered group usually want their leader to assume during a serious crisis—that of a reassuring authority figure who attempts to dispel the doubts and anxieties of his followers.

In private conversations, President Kennedy referred to *The Guns of August*—in which Barbara Tuchman presents a vivid account of how the political and military leaders of Europe blundered into World War I by making one incredibly foolish decision after another—as a warning for the nuclear powers in our own time. He suggested that the Executive Committee's deliberations would provide historic material for *The Missiles of October*, which could be a sequel to *The Guns of August*. He must have realized that if the sequel had a similar ending, there might never be any readers.

### *Explicit discussion of moral issues*

During the discussions preceding the Bay of Pigs invasion, the moral issues raised by Senator Fulbright's speech and by Arthur Schlesinger's memorandum were never discussed. As a result, the group never examined the unsavory ethical issues posed by the CIA's plan, which involved an unprovoked military attack against a small neighboring state and required the government to make false statements to the public in order to create a supposedly plausible cover story. In contrast, during the Cuban missile crisis, members of the Executive Committee explicitly voiced their concerns about the morality of the policy alternatives they were considering, thus forestalling deceitful, clandestine actions. They maintained an attitude of vigilance toward the moral risks as well as toward the military ones. For example, on the second day of the crisis, George Ball vigorously objected to the air-strike option, arguing that a surprise attack would violate the best traditions of the United States and would harm the moral standing of the nation, whether or not the attack proved to be militarily successful. To the surprise of several members of the group, Robert Kennedy continued the argument, calling attention to the large toll of innocent human lives that would result. Urging a decent regard for humanity, the Attorney General pointed out that a surprise air attack would undermine the United States' position at home and abroad by sacrificing America's humanitarian heritage and ideals. He emphasized this moral stance by stating that he was against acting as the Japanese had in 1941 by resorting to a "Pearl Harbor in reverse."

Robert Kennedy's position was challenged by Dean Acheson, who argued that, on the basis of the Monroe Doctrine and prior official warnings, the United States government would be fully justified in using any means to

eliminate the threat to national security posed by the Cuban missiles. The debate on these moral issues and related questions of the legality of possible United States actions in the eyes of other nations continued throughout that day and on succeeding days, with marked effects on other members of the group. At one point, Douglas Dillon announced to the group that he had originally felt that an air attack was justified because the Russians had deceived us but that he no longer felt this position was morally justified. He went on to say that "what changed my mind was Bobby Kennedy's argument that we ought to be true to ourselves as Americans, that surprise attack was not in our tradition. Frankly, these considerations had not occurred to me until Bobby raised them so eloquently."

McNamara shared the Attorney General's position and added that it was expedient to select an initial course of action that would enable the United States government to "maintain the options" so as to "leave us in control of events." He referred explicitly to moral arguments in his retrospective comments about Robert Kennedy's contributions to the group's decisions: "His contribution was far more than administrative . . . he opposed a massive surprise attack of a large country on a small country because he believed such an attack to be inhuman, contrary to our traditions and ideals and an act of brutality for which the world would never forgive us."

According to Robert Kennedy's own account of the deliberations, the moral issue remained a central concern right up until the time that the consensus converged on a blockade as the least risky path of quasi-military action: "We spent more time on this moral question during the first five days than on any single matter . . . We struggled and fought with one and another and with our consciences, for it was a question that deeply troubled us all."

### *Reversals of judgment*

The placid unanimity of the White House group that had approved the Bay of Pigs invasion plan certainly did not characterize the Executive Committee during the missile crisis. In the course of daily clashes and bickering within the group, many members changed their minds about vital issues. On the third day of the crisis, for example, "Rusk spoke out . . . first as a dove, then as a hawk, and finally as an uncertain man." In many instances, individual members reversed their positions completely after hearing appraisals of the military, political, or moral risks by others in the group. Douglas Dillon's switch from favoring an air strike to favoring a blockade after hearing Robert Kennedy's moral arguments is only one of many examples that could be cited. Among those who displayed such reversals was President Kennedy. After hearing the arguments from McNamara and others in the Executive Committee, he no longer favored a surgical air strike and changed his mind in favor of the blockade.

All accounts of the Executive Committee's meetings agree that an outstanding characteristic of the group's deliberations was the frequent

changes of position that occurred while the members were trying to hammer out an acceptable strategy to resolve the crisis:

Abel: "The fact is that nearly every man in the room changed his position at least once—some more than once—during the week of brainstorming."

Sorensen: "Each of us changed his mind more than once that week on the best course of action to take."

Schlesinger: "Thinking aloud, hearing new arguments, entertaining new considerations, they almost all find themselves moving from one position to another."

Robert Kennedy: "None was consistent in his opinion from the very beginning to the very end. . . . For some there were only small changes, and perhaps varieties of a single idea. For others there were continuous changes of opinion each day."

### *Nonstereotyped views of the enemy*

Stereotypes of the enemy as evil, weak, and stupid—which were so much in evidence during the White House discussions of the Bay of Pigs decision—seldom, if ever, were voiced after the bitter anger of the opening session of the Executive Committee. Most members viewed their opposite numbers in the Kremlin as no less rational than themselves and assumed that their choice of action would be selected from a broad spectrum, ranging from conciliatory to belligerent, depending largely upon the words and actions of the United States government. Often the members of the group set themselves the task of trying to predict how the enemy would react to one or another course of action by deliberately trying to imagine themselves in the Soviet leaders' place. Moreover, unlike the tightly held Bay of Pigs deliberations, which excluded most of the experts who should have been consulted, the policy-makers' deliberations during the missile crisis relied heavily on expert judgments from Kremlinologists in many different agencies, with priority given to those who had a good record of correctly predicting Russia's actions in earlier crises.

In their first meeting, the Executive Committee spent considerable time trying to understand why, from the Soviet standpoint, such drastic and risky steps had been taken to build secret missile sites ninety miles from America's shores. The members examined a wide variety of plausible explanations, including the nonsensical possibility that the Russians were merely trying to increase their bargaining power for negotiating the withdrawal of American missile sites near the Soviet Union. The upshot of discussing all the alternative interpretations of Soviet intentions was a tacit recognition that no firm conclusion could be drawn about why the Soviet leaders had set up missiles in Cuba. Thus, instead of the typical groupthink assumption that the only intention behind the enemy's threatening step must be an attempt to undermine and destroy us, most members of the Executive Committee maintained a flexible, open-ended view of what the Soviet leaders might be up to. This enabled them to take seriously the possibility of working out plans for avoiding escalation.

It was not easy to maintain this open-ended view at a time when strong Soviet provocation evoked resentment and readiness to retaliate. Khrushchev had lied and made a fool of President Kennedy by deceiving the United States government with his persuasive assurances that no offensive missiles were being sent to Cuba. Despite considerable cause for anger, the President and his advisers viewed the Soviet leaders as basically reasonable men, who could be convinced to withdraw their missiles. Without denying the cunning and deceit of the Soviet leaders, the group adopted the working assumption that the Soviet Union would not be likely to initiate a war unless unduly provoked.

Rusk and other members of the Executive Committee urged the group to choose a response that the Soviet leaders could clearly see offered them a way out. One of the problems with an air attack, most of them agreed, was that no matter how well a surgical strike might pinpoint the missile installations, it would still be a provocative military move, especially because Russian soldiers, as well as Cubans, would be killed. An important argument that led the group to regard a naval blockade as much more prudent than any alternative military response was precisely that this low-level action could serve as an unmistakable indication of America's strong intention to eliminate the missile bases without confronting the Soviet leaders with a belligerent act that would be "sudden or humiliating."

### *The nonhumiliation theme*

The nonhumiliation theme appealed strongly to President Kennedy. He reiterated it time and again when the Executive Committee was facing the problem of how to implement the naval blockade plan, especially after the Soviet Union had responded to the blockade with propagandistic denunciations and overt acts of defiance. The majority of the Executive Committee supported the strategy of avoiding any sudden or shocking act of aggression that might push the Soviet Union into making an impulsive decision to retaliate. When news came that some Soviet cargo ships had temporarily halted as they were approaching the interception line, which had been set up eight hundred miles from Cuba, the Navy representative suggested that this could be a sinister Soviet move to group the ships around the submarine escort. But the President and others in the Executive Committee felt that a more plausible explanation was that the Soviet government was trying, just as the Americans were, to postpone a military confrontation. Against objections from the Navy, the President decided to move the interception line three hundred miles closer to Cuba, again to give the Kremlin leaders more time to evaluate the crisis. Nevertheless, he did not order any other change that might look like the United States government was backing down; the Navy continued to track and harass Soviet submarines in the Caribbean, signaling strong determination to enforce the blockade.

The Navy's first boarding was deliberately postponed until a *non-Soviet* ship arrived on the third day of the blockade, a Lebanese freighter under charter to the Soviets, which, as expected, had no arms on board. This vessel was selected carefully, according to Robert Kennedy, in order to demonstrate "that we were going to enforce the quarantine and yet, because it was not a Soviet-owned vessel, it did not represent a direct affront to the Soviets requiring a response from them." In this way, as Roger Hilsman (the Director of Intelligence in the State Department) observed, ample time was allowed between each step for the Soviet leaders to weigh the consequences.

On October 26, tension increased when the Executive Committee learned from new intelligence reports that the Cuban missile sites were being completed at full speed. On this same day, however, those members of the Executive Committee who had been defending the working assumption that the Soviets really wanted a peaceful settlement if they could find a nonhumiliating way out were unambiguously supported by events. The Soviets proposed, through an informal channel, an acceptable solution to the crisis: The Soviet Union would remove the offensive missiles and allow United Nations inspection teams to verify the removal. The Russians would pledge not to reintroduce missiles into Cuba in exchange for a United States pledge not to invade Cuba. This proposal was followed by a long, emotionally worded telegram from Khrushchev, the gist of which was that both sides must reach an agreement in order to avoid the risks of a horrible nuclear war.

Hopes for a satisfactory settlement were dashed the next day when a new note from Khrushchev, broadcast by Radio Moscow, offered entirely new terms unacceptable to the United States: Khrushchev offered to trade Soviet missiles in Cuba for United States missiles in Turkey. Worse yet, an American U-2 plane was shot down over a missile site in Cuba and the pilot was killed. This overt act of aggression seemed all the more threatening because it was now clear that the Soviet Union had for the first time ordered its military units in Cuba to activate its highly effective surface-to-air missiles. Hilsman, who was at the White House on that crucial day, says "it was the blackest hour of the crisis."

Faced with this acute deepening of the crisis and the steady movement toward open warfare, the members of the Executive Committee worked out a new military contingency plan in the event that another U-2 was shot down. But still they did not succumb to the temptation to revert to a stereotyped conception of the enemy government. Instead of focusing their deliberations solely on a military response—which would be the order of the day if the enemy were viewed as recalcitrantly set on a destructive course of action—they carefully considered the nonaggressive moves that could be made in response to the Soviet messages.

Despite the setback posed by the new hard-line message from the Kremlin, the group members persisted in their assumption that a military confrontation and the outbreak of World War III might still be prevented if only they could somehow communicate to the Soviet leaders that the Americans

really meant what they had been saying about their limited but nonnegotiable demand to withdraw the Soviet missiles from Cuba. They asked themselves how this could be communicated as a positive move toward peace, not as a threat. Specifically, the question was this: What could the United States do to strengthen the pro-conciliatory tendencies of the Soviet leadership, represented by Khrushchev's personal letter, rather than play into the hands of hard-liners who favored escalation, represented by the latest official note from the Soviet Foreign Office? This kind of question would never have been raised if the members of the Executive Committee had stereotyped the Soviet leadership as a homogeneous group of conniving criminals who could be stopped only by threat of annihilation.

Earlier that week, President Kennedy had quipped, "I guess this is the week I earn my salary." Before the week was over, the Attorney General had also earned his salary. During the deliberations on October 27, Robert Kennedy came up with the brilliant suggestion that the United States government should ignore the official message received that day, as if it did not exist, and simply respond to the acceptable peace-oriented message received the day before. After an exhausting debate by the Executive Committee, this suggestion was endorsed by a consensus of the group and adopted by the President. The wording of the President's letter clearly conveyed the empathic view of the members of the Executive Committee toward the Russian leaders, reflecting their efforts to project themselves into the role of their counterparts in Moscow. The letter included conciliatory statements:

I have read your letter of October 26 with great care and welcomed your desire to seek a prompt solution to the problem. . . . There is no reason why we should not be able to complete these arrangements and announce them to the world within a couple of days. The effect of such a settlement on easing world tensions would enable us to work toward a more general arrangement regarding "other armaments." . . . The United States is very much interested in reducing tension and halting the arms race.

The President did not, however, rely solely upon a low-pressure message to inform the Soviet leaders of the sense of urgency felt in Washington about working out a settlement before the Cuban missiles were ready for use. The formal letter itself carefully avoided hinting at any threats if the offer were refused. But, without consulting the Executive Committee, the President decided to ask his brother to transmit orally to the Soviet ambassador a much stronger message, which alluded to the threats that had deliberately been left out of the formal letter. Robert Kennedy, according to his own account, told Ambassador Dobrynin that this was *not* an ultimatum *but* "if they did not remove those bases, we would remove them . . . [and] we must have [an answer] the next day." In effect, this was a tacit ultimatum, as Alexander George has pointed out, containing the two main elements of a classical ultimatum: a reference to a threat of punishment if the demand is not accepted and a time limit for complying with the demand. Yet, an attempt seems to

have been made to avoid making it sound like a belligerent or humiliating ultimatum, especially because it demanded only that the bargain originally proposed by Khrushchev be adopted. Moreover, Kennedy "offered not only a conditional pledge not to invade Cuba but—as his brother's posthumous account has now made clear—he also gave Khrushchev a private assurance that the Jupiter missiles in Turkey would be removed soon."

The President and the others present at that last crucial meeting, during which the formal letter was drafted, realized that the Soviet leaders might have already moved too far along the path toward a military confrontation to back down. The dominant feeling of the group, Robert Kennedy asserts, was one of "foreboding and gloom"; many members thought that the odds were against their last-minute conciliatory effort. To make matters even worse, they had just learned that another U-2 plane, based in Alaska, had accidentally flown over the Soviet Union on the way back from the North Pole. American fighter planes sent into Soviet territory to escort the lost U-2 plane home were, in effect, invading Soviet air space. This came to be known as "the Dr. Strangelove" incident because of its resemblance to the black-comedy film showing an accidental preemptive air strike against the Soviet Union. Occurring at such a critical time, this incident could easily have been taken for a nuclear air attack and therefore, as Khrushchev later said, could have pushed the Soviets to take "a fateful step." The Soviets might have jumped to such a dire conclusion if the United States government had not been so careful to avoid any humiliating aggressive action during the preceding days of the crisis.

### Why were the decisions of the Executive Committee successful?

We do not know why the men in the Kremlin decided to accept America's tacit ultimatum. The United States government must have done something right, but the historical evidence is not yet at hand to inform us what that something was. One component might well have been the low-keyed and non-provocative wording of the warning messages addressed to the Soviet leaders throughout the crisis. This is one of the components singled out by Hilsman, who has reviewed the historic events of October 1962 with an eye to explaining how the United States induced the Soviet leaders to back down. Hilsman starts with the premise that the Soviets knew they were facing vastly superior United States forces that combined enormous conventional military power with potentially devastating nuclear power. But it was the way the United States handled its overwhelming power, according to Hilsman, that enabled the crisis to be resolved without a military confrontation "awesome to contemplate . . . American ground and air forces attacking Soviet nuclear missiles poised on their pads and defended by Soviet ground combat forces

equipped with tactical atomic weapons." "Flexibility and self-restraint," Hilsman asserts, were the keystones of the United States government's handling of the crisis. This diplomatic approach, in turn, enabled the Soviet Union to react with "wisdom and restraint." In this way, Hilsman explains the paradox that the missile crisis, which brought the two superpowers to the brink of mutual destruction, had the ultimate effect of producing a marked relaxation in the cold war, culminating ten months later in a treaty that banned atmospheric tests of nuclear bombs by both countries.

Alexander George points out that the majority of the members of the Executive Committee resisted urgent pressures from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to send an ultimatum threatening an immediate military confrontation; instead, they adopted a mixed strategy of "coercive diplomacy," which "includes bargaining, negotiations, and compromise as well as coercive threats." Had the President and his Executive Committee thought about the enemy leaders in the usual stereotyped way, without considering how they would react if the roles were reversed, the necessary restraint probably would not have been achieved. This is essentially the conclusion drawn by Robert Kennedy, who said, "A final lesson of the Cuban missile crisis is the importance of placing ourselves in the other country's shoes."

Of course the fact that Khrushchev was forced to back down in response to the United States government's coercive demands was a humiliation, but in keeping with a nonstereotyped view of the enemy, President Kennedy took steps to avoid rubbing it in. In their elation following the crisis, some leading officials in the United States government could not resist gloating, as did Secretary Rusk when he remarked to a news correspondent, "Remember when you report this—that eyeball to eyeball, they blinked first." President Kennedy then in no uncertain terms asked all members of the Executive Committee and other government officials to refrain from saying anything publicly that could be construed as claiming a victory for the United States. Almost all official United States government statements thereafter expressed respect for Khrushchev's statesmanlike role for doing "what was in his own country's interest and what was in the interest of mankind."

### Conclusions

The main characteristics of the Executive Committee's deliberations are at the opposite pole from the symptoms of groupthink. Had the Executive Committee succumbed to the natural tendencies toward groupthink during the harrowing days of the Cuban missile crisis, we can easily imagine what the outcome might have been. The solution worked out by the committee members during the first five days of the crisis and the restraints they observed in advising specific decisions during the next eight days were not achieved without considerable subjective distress. President Kennedy and others in the

committee were frequently frustrated and sometimes exasperated by the group's failure to arrive at a stable consensus as the members vigilantly appraised and reappraised the risks. They had to undergo the unpleasant experience of hearing their pet ideas critically pulled to pieces, and the acute distress of being reminded that their collective judgments could be wrong. Over and beyond that, the acknowledgment of the awesome threat of nuclear war made them go through thirteen days of constant tension as they realized that these might be the last days of their lives. Nevertheless, instead of striving for comfortable feelings of security, they resisted the temptation to develop a set of shared beliefs that might have reassured them that their side was bound to win and that the evil enemy would give in or forever regret the consequences. Perhaps the magnitude of the obvious threat of nuclear war was a major factor that, along with the improved decision-making procedures used by the Executive Committee, operated to prevent groupthink.<sup>3</sup> It seems probable that if groupthink tendencies had become dominant, the group would have chosen a much more militaristic course of action and would have put it into operation in a much more provocative way, perhaps plunging the two superpowers over the brink.

The key members of the Executive Committee who so successfully avoided succumbing to groupthink tendencies—the President, the Attorney General, the White House coordinator, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, and several other high-ranking officials—were the same individuals who had formed the nucleus of the group that eighteen months earlier had shown all the symptoms of groupthink when planning the Bay of Pigs invasion. The members of the Executive Committee who had not been involved in the Bay of Pigs decision differed little in intelligence, experience, outlook, and personality from those they replaced. This implies that groupthink is not simply a matter of a fixed attribute of a group, nor is it a question of the types of personalities that happen to be dominant within the group. If the same committee members show groupthink tendencies in making a decision at one time and not at another, the determining factors must lie in the circumstances of their deliberations, not in the fixed attributes of the individuals who make up the group. The determining factors therefore seem to be variables that can be changed and lead to new and more productive norms.

## 7

## *The Making of the Marshall Plan*

### The postwar economic crisis

Throughout 1947, several tough-minded groups within the Truman administration confronted one of the gravest crises of the century—the threat of complete economic collapse of war-devastated Europe. Their efforts culminated in the Marshall Plan, a comprehensive and detailed program for supplying American funds to aid European recovery. It was developed in the State Department, headed by General George C. Marshall, who had urged the administration to find a constructive solution to the economic plight of postwar Europe.

Historians seem fairly well agreed that the Marshall Plan succeeded because it was so carefully designed and implemented. The plan not only prevented the crisis from worsening but it also enabled England, France, Italy, West Germany, and other Western powers to rebuild their factories, to redevelop their natural resources, and to restore the other sagging features of their economic life. Perhaps the most impressive testimony to the extraordinary quality of the Marshall Plan came from Winston Churchill, whose active participation in the shaping of modern history made him acutely aware of the likelihood that the altruistic reasons given by a major power for supplying aid to another nation are merely a cover for sordid intentions. The Marshall Plan, in Churchill's judgment, was "the most unsordid act in history."

Even some "revisionist" historians, who emphasize the sordid economic motivations of United States foreign policy during the cold war years—maintaining access to international markets, preventing national revolutions that might overturn capitalism, and interfering with Soviet bilateral trade agreements—acknowledge the strong altruistic component in the Marshall Plan. William A. Williams, for example, notes that "there can be no question that it [the Marshall Plan] did represent America's generous urge to help the peoples of western Europe, and that it did play a vital role in the recovery of that region." He adds that for large numbers of men, women, and children in Europe, it "literally made the difference between life and death."