

THE ARMAGEDDON LETTERS

KENNEDY / KHRUSHCHEV / CASTRO

IN THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS



JAMES G. BLIGHT

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PRODUCER OF *THIRTEEN DAYS*

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ACT I

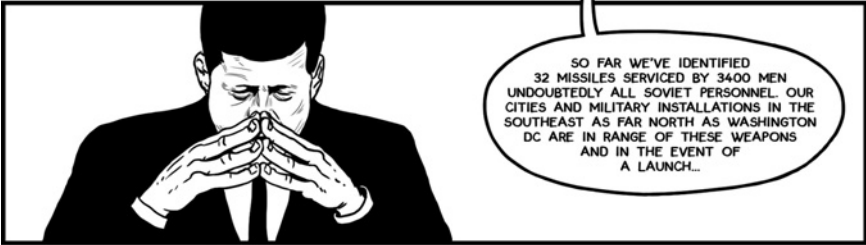
Collision

October 22–23, 1962

A U-2 OVER CUBA SUNDAY MORNING CAME BACK WITH DISTRESSING PHOTOGRAPHS. OUR ANALYSIS INDICATES THAT THE SOVIET UNION HAS FOLLOWED UP ITS CONVENTIONAL WEAPONS BUILD UP IN CUBA WITH THE INTRODUCTION OF SURFACE-TO-SURFACE MEDIUM RANGE BALLISTIC MISSILES. WE DO NOT BELIEVE THE MISSILES ARE AS YET OPERATIONAL. THE REPORTS ARE THAT THE SS4 CAN DELIVER A 3-MEGATON NUCLEAR WEAPON 1000 MILES.



SO FAR WE'VE IDENTIFIED 32 MISSILES SERVICED BY 3400 MEN UNDOUBTEDLY ALL SOVIET PERSONNEL. OUR CITIES AND MILITARY INSTALLATIONS IN THE SOUTHEAST AS FAR NORTH AS WASHINGTON DC ARE IN RANGE OF THESE WEAPONS AND IN THE EVENT OF A LAUNCH...



...WE'D ONLY HAVE FIVE MINUTES OF WARNING.



JESUS CHRIST.

HE CAN'T DO THIS TO ME!



HE JUST HAS...





MOSCOW

THESE MEASURES
CONSTITUTE A SERIOUS
THREAT...

THE U.S. HAS OPENLY
TAKEN THE PATH OF GROSSLY VIOLATING
THE U.N. CHARTER, THE PATH OF VIOLATING
INTERNATIONAL NORMS OF FREEDOM OF
NAVIGATION ON THE HIGH SEAS, THE PATH
TO AGGRESSIVE ACTIONS BOTH AGAINST
CUBA AND AGAINST THE
SOVIET UNION.

WASHINGTON

I MADE CLEAR THAT
THE U.S. COULD NOT TOLERATE
ANY ACTION WHICH DISTURBS
THE EXISTING OVERALL
BALANCE OF POWER IN THE
WORLD.

YOUR STATEMENT IS
REGARDED AS UNDISGUISED
INTERFERENCE IN THE INTERNAL AFFAIRS
OF CUBA AND THE SOVIET UNION. THE
U.N. CHARTER AND INTERNATIONAL
NORMS GIVE NO RIGHT TO ANY STATE
TO INSTITUTE IN INTERNATIONAL
WATERS THE INSPECTION OF
VESSELS BOUND FOR THE
SHORES OF CUBA.

THE U.S. IS DETERMINED
THAT THIS THREAT BE REMOVED.
THE ACTION WE ARE TAKING IS THE
MINIMUM NECESSARY TO REMOVE THIS
THREAT TO THE SECURITY OF THE
NATIONS OF THIS HEMISPHERE. THE
FACT OF THIS MINIMUM RESPONSE
SHOULD NOT BE TAKEN AS A BASIS,
HOWEVER, FOR ANY MISJUDGMENT ON
YOUR PART.





Theatrical Preview

[Voice-over: Jack's wake-up call comes around 8:30 a.m., in his bedroom, on October 16th, when he is informed of the deployment.]

JACK: The Russians have done what? But for the past year and a half, week in and week out, they have reassured us that they would never do anything as risky as put nuclear weapons in Cuba. Jesus Christ, now what do I do? I have issued public statements saying that the Russians will not put nukes in Cuba, but if they did, we would take them out militarily. Fine words. But start a war with the Soviet Union? Oh my God, we are in a helluva mess.

[Voice-over: Nikita Sergeï'ich's wake up call comes a week later, around 2:30 a.m. in a conference room in the Kremlin, when he and his associates are informed of the content of Kennedy's October 22nd televised speech revealing the presence of Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba.]

NIKITA SERGEI'ICH: So, the Americans found out about our big secret. Now Kennedy is giving us an ultimatum, isn't he? He is telling us that if we don't remove the missiles from Cuba, he will order an attack on Cuba. Well, let's just see who has the most nerve. We are a superpower. Instead of removing the weapons, let's speed up work at the missile sites on the island and make them operational for a launch. That should sober up Kennedy, if anything will.

[Kennedy and Khrushchev collide on stage, still half asleep. They fall down and pick themselves up and, when they do, they stare briefly at Castro, still shouting at them from across the stage, before resuming their superpower dialogue of threat and counter-threat.]

FIDEL: Comrade Nikita, don't you dare cave into Kennedy. Ignore Kennedy. In Cuba, we are ready to fight to the last man, woman and child. This is your moment of truth, your chance to destroy the U.S. if Kennedy is stupid enough to attack us, now that we are equipped with nuclear weapons. Stay firm!

Hey, Kennedy: we are ready for you—Cubans, Russians, nuclear weapons. If you know what's good for you, you will leave us alone. Don't even think about invading our island and expect to survive, Yankees!

JACK: [Totally ignoring Fidel.] Blah, blah, blah, take 'em out or we'll take 'em out for you, Mr. Chairman, blah, blah, blah!

NIKITA SERGEI'ICH: [Totally ignoring Fidel.] Blah, blah, blah, if you attack, you will start a world war, Mr. President, because we will not surrender our rights, blah, blah, blah!

End of Theatrical Preview

* * *

#12

John F. Kennedy to Nikita S. Khrushchev

October 22, 1962¹

"catastrophic consequences to the whole world"

Jack has been through a week from hell in which his fervent hope—that the Soviet deployment in Cuba does not include nuclear weapons—has collided with the reality uncovered by the CIA. A week ago, on the morning of October 16th, his national security adviser McGeorge Bundy came to see him while Jack was eating breakfast, and still in his pajamas. Bundy broke the news that the CIA had confirmed the presence of Soviet nuclear missile sites under construction in Cuba. Some medium and intermediate range missiles had also been positively identified. In his mind's eye, Jack could already see a "we told you so" look on the faces of his military chiefs, Republicans in Congress, many Democratic hawks, and even members of his own administration. Jack had believed Khrushchev and all the other Russians who had reassured him and his advisers that the USSR would not, under any circumstances, deploy nuclear weapons in Cuba in the face of stern

warnings from the U.S. of the dire consequences that would follow such a deployment. Now all the hawks will come home to roost and demand that an immediate air strike on the Soviet sites, with an invasion to follow, to make sure all the weapons and their delivery systems have been destroyed.

As he reflects back on his own initial response to the news of the Soviet nuclear deployment in Cuba, he recalls his own anger, his feeling of betrayal by Khrushchev, and his judgment that the Soviets must be confronted: either they will remove the nuclear weapons and missiles, or the U.S. will remove them by force. He also recalls that this urge to lash out and hit the Soviets in Cuba was followed by a frightening thought: if the U.S. attacks Cuba, killing Soviets as well as Cubans, what will the Soviets do in response? Will they move against West Berlin? If they do, the U.S. is bound by its agreement with NATO to respond militarily. Jack knows only too well that in Europe, the Soviets field an army in the millions, while NATO has only a token force of about 12,000 in West Berlin. Thus, the only NATO response that might plausibly stop the Russians in their tracks is a nuclear response. The resulting nuclear war will begin with the use of NATO's relatively small, tactical nuclear weapons. But it will almost surely escalate to the use of larger nuclear weapons. Where will it end? Will Europe be destroyed in the attempt to save it from Soviet aggression? Or, will one or more Soviet nuclear weapons be fired from Cuba toward targets in the U.S.? Will Miami, or Atlanta or Houston or New Orleans be destroyed in response to a U.S. attack on Cuba? Jack's brother Bobby, the attorney general, had told Jack on the 16th that it seemed as if the world was on the brink of nuclear destruction, possibly foreshadowing the end of mankind. Unable to find words with which to respond adequately, Jack had simply nodded his agreement at Bobby's proposition, formerly so abstract, now suddenly so horrifyingly close and real.

All week long, in secret, Jack and his advisers debate how to respond, finally reaching a compromise solution by the end of the week: the U.S. Navy will implement a naval quarantine around the island of Cuba, a move that will prevent further movement of Soviet military hardware and personnel into Cuba. Moreover, if the Soviets fail to agree to dismantle their nuclear missile sites and send their equipment back to the Soviet Union, the blockade can be tightened to include other material. The air strike and invasion option is still on the table—the attack planes are on standby in south Florida and on aircraft carriers in the Caribbean, and the initial invasion force of 150,000 men, led by the U.S. Marines, is fully equipped and ready to hit the beaches in Cuba. The Pentagon anticipates 25,000 American casualties in the initial phases of the invasion and occupation of Cuba.

Jack is editing a letter to Khrushchev urging the Soviet leader to take this upcoming speech very seriously. Lying at the highest levels cannot be tolerated. He wants Khrushchev to pay especially close attention to those aspects of the speech which emphasize that the U.S. is absolutely determined to remove the Soviet weapons from Cuba if Khrushchev is unwilling to do so. In the speech,

Jack will stress that any Soviet attack on any target in the U.S. or Latin America will be met with a nuclear response against the Soviet Union. He knows that a direct nuclear challenge, made in a public forum, is unprecedented in American history.

As he releases the letter to be sent to Khrushchev, Jack briefs the Congressional leadership on what is in his speech. The Senators and Congressmen get the news cold. They know nothing of what has been going on behind closed doors for the past week. Jack is appalled at their response: all the Republicans and most of the Democrats urge him to attack Cuba ASAP and throw out both the Castro regime and the Soviets who support it. They seem not even to consider what the Soviet response might be. As he leaves the briefing to prepare for his 7:00 p.m. TV and radio address to the nation, he says to an aide: "if any of those bastards want this goddamned job, they can have it."

Jack heads upstairs to make the final adjustments to the scariest speech ever delivered by a U.S. president. He will tell his fellow citizens that Soviet nukes in Cuba threaten us; if the Soviets don't remove them we will attack and remove them; if the Soviets counterattack, we will Jack will be a little ambiguous at this point, but in just a few minutes Jack will seem to many Americans to be saying that, in that case, we will attack the Soviet Union with nuclear weapons. Armageddon lurks in between the lines of his speech, and between the lines of the letter he now sends to Khrushchev.

Sir:

A copy of the statement I am making tonight concerning developments in Cuba and the reaction of my government thereto has been handed to your ambassador in Washington. In view of the gravity of the developments to which I refer, I want you to know immediately and accurately the position of my government in this matter.

In our discussions and exchanges on Berlin and other international questions, the one thing that has most concerned me has been the possibility that your government would not correctly understand the will and determination of the United States in any given situation, since I have not assumed that you or any other sane man would, in this nuclear age, deliberately plunge the world into war which it is crystal clear no country could win and which could only result in catastrophic consequences to the whole world, including the aggressor.

At our meeting in Vienna and subsequently, I expressed our desire and readiness to find, through peaceful negotiation, a solution to any and all problems that divide us. At the same time, I made clear that in view of the objectives of the ideology to which you adhere, the United States could not tolerate any action on your part which in a major way disturbed the existing overall balance of power in the world. I stated that an attempt to

force abandonment of our responsibilities and commitments in Berlin would constitute such an action and that the United States would resist with all the power at its command.

It was in order to avoid any incorrect assessment on the part of your government with respect to Cuba that I publicly stated that if certain developments in Cuba took place, the United States would do whatever must be done to protect its own security and that of its allies.

Moreover, the Congress adopted a resolution expressing its support of this declared policy. Despite this, the rapid development of long-range missile bases and other offensive weapons systems in Cuba has proceeded. I must tell you that the United States is determined that this threat to the security of this hemisphere be removed. At the same time, I wish to point out that the action we are taking is the minimum necessary to remove this threat to the security of the nations of this hemisphere. The fact of this minimum response should not be taken as a basis, however, for any misjudgment on your part.

I hope that your government will refrain from any action which would widen or deepen this already grave crisis and that we can agree to resume the path of peaceful negotiation.

Sincerely,
John F. Kennedy

* * *

#13

Nikita S. Khrushchev to John F. Kennedy

October 23, 1962²

"catastrophic consequences for world peace."

It is 2:30 a.m. in Moscow on October 23, 1962. Nikita Sergei'ich and his closest advisers in the Soviet Presidium are sitting in a conference room at the Kremlin, waiting for John F. Kennedy's TV and radio address, set to begin at 3:00 a.m. October 23rd Moscow time (7:00 p.m. October 22nd Washington time). Exhausted, apprehensive, they wait in silence. Nikita Sergei'ich has dreaded such a moment ever since the deployment to Cuba began over the summer—the moment when it becomes obvious that the Americans have discovered the missiles in Cuba before they become operational, before they might provide a deterrent to a U.S. attack on the island. Outwardly confident about his scheme to arm Cuba with nuclear weapons as a means of saving the Cuban Revolution, Nikita Sergei'ich has nevertheless had his doubts about whether the plan would succeed. Cuba is so far from the Soviet Union and so close to the U.S. But around the middle of October when the

deployment neared completion and the U.S. had apparently—he couldn't know for sure—not yet discovered the nuclear component of the deployment—he allowed himself to become optimistic, almost jubilant. He is still acutely aware, however, that even if the Soviets get away with it, Kennedy will find the deployment difficult to accept, and of course the U.S. hawks will squawk and scream bloody murder that the president should use the opportunity to get rid of both Soviet weapons and Cuban communists.

Nikita Sergei'ich has, in fact, been composing and revising in his mind the letter he wants to send to Kennedy on the eve of giving his speech in Cuba, planned for the end of November. In that speech he would announce the details of the deployment to the whole world. Kennedy, he feels, will need some time to deal with his own emotions and also to plan a politically viable strategy to resist the urge to war that his hawks will doubtless try to force on him. Whenever he has doubts about whether Kennedy will find it possible to accept the Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba, Nikita Sergei'ich falls back on his own experience: we in the Soviet Union, he reasons, have been surrounded by U.S. missiles for many years and we have learned to live with them. Of course, he thinks, we don't like being surrounded by American military might in Turkey, Italy, Germany and elsewhere in Europe. But his view is: what the hell, it's just part of the superpower game: the West puts its nuclear chess pieces over here and over there, and we in the USSR do the same. What else could it be but a game? No one in his right mind can believe even for a moment that the objective is to actually use these nuclear weapons. Or so Nikita Sergei'ich believes.

Nikita Sergei'ich is mulling his options over in his mind—depending on what Kennedy says in his speech—when a knock is heard on the door to the conference room in which the entire Soviet leadership sits in silence. They might be mistaken for a group of Buddhist monks except, of course, that these Russians are meditating not on the concept of emptiness, but on the possibility that a nuclear war in which they are centrally implicated may be about to begin in and around Cuba. Nikita Sergei'ich's aide for international affairs opens the door. He is handed a phone, which he puts to his ear while, for what seems to the others in the room like an eternity, he makes notes with a pencil and paper. The aide, Oleg Alexandrovich Troyanovsky, at last informs the group that he has been on the phone with the Soviet ambassador in Washington. The ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin, has been reading the text of Kennedy's speech to him in English. Troyanovsky has been translating the speech and writing it down in Russian. When Troyanovsky is finished scribbling, Nikita Sergei'ich motions for him to tell the group the gist of the speech. He does this. After many moments of dead silence, Marshal Rodion Malinovsky, the defense minister, announces sourly, "We missed our chance." As the minister begins to rise and elaborate on his point, Nikita Sergei'ich tells him to shut up and sit down. At last, the official copy of the speech comes through, via the U.S. embassy in Moscow, to the Soviet Foreign Ministry, thence to the Kremlin. Troyanovsky now reads the official text aloud to the group. Nikita Sergei'ich has two responses, equally powerful: first, we are not at war yet, which is good; and second, Kennedy is threatening

us, which is not good, and we have to respond forcefully to his threats. So we have to be careful, but we have to be clear that, as the other superpower, the USSR is not going to be pushed around.

Nikita Sergeï'ich's aides are silent. They continue to stare straight ahead, as if waiting to be dismissed. After a moment's hesitation, Nikita Sergeï'ich dictates the letter to Kennedy. Then he announces that the entire leadership will sleep what little is left of the night in the Kremlin. The press, especially the foreign press, is bound to be curious, he thinks, if ZIL limousines begin to zoom out of the Kremlin in the middle of the night. Everyone agrees to this, though not everyone is happy about it. Nikita Sergeï'ich says he will edit the text of the letter to Kennedy at the beginning of a meeting he calls for 10:00 a.m. later on the morning of October 23rd. Just before leaving, an aide suggests that Nikita Sergeï'ich issue a threat to Kennedy: if the U.S. moves against Cuba, the USSR will move against West Berlin. Nikita Sergeï'ich tells him to keep advice like that to himself.

Mr. President:

I have just received your letter, and have also acquainted myself with the text of your speech of October 22 regarding Cuba.

I must say frankly that the measures indicated in your statement constitute a serious threat to peace and to the security of nations. The United States has openly taken the path of grossly violating the United Nations charter, the path of violating international norms of freedom of navigation on the high seas, the path to aggressive actions both against Cuba and against the Soviet Union.

The statement by the government of the United States of America can only be regarded as undisguised interference in the internal affairs of the Republic of Cuba, the Soviet Union and other states. The United Nations charter and international norms give no right to any state to institute in international waters the inspection of vessels bound for the shores of the Republic of Cuba.

And naturally, neither can we recognize the right of the United States to establish control over armaments which are necessary for the Republic of Cuba to strengthen its defense capability.

We reaffirm that the armaments which are in Cuba, regardless of the classification to which they may belong, are intended solely for defensive purposes in order to secure the Republic of Cuba against the attack of an aggressor.

I hope that the United States Government will display wisdom and renounce the actions pursued by you, which may lead to catastrophic consequences for world peace.

...

N.S. Khrushchev

* * *

#14

Fidel Castro: Statement on Cuban Radio and Television

October 23, 1962³

"the aggressors will be exterminated."

Fidel arrives at the television studio in downtown Havana at around 8:30 p.m. on October 23rd. He will give Cuba's official response to the crisis that began a little more than twenty-four hours earlier, when Kennedy gave his speech announcing the "quarantine" of Cuba. The TV studio is not Fidel's natural element. He must sit, though his inclination is to get up on his feet, to gesticulate wildly with his long arms, neither of which is possible in the small, cramped space. Even more importantly, he thrives on the feedback of an appreciative audience. It spurs him to the rhetorical heights for which he is famous. He has noticed on the ride over to the studio that the streets are virtually empty—a good sign, because it means that his constituents are home or in public places where they can listen and watch his response to the gringos' threats on radio and TV. He tries to keep this uppermost in his mind as he gets set up in the studio. His only live audience is the collection of rather dour-looking government ministers and other officials. All of them (even the civilians) are in military uniforms.

After a perfunctory introduction by Luis Gomez, Fidel begins. At first, he squirms and seems uncomfortable with the position of the microphone. He is also exhausted; he hasn't slept more than a few hours in the past days, as the crisis approached and finally erupted. But after a few minutes, Fidel warms to his task and launches into wave after wave of apocalyptic rhetoric, urging Cubans to remain calm, even serene, as the countdown proceeds toward Cuba's possible date with nuclear Armageddon. He is emboldened not only by his own self-reinforcing crescendo of verbal virtuosity, but also because he has by this time seen reports of Khrushchev's reply to Kennedy's speech of the day before. Khrushchev has been tough and uncompromising, ready for a showdown with the United States of America over nuclear missiles in Cuba.

Cuba, Fidel says in many different ways, now at top volume with hands and arms punching holes in the air over the microphone, will never surrender any of its inalienable rights, will never allow the Yankees nor anyone else to inspect its territory—regarding Soviet missiles or anything else, for that matter. His voice cracks, as it always does when he is going full tilt, in a way that surprises those new to his speeches. His phrasing is now punctuated with high-pitched squeaks. But instead of distracting listeners, Fidel's brief flights into the upper range where only counter-tenors can vocalize comfortably tend to focus his audience on just how difficult

it is for him to say all he has to say in the time allotted for the speech—no matter that he sometimes speaks continuously for several uninterrupted hours at a time.

Now the jokes come. Kennedy says the Cuban people have been betrayed. By whom? By the leaders? By Fidel? Who are these leaders? Martians? Yes, we must be Martians, he says. He imagines people all over the island laughing at that one. He finishes with a flourish and, concludes, as usual, with “*patria o muerte.*” “*Fatherland or death.*” Both the fatherland and death have never been this close, this intense, and this significant, he thinks, on this warm October evening in central Havana. But Fidel has already told his listeners that death, if that is what comes to the entire Cuban nation, will not be in vain. If “the United States continues on the path it has chosen,” Fidel says, “then the United States is resolutely determined to commit suicide.” The Russians, it is understood, will redeem Cuba’s martyrdom by destroying the United States. Fidel’s small audience of officials reacts to this apocalyptic statement by breaking into uproarious laughter.

A little after 10:00 p.m., Fidel concludes his hour and a half speech. At that moment, thousands of Cubans all across the island rush into the streets carrying makeshift torches, singing the Cuban national anthem:

*Hasten to battle, men of Bayamo,
For the homeland looks proudly to you.
You do not fear a glorious death,
Because to die for the country is to live.
To live in chains
Is to live in dishonor and ignominy.
Hear the clarion call,
Hasten, brave ones, to battle!*

We decidedly reject any attempt at supervision, any attempt at inspection of our country. Our country will not be subjected to inspection from any quarter. Our country will never be inspected by anyone, because we will never give authorization for that to anyone, and we will never abdicate our sovereign prerogative. Within our frontiers, we are the ones who rule, and we are the ones who do the inspecting. That is all there is to it.

Anyone who tries to come and inspect Cuba must know that he will have to come equipped for war. That is our final answer to illusions and proposals for carrying out inspections on our territory.

....

We are decidedly in favor of disarmament. What is our policy on military bases? We are decidedly in favor of dismantling all military bases. What is our policy on the presence of troops in various countries? We are in favor of a peace policy. We maintain there should be no troops or military personnel in the territory of any other country. That is

our position, the principle we stand on. If the United States wishes disarmament, that is magnificent. Let us all disarm. Magnificent! Let us all support a policy for the dismantling of bases, troops, all of those things scattered throughout the world. Magnificent! We are in accord with that kind of policy.

However, we are not in agreement with a policy which calls for disarming us in the face of the aggressors. That is so stupid, so ridiculous, and so absurd, that it is not worth time wasting a thought about such idiocy ... They believe they are going to scare us with that.

We are cured of that here—cured of fear.

....

We ... face everything calmly. We are not intimidated. But we are calmed by something, and that is knowing that the aggressors will not go unpunished. We are calmed by knowing that the aggressors will be exterminated. Knowing that makes us calm.

We are running risks that we have no choice but to run. They are the risks run by mankind. And we, who are part of mankind—and a very worthy part of mankind—know how to run those risks calmly. And we have the consolation of knowing that the aggressors in a thermonuclear war, those who unleash a thermonuclear war, will be exterminated. I think there are no ambiguities of any kind.