

Why We Didn't Go to Nuclear War in 1962

by Jeffrey Steinberg

Aug. 3—In late October 1962, the world stood on the brink of thermonuclear war. In reaction to the Bay of Pigs invasion, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchov dispatched Soviet nuclear weapons to Cuba. For 13 days in October 1962, the danger of a thermonuclear war between the two superpowers was greater than at any moment until today.

Hardline advisors to both President John Kennedy and Khrushchov pressed for a confrontation, which ran the risk of triggering a thermonuclear war which would probably have ended human civilization for centuries,—even if it would have been tame compared to what we face today.

Fortunately, John F. Kennedy had a deep sense of the awesome responsibilities he carried as the ultimate decision-maker on whether humanity would live or die in an exchange of thermonuclear weapons.

From the day after John Kennedy's election as President, he entered into a secret correspondence with Khrushchov. Between November 1960 and November 20, 1963, Kennedy and Khrushchov exchanged over 100 private communiqués. While some were formal diplomatic exchanges, early in their correspondence, they agreed that some of their letters back and forth should be private, personal, and non-binding. They sought nothing more than a free channel through which to put ideas on the table, without any public scrutiny or Cabinet meddling, in order to take a better measure of one another and, above all else, to avoid war.

On Oct. 16, 1961, President Kennedy wrote to Premier Khrushchov from his vacation home at Hyannis Port, Massachusetts. The letter perfectly summarized the situation that both leaders faced.

'A Special Responsibility'

President Kennedy wrote:

I am gratified by your letter and your decision to suggest this additional means of communication. Certainly you are correct in emphasizing that this correspondence must be kept wholly private, not to be hinted at in public statements, much less disclosed to the press. For my part the contents and even the existence of our letters will be known only to the Secretary of State and a few others of my closest associates in the government. I think it is very important that these letters provide us with an opportunity for a personal, informal but meaningful exchange of views. There are sufficient channels now existing between our two governments for the more formal and official communications and



U.S. State Department

Premier Nikita Khrushchov (left) and President John F. Kennedy getting acquainted in Vienna, Austria on June 3, 1961.

public statements of position. These letters should supplement those channels, and give us each a chance to address the other in frank, realistic and fundamental terms. Neither of us is going to convert the other to a new social, economic or political point of view. Neither of us will be induced by a letter to desert or subvert his own cause. So these letters can be free from the polemics of the cold war debate. That debate will, of course, proceed, but you and I can write messages which will be directed only to each other.

The importance of this additional attempt to explore each other's view is well-stated in your letter; and I believe it is identical to the motivation for our meeting in Vienna. Whether we wish it or not, and for better or worse, we are the leaders of the world's two greatest rival powers, each with the ability to inflict great destruction on the other and to do great damage to the rest of the world in the process. We therefore have a special responsibility—greater than that held by any of our predecessors in the pre-nuclear age—to exercise our power with the fullest possible understanding of the other's vital interests and commitments. As you say in your letter, the solutions to the world's most dangerous problems are not easily found—but you and I are unable to shift to anyone else the burden of finding them.

Premier Khrushchov had wasted no time in setting about taking a measure of the newly elected American President. On Nov. 9, 1960, Khrushchov sent a revealing note of contratulations to JFK, which began:

ESTEEMED MR. KENNEDY, Allow me to congratulate you on the occasion of your election to the high post of the President of the United States.

We hope that while you are at this post the relations between our countries would again follow the line along which they were developing in Franklin Roosevelt's time, which would meet the basic interests not only of the peoples of the U.S.S.R. and the United States but all mankind which is longing for deliverance from the threat of a new war.

I think you will agree that the eyes of many people are fixed on the United States and the Soviet Union because the destinies of world



White House/Cecil Stoughton

President Kennedy and his brother, U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy, confer at the White House, on October 3, 1962.

peace depend largely on the state of Soviet-American relations.

In the Moment of Crisis

By the time the Cuban Missile Crisis began in the second half of October 1962, Kennedy and Khrushchov had exchanged 60 communiqués through the personal channel they had established early in Kennedy's term. The last of the pre-Cuban Missile Crisis communications was an Oct. 8, 1962 letter from JFK, responding to a Khrushchov proposal relating to ongoing negotiations on a nuclear test ban treaty, a first-ever binding agreement between the two thermonuclear superpowers, to pull back from the expansion of overkill arsenals of nuclear weapons.

During the crisis itself, JFK established a personal direct channel through his brother Robert. On October 23, hidden in the back of an associate's car so as to avoid detection, RFK made a secret visit to Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin. The height of the crisis came on the evening of October 27. As they recalled their private thoughts afterwards, that was an evening when some inner-circle Administration officials were asking themselves whether or not they would live to see another Saturday night.

RFK asked Dobrynin to meet him in his office at the Justice Department. According to Dobrynin's report to Moscow, Robert Kennedy emphasized that time was of the essence: this chance must not be missed. He communicated a secret offer, known only to nine U.S. officials, to withdraw U.S. missiles from Turkey in exchange for the Russian missiles in Cuba. In principle, the crisis was solved.