

October 23, 1962
Telegram from Soviet Ambassador to the USA
Dobrynin to the USSR MFA

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Summary:

Dobrynin sends a report on the general mood of Washington DC, by way of media and observation, regarding Kennedy's establishment of a quarantine around Cuba.

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Russian

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CIPHERED TELEGRAM

Following Kennedy's speech on the Cuban issue yesterday, a broad campaign was deployed here, called forth in order to impart to the developing situation even more extraordinariness and seriousness than was done in Kennedy's speech itself.

In a briefing conducted by the USA Ministry of Defense yesterday evening, [Secretary of Defense Robert S.] McNamara categorically declared that the USA will not stop short of sinking Soviet ships which are bringing "offensive types" of weapons to Cuba, if those ships will refuse to obey the demands of American warships.

It is reported that the President's official proclamation about the introduction into force of measures to assert a quarantine on the delivery to Cuba of offensive types of weapons will be published before the end of the day today or tomorrow morning after the formal agreement with other members of the Organization of American States. For the practical implementation of the quarantine in the area of Cuba, there has been assembled, according to the reports of military observers, around 450 military ships, more than 1,200 airplanes and around 200 thousand soldiers.

Almost without interruption, the commentaries which are broadcast on radio and television--and also the commentaries which appeared in today's morning newspapers--are directed towards supercharging the atmosphere and predictions of an early "test of force," as soon as the first Soviet ship approaches Cuba (we broadcast similar commentaries via TASS).

An analysis of the public statements which Kennedy has made, his message to N.S. Khrushchev, and also the statements of officials who are close to the White House and the State allow us to make, as it is presented to us, a preliminary conclusion that the measures which have been undertaken by the Kennedy Administration in regard to Cuba are the product of a range of domestic and foreign policy considerations, the most important of which, apparently, are the following.

1. To try to "take up the gauntlet" of that challenge which Kennedy believes has been thrown down by the Soviet Union to the USA in the form of military deliveries to Cuba. Regarding this, insofar as up to now a direct military attack by the USA on Cuba is not on the table (the President, as is known, also persistently stressed this during the meeting with A.A. Gromyko), Kennedy evidently is counting on the Soviet Union in this case not responding with military actions directly against the USA itself or by delivering a blow to their positions in West Berlin. As a result, in Kennedy's thinking, the United States will succeed in establishing at least in part the correlation of forces which existed in the world before July, that is before the announcement of our military deliveries to Cuba, which delivered a serious blow to the USA's positions as the leader of the capitalist world and even more constrained their freedom of action on issues like the one in West Berlin.

Kennedy apparently believes that a further demonstration by the United States of indecisiveness and lack of will to risk a war with the Soviet Union for the sake of its positions would unavoidably lead to an even quicker and more serious undermining of their positions around the globe.

2. That which Kennedy said yesterday in his appeal to the American people and the complex of measures which were announced in this connection by the USA

government in fact touch not only upon Cuba alone or our deliveries of weapons to it, or even our missiles for Cuba. More to the point, it is a decision connected with a certain risk and determined by a whiff of adventurism, to try to bring to a stop now the development of events in the whole world, which are generally disadvantageous to the USA.

In this regard, some information which we have just received by confidential means and which we are now reconfirming, may be interesting. According to this information, prior to the President's decision a hot discussion was conducted recently in the government regarding the future foreign policy course of the USA following the appearance of information about the deliveries of Soviet missiles to Cuba. [Attorney General] R. Kennedy, McNamara, Rusk, Chief of the CIA [John] McCone, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff asserted that since Vienna the status quo in the world had changed, and had changed not to the benefit of the USA, as a result of the well-known development of the Cuban events, in particular the open deliveries of Soviet weapons to Cuba. The issue is not the weapons themselves, insofar as they do not have much significance from a purely military point of view, rather it is that great political loss which the Kennedy government suffered in the eyes of the whole world and particularly of its American allies and neighbors when it (the USA government) turned out to be not in a position--for the first time in the history of the USA--to prevent "the penetration and establishment of influence" by another great power, the USSR, in the Western Hemisphere itself. What then of the obligations of the USA in other parts of the world? And all this is happening at a moment--as asserted by representatives of the military brass--when America for the time being still has an advantage over the Soviet Union in nuclear missiles, an advantage which is gradually being liquidated by the successes of Soviet weapons, and now also by the creation of a missile base in Cuba in direct proximity with the USA. This means, the American chiefs of staff maintain, that time is not waiting, if the Kennedy government really intends to prevent a further disadvantageous development of events.

In Berlin also, the USA is constantly on the defensive, which does not add to the Administration's prestige. The latest meetings with A.A. Gromyko (this argument was attributed to Rusk) strengthened the President's and Rusk's belief that the Soviet Union seriously intends to sign a peace treaty with the GDR, with all the consequences that will flow from that for the USA. This, almost unavoidably will bring about a crisis at the end of the year, since the USA will not withdraw its forces from West Berlin. Wouldn't it be better then to try to force the Soviet Union to retreat by "striking a blow on the Cuban issue ["--no close quotation mark--ed.], which gives more benefits to the USA than the Berlin question, if the moods of public opinion and geographic and military-strategic factors are taken into account[?] Precisely on the Cuban issue it is best for President Kennedy to take a firm position and to "demonstrate his character." This approximately was the basic argument of those government representatives who support a more hard-line course of action (several of them speculated also that the President maintains the opinion that the Soviet government apparently does not particularly believe in the President's steadfastness following the failure of last year's incursion in Cuba). It follows, evidently, to recognize that the supporters of this course for the time being have taken the upper hand in the USA government.

3. Having created the extraordinary situation around Cuba, the Kennedy administration is hoping that in that situation it will be able quickly to get from its NATO allies and from the Latin American countries support for its course towards the full isolation of Cuba from the "free world," and the ultimate overthrow of the current government of Cuba. In this regard it should be noted that although the West European and Latin American diplomats express alarm about the possible consequences of realizing in practice the announced "quarantine" of Cuba, they express, as a rule, confidence that their governments under current conditions will not be able to deviate from support for the USA. In particular, it became known to us that the Chilean representative in the Organization of American States received an instruction to support the USA proposals this time. Brazil and Mexico are also

departing from their previous positions after having been subject to strong pressure from the USA, which is asserting that the Soviet missiles now threaten the Latin American countries too. The decision of the Organization of American States which was just accepted (transmitted via TASS) in fact in support of the course of action of the USA shows that the Kennedy administration is succeeding in binding the governments of these countries to its will under conditions of the prewar psychosis which has now been created in the USA. We should, it's true, note that Brazil, Mexico and Bolivia abstained from the vote on the paragraph which envisaged the application of force.

4. On the domestic political plane, Kennedy obviously is counting on his last step to pull the rug out from under the legs of the Republicans, whose leadership in recent days officially announced that they consider the Cuban issue a fundamental issue of the election campaign, having in essence accused the administration of inactivity on that issue.

However, it is necessary to stress that the events connected with Kennedy's announcement yesterday obviously have overtaken the significance of electoral considerations and that these considerations now are moving to the background.

Overall, the impression is being created that, reserving a certain possibility not to let the matter lead to an open military confrontation--this can be seen in his proclamation in general form by the readiness which he expressed to continue "peace negotiations" with the Soviet side on settling controversial issues, including the Cuban issue and several other questions--Kennedy at the same time consciously and sufficiently provocatively is aiming towards an abrupt aggravation of relations with the Soviet Union in accord with the above-mentioned considerations.

In this regard it is as if this time he is ready to go pretty far in a test of strength with the Soviet Union, hoping that in the location of the conflict (Cuba) which was chosen by him, the President, the USA has a greater chance than the USSR, and that in the final analysis the Soviet government will refuse to increase the military power of Cuba, not wishing to let a major war break out. Under these conditions it is seen as expedient, while observing the necessary precautions, to at the same time review certain steps which would demonstrate the resolve of the USSR to give an appropriate rebuff to the USA and which would make the USA vulnerable to the possibility of actions which we may take in response. In particular, as it seems to us, it would be possible to review the question of hinting to Kennedy in no uncertain terms about the possibility of repressions against the Western powers in West Berlin (as a first step, the organization of a blockade of ground routes, leaving out for the time being air routes so as not to give grounds for a quick confrontation).

Besides this, taking into account the future development of events and as a means of putting extra pressure on the USA government, it is possible that it would make sense to undertake such measures as, for instance, calling back from the USA Soviet theatrical collectives and Soviet students (sending for them a special airplane), which should show to the Americans the seriousness of our intentions in regard to the events in Cuba.

However, in our opinion it is not necessary to hurry on all the above measures, since an extreme aggravation of the situation, it goes without saying, would not be in our interests. It would make sense to use also the desire of neutral states, and not only them, to find a way to settle the current conflict. Such moods are clearly felt not only at the UN, but also among the diplomatic corps here.

Overall, here in Washington the tension around this situation continues to grow. It seems as if the Americans themselves are beginning to worry a lot, anticipating the arrival in Cuba of the first Soviet ship (many people are expressing this question directly to the Embassy) and how this first "test of strength" will end. This atmosphere of tense waiting entered a new phase with the publication just now of the

President's official proclamation which announces the entering into force of the ban on delivering "offensive weapons" to Cuba as of 14 hours [2 p.m.] (Greenwich Mean Time) on 24 October.

23.X.62 A. DOBRYNIN

[Source: AVP RF, copy courtesy of NSA; translation by Mark H. Doctoroff.]