

PREM 11/3689

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*subject*TOP SECRETFROM WASHINGTON TO FOREIGN OFFICE ✓

Cypher/OTP

P R I S E CSir D. Ormsby Gore
No. 2636
October 22, 1962D: 7.52 p.m. October 22, 1962
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Cuba.

Following personal for Prime Minister from Ambassador.

I know that David Bruce had instructions to put us in the picture at midday today in London, but it may be useful if I give an account of my talk with the President yesterday. He asked me to come unseen to the White House just before lunch. We were quite alone and he told me that no one else outside the United States Government was being informed of what was going on.

2. He then said that the situation with regard to Cuba had completely changed during the course of the last week. A major photo reconnaissance effort by U.2 aircraft had now shown that Cuba was obtaining two types of medium range offensive missiles. One type on fixed sites had an estimated range of two thousand miles. The other type was mobile with an estimated range of fifteen hundred miles. He was not very specific with regard to figures but he thought that there were perhaps thirty to forty missiles already on the island and they now knew that more were on their way by ship. They had to assume that these missiles would be armed with nuclear warheads. They would be more or less useless without them but the Americans had no firm information at this time as to whether nuclear warheads had arrived. They did, however, know of the construction of underground storage facilities. He said that this new information posed a very serious problem for the United States. He had made his position very clear on September 13 when he had said, among other things, that if Cuba became an offensive military base of significant capacity for the Soviet Union, then the United States would do whatever must be done to protect its own security and that of its Allies. This straightforward differentiation between defensive and offensive capacity constituted a clear warning of where the United States would draw the line. In these circumstances and in the light of this latest information, the Administration had had to decide what action they could appropriately take.

3. The President said that they had come to the conclusion that there were two alternatives open to them:-

/(i) They could

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(i) They could order an all-out air strike first thing Monday morning to take out all the known missile sites and the missiles themselves insofar as they had been able to pinpoint their present whereabouts. The military authorities estimated that such a strike would eliminate at least fifty per cent of the Cuban missile potential but it would inevitably cause a large number of casualties to Russians as well as Cubans. The strike would be followed by the imposition of a blockade of Cuba.

(ii) They could impose almost immediately a blockade without first carrying out an air strike. They would stop and search all ships suspected of carrying goods which would help to build up the military potential of Cuba. This would mean leaving the Cubans with their present offensive capacity, such as it was, but would demonstrate America's determination not to allow the build up to proceed any further.

4. The President then asked me for my views as to which of these two courses I felt was the correct one. I said that I saw very serious drawbacks in the first course of action he had outlined to me. Very few people outside the United States would consider the provocation offered by the Cubans serious enough to merit an American air attack. I thought that in the circumstances America would be damaged politically, and in any case I could not believe that the missiles so far landed constituted any significant military threat to the United States. Even with these weapons in existence on Cuba the United States could presumably overwhelm the island in a very short time if they decided at some future date that this had to be done. I thought we ought also to bear in mind the possible repercussions on the Berlin situation. American action of this kind might well provide a smoke-screen behind which the Russians might move against Berlin under favourable conditions. Therefore, of the two alternatives he had put to me I would certainly favour the second, although this too would have far-reaching political implications including the probability of a major Russian reaction perhaps in the Berlin context.

5. The President said that he and his colleagues had come to the same conclusion and that they therefore intended to carry out the second course of action. He added that he supposed that there was a third course and even a fourth course open to them. They might, for instance, use the latest developments as an excuse for a full-scale invasion of Cuba and so finish with Castro once and for all. They might never have a better opportunity for such action. Again, they might do nothing at all and go on as before, but he thought that this was not only politically impossible but was in any case too dangerous. It was now clear that their present actions in Cuba constituted a direct challenge by the Soviets to the United States. They knew perfectly well what his own position and that of the United States Government was and if, when confronted by this provocative challenge, he did nothing, his friends and
/Allies

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the United States' other Allies would feel that the Americans had no real will to resist the encroachments of Communism and would hedge their bets accordingly.

9. The President impressed upon me how vital it was to keep all this information secret until they were ready to act. He wished that only you and your closest advisers should be informed of what was happening. I said that in these circumstances I thought it would be better if I did not report through the usual channels but rather that he should send you a personal message later in the afternoon by teletype machine.

[Copies sent to Prime Minister's Office]

JJJJJ

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