

McNamara: The second point, Mr. President, is the present position of the Soviet vessels, and our plans for intercepting them. There are two vessels that I'll be discussing. One is the *Gagarin*, and the other is the *Kimovsk*, of which these are pictures.

Both of these will be approaching the barrier, by which I mean, they are about 500 miles from Cuba at approximately noon today, roughly the present time, eastern daylight time. I say they will be approaching it—they will be approaching it if our dead reckoning is correct.

Twenty-two seconds excised as classified information.

The *Gagarin* appears to be about 30 to 50 miles behind the *Kimovsk*.

Ten seconds excised as classified information.

The *Gagarin* declared [its cargo as being] technical material at Conakry. This is a typical declaration of an offensive weapons-carrying ship from the Soviet Union. We have checked back the records, and this appears to be a typical way by which they propose to deceive. Both of these ships, therefore, are good targets for our first intercept. Admiral Anderson's plan is to try to intercept one or both of them today.

There is a submarine very close, we believe, to each of them. Between. One submarine relatively close to both of them. The submarine will be at the barrier tonight, late today. It's traveling 8 knots an hour, and therefore it should be 20 to 30 miles from these ships at the time of intercept.

And hence it's a very dangerous situation. The Navy recognizes this, is fully prepared to meet it. Undoubtedly we'll declare radio silence. And therefore neither we nor the Soviets will know where our Navy ships are for much of today.

And that, I think, summarizes our plan.

President Kennedy: Which one are they going to try to get? Both of them?

McNamara: They are concentrating on the *Kimovsk*, but we'll try to get both. The *Kimovsk* has the 7-foot hatches and is the most likely target.

President Kennedy: If the . . . one of our ships . . . what kind of ship is going to try to intercept? A destroyer?

McNamara: Last night, at about midnight, the plan was to try to intercept the *Kimovsk* with a destroyer. Previously it had been thought it would be wise to use a cruiser. But, because of the Soviet submarine, at the time of intercept, it's believed that it would be less dangerous to our forces to use a destroyer. The [aircraft carrier] *Essex*, with antisubmarine equipped helicopters, will be in the vicinity, and those helicopters will attempt to divert the submarine from the intercept point.⁶

McCone: Mr. President, I have a note just handed to me from . . . [unclear]. It says that we've just received information through ONI that all six Soviet ships currently identified in Cuban waters—and I don't know what that means—have either stopped, or reversed course.⁷

Rusk: What do you mean, Cuban waters?

6. The aircraft carrier USS *Essex*, a lead ship of Navy Task Force 136, commanded by Vice Admiral Alfred Ward, was directly responsible for implementing the quarantine under CINCLANT (Admiral Dennison) and the chief of naval operations (Admiral George Anderson).

7. The ONI was the U.S. Navy's Office of Naval Intelligence.

McCone: Dean, I don't know at the moment.

McNamara: Most of these ships [in Cuban waters] are outbound from Cuba to the Soviet Union. There are several, and I presume that that's what that refers to. There are only—

President Kennedy: [*interrupting*] Why don't we find out whether they're talking about the ships leaving Cuba or the ones coming in?

McCone: I'll find out what this guy [*unclear*]. [*He leaves the room.*]

Rusk: [*drily*] Makes some difference. [*A few people laugh.*]

Bundy: It sure does.

McNamara: There were a number of ships so close to the harbors in Cuba this morning that we anticipate their entering the harbors at the present time, inbound from the Soviet Union. There were a number of ships outbound also relatively close to the harbors.

Gilpatric: There is one other ship, a tanker, which is now passing through one of the straits, one of the channels through the islands, a tanker. . . .

President Kennedy: If this submarine should sink our destroyer, then what is our proposed reply?

Taylor: Well, our destroyer, first, will be moving around all the time and the submarine is going to be covered by our antisubmarine warfare patrols. Now, we have a signaling arrangement with that submarine to surface, which has been communicated I am told by . . . to—

Alexis Johnson: I sent it [to the Soviets] last night, yes.

Unidentified: But is that . . . ?

Taylor: Could you describe this, I just—

Alexis Johnson: I sent the identification procedures for a submarine. I sent a message to Moscow last night saying that, in accordance with the President's proclamation, the Secretary of Defense has issued the following procedures for identification of submarines, and asked the embassy to communicate this to the Soviet government, and said this is also being communicated to other governments, this would be a general regulation. Whether they . . . I have not got acknowledgment of receipt of that.

As far as our proclamation is concerned, it was delivered to the Soviet foreign office last night and very promptly returned.

Rusk: I presume they took a look at it.

Alexis Johnson: It was also delivered to the embassy here last night. We have not yet received it back. But these identification procedures should be in their hands.

They are standard. . . . I understand they are an addition to standard international practice accepted by the Soviets?

McNamara: No. This is a new procedure I asked them to set up yesterday, Alex.

Alexis Johnson: It is a new procedure.

McNamara: Here is the exact situation. We have depth charges that have such a small charge that they can be dropped and they can actually hit the submarine, without damaging the submarine.

Taylor: They're practice depth charges.

McNamara: Practice depth charges. We propose to use those as warning depth charges. The message that Alex is talking about states that, when our forces come upon an unidentified submarine we will ask it to come to the surface for inspection by transmitting the following signals, using a depth charge of this type and also using certain sonar signals which they may not be able to accept and interpret. Therefore, it is the depth charge that is the warning notice and the instruction to surface.

It was after McNamara made this point in the discussion, Robert Kennedy jotted down later that day, that he thought "these few minutes were the time of greatest worry by the President. His hand went up to his face & covered his mouth and he closed his fist. His eyes were tense, almost gray, and we just stared at each other across the table."⁸

Taylor: I believe it's the second step, Mr. Secretary, as [Admiral George] Anderson described it.

McNamara: Yes.

Taylor: First the signals and then after—

McNamara: Right. The sonar signal very probably will not accomplish its purpose.

Alexis Johnson: The time element being what it has been, I am not sure that we could assume . . .

McNamara: I think it's almost certain they didn't. [Unclear] didn't see ours, but you and I were working on it at 1:30 [unclear]. I'm sure that it got to the Soviet Union back to the submarine. Now—

Alexis Johnson: That's what I mean. Yes.

McNamara: I neglected to mention one thing about the submarine, however.

Nineteen seconds excised as classified information.

President Kennedy: Kenny?

Kenneth O'Donnell: What if he doesn't surface, then it gets hot?

President Kennedy: If he doesn't surface or if he takes some action—takes some action to assist the merchant ship, are we just going to attack him anyway? At what point are we going to attack him?

I think we ought to wait on that today. We don't want to have the first thing we attack as a Soviet submarine. I'd much rather have a merchant ship.

Taylor: Well, we won't get to that unless the submarine is really in a position to attack our ship in the course of an intercept. This is not pursuing [unclear] on the high seas.

McNamara: I think it would be extremely dangerous, Mr. President, to try to defer attack on this submarine in the situation we're in. We could easily lose an American ship by that means. The range of our sonar in relation to the range of his torpedo, and the inaccuracy, as you well know, of antisubmarine warfare is such that I don't have any—

President Kennedy: [Unclear] imagine it would.

8. Robert Kennedy's handwritten notes on the meeting, found in the Robert Kennedy Papers, are quoted in Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *Robert Kennedy and His Times* (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 514. See also Robert Kennedy's own later reconstruction of this part of the meeting in *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1971), pp. 69–70.

McNamara: — great confidence that we can push him away from our ships and make the intercept securely. Particularly, I don't have confidence we could do that if we restrict the commander on the site in any way. I've looked into this in great detail last night because of your interest in the question.

Rusk: Can you interpose the Soviet merchant vessel between the submarine and yourself? Or does he have torpedoes that can go around and come in from the other side?

Taylor: He can maneuver anyway he wants to.

Rusk: I know. But I mean, suppose that you have air observation, you keep the Soviet ship—

Unidentified: Right underneath.

Unidentified: I don't think—

McNamara: What the plan is, Dean, is to send antisubmarine helicopters out to harass the submarine. And they have weapons and devices that can damage the submarine. And the plan, therefore, is to put pressure on the submarine, move it out of the area by that pressure, by the pressure of potential destruction, and then make the intercept. But this is only a plan and there are many, many uncertainties.

Rusk: Yeah.

President Kennedy: OK. Let's proceed.