

Never was the world so perilously close to war as it was in the last week of October, 1962 over Cuba. Here is the story as told by the *London Observer's* diplomatic staff.

## THREE DAYS THAT SAVED THE WORLD

An hour before President Kennedy was due to broadcast in Washington on a matter of "urgent national importance," Adlai Stevenson stepped into a high-speed lift to the thirty-eighth floor of the United Nations building in New York.

He walked into the offices of the Acting Secretary-General, U Thant, and, choosing his words with his customary fastidiousness, told him that the Russians had missile bases in Cuba and that the United States intended to call an emergency meeting of the Security Council.

It was six o'clock on the evening of Monday, October 22—the beginning of a self-contained week of nightmare that ended almost as abruptly as it began. The week is still full of mysteries and question marks and it has no precedents or parallels. But

the events of the next few days illuminated, with a sudden glare, the terrifying rules and moves of the nuclear chess game.

### *Crucial clash*

The full import of Stevenson's news did not at once strike U Thant. Stevenson did not tell him that the President was about to announce a blockade, and did not wait for any discussion. But U Thant knew that he must expect a direct Russian-American clash, that would be crucial for the U.N., and for him.

Ever since he had been elected to office a year before, the U. N. Secretariat had watched U Thant with increasing respect. He had taken his predecessor, Dag Hammarskjöld, as his model: even the offices kept their antiseptic Swedish air,

though one or two abstract works of art had been replaced with Renoirs and a strange assortment of Mexican and African sculpture.

U Thant lacked Hammar-skjold's intellectual power or political subtlety, but he had the same dedicated independence.

When Stevenson left, U Thant called in his main confidant on the Secretariat, the clever soft-voiced Indian, CHAKRAVARTHI NARASIMHAN, his right-hand man throughout the week. Together they listened to Kennedy's broadcast, and then U Thant withdrew for his customary reflection—the last quiet evening he was to have.

### *Crisis gathers*

Next day the crisis gathered speed. From Washington, Kennedy completed his opening moves: the U.S. fleet deployed off Cuba, the Western allies expressed their support, Stevenson tabled a resolution in the Security Council, demanding immediate dismantling and withdrawal from Cuba of all offensive weapons, endorsed unanimously by the Organization of American States.

But from Moscow the western ambassadors reported a strange calm. The Soviet Council of Ministers had met in the Kremlin to hear the Defense Minister, Marshal Malinovsky, report on military preparations. At the Foreign Ministry a tall, Stalintype skyscraper, VASSILY KUZNETSOV, the Deputy Foreign Minister, had summoned the newly appointed American Ambassador, FOY KOHLER, a quiet, wrinkled man who was the chief American expert on Berlin.

KHRUSHCHEV himself was ostentatiously playing it cool: while in New York an extremely worried U Thant was considering ways of calling for a truce, Khrushchev in Moscow went to see "Boris Godunov" at the Bolshoi, chatted afterwards to JEROME HINES, the bass singer from California who had sung the part of Boris, and found time to receive WILLIAM KNOX, American president of Westinghouse Electric. As for the Moscow public they had not even been told about the cause of the crisis.

In Washington and Europe the atmosphere became steadily more strained as the

public waited for the clash between American warships and Russian arms ships heading for Cuba. The New York stock market fell by 11 points on Tuesday, four on Wednesday; the price of gold went up, and shops in Los Angeles reported a heavy demand for tin foods.

#### *Phone at side*

Everyone was watching the President. To his friends he seemed controlled and reasonably relaxed. But throughout the week he was never more than a few steps away from a telephone. Ever since the danger of sudden nuclear attack, the telephone had become the most crucial part of the equipment: whenever he moved, the switchboard moved with him, and even at the airport a wheeled trolley carried a telephone at his side.

The "situation room," just inside the west wing of the basement of the White House, was manned 24 hours a day by the President's aides, including MCGEORGE BUNDY and his deputy, CARL KAYSEN.

Equally important was the telephone between Washing-

ton and GENERAL NORSTAD, the cool and sophisticated commander of Nato. After Kennedy's speech, he ordered American forces in Europe to a state of "awareness" — the first of three pre-arranged stages of preparation for trouble in Europe which he had introduced about 18 months before.

As the tension increased, Norstad came under heavy pressure from Washington to move to a further stage of preparedness — involving the issue of ammunition (including nuclear warheads) and the dispersal of nuclear bombers. It is now known that he resisted this pressure, arguing that it would be wrong, as long as the crisis was confined to the Caribbean, to take what might appear to the Russians as provocative measures in Europe.

#### *The neutralists*

As the world prepared reluctantly to face war, all sides looked hopefully towards the U.N. But, from U Thant's vantage point, the outlook was increasingly grim. On the Wednesday morning the leader of the Cypriot delegation, ZENON ROSSIDES, to-

gether with six other neutralist leaders, called on U Thant to plead for him to intervene.

U Thant consulted closely with OMAR LOUTFI, his comfortable-looking Egyptian under-secretary, and then prepared a careful message to Khrushchev and Kennedy, bravely objecting to the "extraordinary" nature of the blockade and calling for a fortnight's truce—a demand that went further than the neutralists' own suggestions. The message was delivered that evening to the Security Council; some delegates believed that U Thant was threatening to resign (echoing Hammarskjöld at Suez) if the Americans used force.

By the end of the day there was some relaxation: Washington had reported that some Russian ships had altered course, and Khrushchev had mentioned casually to William Knox in Moscow that he was still thinking of coming to America. On Wednesday afternoon U Thant himself ordered that the annual U.N. concert, given by the Leningrad Orchestra, should proceed as usual.

Then, on Wednesday night, the spotlight temporarily turned on a remote old man in Wales — BERTRAND RUSSELL, who was sitting in his bedroom slippers in his rented villa, Plas Penryhn, with his dog Peanut.

#### *Five cables*

Russell's activities provided a curious entracte to the world crisis — as if a dramatic critic had strayed on to the stage by accident. Ever since he had listened to Kennedy's midnight broadcast, Russell had been in a state of unusual agitation. That night he sent off five cables — which were phoned through via Manchester — to Kennedy, Khrushchev, Macmillan, Gaitskell and U Thant, in that order. Copies of the cables were read to British newspapers, which ignored them.

For the next two days Russell tried to mobilize mediators, including SCHWEITZER in Africa, PABLO CASALS, in Puerto Rico, and CYRUS EATON, Khrushchev's eccentric millionaire friend, in America; he also proposed summoning an emergency meeting of the Pugwash scientists.

He appealed to the British Press "to allow the people to know of the grave danger facing mankind," and prepared an angry leaflet headed **YOU ARE TO DIE**, which was printed at its own expense by the Cuban Embassy in London.

#### *Frosty answer*

The Press took no notice at all until at 7:30 on Wednesday night the Tass Agency in Moscow suddenly put over the tape a long, conciliatory reply from Khrushchev.

Abruptly the boycott of Plas Penryhn was transformed into a siege. The telephone was blocked with calls from all over the world, asking for Russell's original Khrushchev's letter (which he had not then seen — the actual letter *still* hasn't arrived). Next morning there were 36 journalists at the house. Russell found himself, for the moment, in the midst of the triangle of Washington, Moscow and the U.N.

The only leader who did not in the end reply personally to Russell's cables was Macmillan, who sent a frosty

answer through his secretary, PHILLIP DE ZULUETA, saying "Your views have been noted."

On Thursday, at the U.N. after Khrushchev's letter to Russell, the atmosphere was still strained, but more hopeful. Kennedy replied to U Thant, saying that Stevenson would enter preliminary talks as U Thant had asked, and Moscow reported that Khrushchev, too, had agreed to talks. Stevenson and Zorin exchanged allegations, but some contact had at least been achieved.

The next day Khrushchev told U Thant that he had ordered Russian ships to stay out of the interception area. Kennedy said that everything possible would be done to avoid confronting Russian ships outside that area. The dreaded clash at sea had been averted, and the first part of the crisis was over — with the U.N. as the undisputed peacemaker.

#### *Force hint*

But a second and more serious crisis was only just beginning — the three days in which the world could have

been lost, but was saved. For although Khrushchev had indirectly given Kennedy a mild public answer, he had not committed himself to removing the missile bases from Cuba. On the contrary, American air surveys showed the Russians were working feverishly to complete them.

The removal of these bases was Kennedy's declared aim, by negotiation if possible, but if not, Washington increasingly hinted then by force.

The blockade might stop more missiles coming in, but it could not stop the Russians from finishing the bases already started. The speed with which this second crisis developed was dictated by the speed of the continued Russian buildup. Washington thought that Khrushchev might simply be playing for time, hoping the crisis would gradually peter out, leaving Russian rockets still in Cuba.

Mr. Kennedy had warned in his broadcasts that if the offensive preparations in Cuba continued, "further action would be justified." Now, inspired leaks to the Washington Press corps ominously began to speak of possible

American bombing attacks on the missile bases.

If this was part of the war of nerves, the Russians had already shown — more gently — they could play the same game. In Moscow on Thursday, Marshal Malinovsky made the closing speech at an army conference on ideological questions. Soviet forces, he declared, were in a high state of readiness. A shortened version of the speech was published in the Army's paper. About 15 youths demonstrated outside the American Ambassador's residence, a handsome domed building in a square near the Embassy. They were chased away by militiamen.

With the new crisis in mind U Thant had sent, pressed by the neutrals, another message to the two leaders urging restraint. But he was a little reluctant to push himself forward. SIR PATRICK DEAN, the chief British delegate, commented sympathetically: "If U Thant is always the ham in the sandwich, he's bound to be eaten in the end." U Thant was also in touch on Thursday with Bertrand Russell, who had three letters from

the Acting Secretary-General during the week.

*'End this madness'*

At 2:30 a.m. on Friday, Russell had a reply to his sharp cable to Kennedy which had wound up "End this madness." It had been lost for three days at the White House among 53,000 other telegrams. Kennedy, more politely told Russell: "I think your attention might now be directed to the burglars rather than those who have caught the burglars."

That night Russell, helped by his secretary RALP SCHOE-  
NMAN, sent more cables to Kennedy, CASTRO and Khrushchev. At Portmadoc telephone exchange the night operator said: "Don't you ever get any sleep, you two?"

But the role of the sleepless philosopher was over. Even the public mediation of the U.N. was taking second place to secret diplomacy and this was increasingly direct between Washington and Moscow.

At the U.N. the American delegation, sensing hostility, quietly dropped its initial plan — to provoke a Soviet veto at the Security Council

and then carry the American resolution immediately before the General Assembly. Instead it accepted a U.A.R.-Ghana proposal to suspend the Security Council discussions until U Thant had had a chance of trying to arrange a compromise.

*Secret messages*

On Friday morning Adlai Stevenson went to Washington for instructions on the minimum terms the Americans should demand. That afternoon, he, Zorin and the Cuban GARCIA were all received by U Thant on the thirty-eighth floor. They were ushered into different waiting rooms to avoid meeting. Stevenson left the building saying "That is a good time for quiet diplomacy."

Then, expecting a tough round of negotiations, the American delegation was astounded to be called up by Washington at 11:30 on Friday night — after dawn in Moscow — and told that Kennedy had just received a secret message from Khrushchev going far beyond the compromise that U Thant had been trying to negotiate.

This was the third of four

secret messages that are known to have passed between Kennedy and Khrushchev during the crisis. There are believed to have been others, but no one outside the White House and the Kremlin knows for sure.

There is no direct telephone line from the White House to the Kremlin. (Though during the past year the Swedes had suggested installing such a telephone link as one way of preventing war by accident.) But this time Kennedy and Khrushchev corresponded secretly with each other through their embassies.

As soon as he came into office, Kennedy had made a point of establishing as close a contact with Khrushchev as possible through the American ambassador in Moscow. Until recently it was the veteran Russian-speaking LLEWELLYN THOMPSON, who had just been replaced by Foy Kohler. Thompson could see Khrushchev at almost any time and, back in Washington, was one of the President's most trusted advisers on how to deal with Russia.

The text of Khrushchev's message to the President on Friday night is still secret. It is said not to have been published by the Americans because of its violent and vituperative language. But, behind this smoke screen, Khrushchev made the key move of the week. According to Kennedy's reply to the message, the Soviet leader admitted in it for the first time the presence of bases in Cuba, reassured the Americans they were in Soviet not Cuban hands, and agreed to take them out in return for no more than the assurance that the Americans would not invade Cuba.

#### *New twist*

It was clear later that this was the turning-point of the crisis. But at the time the outside world, ignorant of the message, could see only a rapid slide towards war. Evidently Khrushchev had at last been convinced that if he did not withdraw his missiles the Americans might really attack them.

That Friday evening as his vital message was on its way to Washington, Mr. and Mrs. Khrushchev attended a con-



cert given by a Cuban orchestra in the Tchaikovsky Hall.

In Washington that night it must have looked as though the game was won. But on Saturday morning more disturbing news began to come from Moscow. A large organised demonstration took place outside the American Embassy and Moscow Radio announced that it would be broadcasting an important statement. Most Muscovites expected a call-up of the reserves. Instead it was an offer to America to swap the Soviet bases in Cuba for the American missile bases in Turkey, which was received in Washington with bewilderment and alarm. It coincided with news that Russians round the Cuban missile sites were firing at American reconnaissance planes and had shot one down.

Had Khrushchev suddenly changed his mind? Or had he lost control in the Kremlin and been forced to take a tougher line? Whose finger was now on the trigger on the other side?

#### *A mystery*

Paradoxically one of the most frightening thoughts of

a frightening week was that Khrushchev might no longer be there. But as one American diplomat said: "We must remember our aim is to dismantle the bases — not to dismantle Khrushchev."

Just why Khrushchev backtracked on Saturday is still a mystery. In his reference to a Cuba-Turkey deal, the Soviet Premier mentioned WALTER LIPPMANN. The wizened elder statesman of the American Press, in his column the previous Tuesday, had first made the heretical suggestion of a Cuba-Turkey exchange — to the fury of the State Department, who thought the Russians would interpret it as official kite-flying.

But there *were* signs that a deal over Turkey had been considered in Washington as one possible bargain in later negotiations with Russia. The Turks themselves objected to the Americans taking their missiles away.

#### *The brink*

On Saturday evening, President Kennedy replied to both Khrushchev messages. He rejected a deal over Turkey. He was ready, he said,

to talk about disarmament generally, provided the Russian missiles in Cuba were "rendered inoperable." But he offered Khrushchev another way out. He gave him the promise the Soviet Premier had asked for in his secret Friday message — that America would not attack Cuba if the Soviet missiles were withdrawn. American officials at the U.N. spread the word that unless an agreement were reached within the next few hours the U.S. would take direct military action to wipe out the bases.

This was the brink. For no one knew what Khrushchev would reply. For the next fifteen hours the tension reached its peak. And nerves on both sides were stretched even tighter when, on the Sunday morning, an American U2, straying off course above Siberia, was sighted by the Russians.

While the world waited anxiously for Khrushchev, the man who seemed least worried of all was PRESIDENT DE GAULLE. He was far more concerned about his referendum. On Saturday afternoon he went down to his country

house at Colombey-les-deux-Eglises and did not come back to Paris until Tuesday.

In London on Saturday night, it was realised that the situation was heading for disaster. Macmillan had seen Khrushchev's unpublished letter to Kennedy of the day before and believed that the risk of war was greater than at any time in the crisis. Late on Saturday, he summoned BUTLER, THORNEYCROFT and HOME, who were joined by HEATH when he got back from Brussels. They discussed the situation and the Prime Minister spoke to Kennedy on the telephone. The ministers met again at 9:30 on Sunday morning, when there was still no sign of a statement from Khrushchev.

With the help of his colleagues, Macmillan drafted a letter to Khrushchev, which was finished by 11:15. By noon it had been typed, coded and transmitted to SIR FRANK ROBERTS in Moscow.

#### *Sense of relief*

But the letter was not needed. By 2:15 the teleprinters at Admiralty House, and everywhere else, tapped

out the next of Khrushchev's message agreeing to the President's terms.

At the U.N. on Monday morning there was a sense of immense, overwhelming relief. Ambassador Zorin gave a lunch for members of the Security Council. Stevenson

arrived in good humour, and, as a joke, pulled out a newspaper cutting about the Ghanaians asking for weapons to repel *elephants*.

"I expect they were American elephants," said Zorin. "No," said Stevenson, "the elephants wore red." —

### A LEARNED IGNORAMUS

The specialist "knows" very well his own, tiny corner of the universe; he is radically ignorant of all the rest. Here we have a precise example of this strange new man . . . a human product unparalleled in history. For, previously, men could be divided simply into the learned and the ignorant, those more or less the one, and those more or less the other. But your specialist cannot be brought in under either of these two categories. He is not learned, for he is formally ignorant of all that does not enter into his specialty; but neither is he ignorant, because he is a "scientist," and "knows" very well his own tiny portion of the universe. We shall have to say that he is a learned ignoramus, which is a very serious matter, as it implies that he is a person who is ignorant, not in the fashion of the ignorant man, but with all the petulance of one who is learned in his own special line. — Jose Ortega y Gasset.