

Confrontation Confidential: The Nixon Administration's Response to the Cienfuegos Crisis of
1970 – 1971

Research Thesis

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by

Erik J. Ehrenfeld

The Ohio State University

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Project Advisor: Professor David Steigerwald, Department of History

Project Mentors: Professor Peter L. Hahn, Department of History, and Professor Christopher
McKnight Nichols, Department of History

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

Acronym/Abbreviation	Definition
ABM	Anti-Ballistic Missile (System)
EXCOM	Executive Committee of the National Security Council
ICBM	Intercontinental Ballistic Missile
MIRV	Multiple Independently-Targetable Reentry Vehicle
NPT	Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons
NSC	(United States) National Security Council
PLO	Palestinian Liberation Organization
PRC	The People's Republic of China
SALT	Strategic Arms Limitation Talks
SLBM	Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missile
SRG	Senior Review Group (of the National Security Council)
SSBN	Nuclear-Powered Ballistic Missile Submarine
TASS	Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union
US	The United States (of America)
USSR	The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Soviet Union)
WSAG	Washington Special Actions Group (of the National Security Council)

List of Primary Participants**United States**

Participant	Title
Ray S. Cline	Assistant Secretary of State for Intelligence and Research
Jerry W. Friedheim	Deputy Assistant, Secretary Defense for Public Affairs
Alexander M. Haig Jr.	United States Deputy National Security Advisor
H.R. Haldeman	White House Chief of Staff
Richard M. Helms	Director of Central Intelligence
William G. Hyland	Staff Member, United States National Security Council
Ural Alexis Johnson	Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs
Henry A. Kissinger	President's Assistant for National Security Affairs
Melvin R. Laird Jr.	United States Secretary of Defense
Thomas H. Moorer	Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
Richard M. Nixon	President of the United States
David Packard	United States Deputy Secretary of Defense
Rembrandt C. Robinson	Member, Chairman's Staff Group, Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff
William P. Rogers	United States Secretary of State
Helmut Sonnenfeldt	Senior Staff Member, United States National Security Council
Llewellyn E. Thompson	Advisor on Soviet Affairs
Viron P. Vaky	Staff Member, United States National Security Council
Ronald L. Ziegler	White House Press Secretary

Soviet Union

Participant	Title
Leonid I. Brezhnev	General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union
Anatoly F. Dobrynin	Ambassador of the Soviet Union to the United States
Andrei A. Gromyko	Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet
Alexei N. Kosygin	Premier of the Soviet Union
Yuli M. Vorontsov	Chargé d'Affaires of the Soviet Embassy to the United States

Abstract

During a period of uninterrupted crises across the globe in the late summer and early autumn of 1970, the United States (US) compelled the Soviet Union (USSR) to abandon its efforts to establish a nuclear submarine base in the Cuban harbor of Cienfuegos. Follow-on negotiations that concluded in May 1971 restricted the operation of Soviet submarine tenders in the region that threatened to serve a similar role to the base, albeit to a lesser degree. This neglected episode of Cold War history highlights core attributes of the Nixon administration's approach to international politics in general and crisis resolution vis-à-vis the USSR in particular. Firstly, the budding détente between the two superpowers, which arose primarily because of the changing world balance of power, guided the US response. Meanwhile, efforts to link various developments and political imperatives at home and abroad shaped Nixon's framing of the issue. Finally, the organization of, and the culture in, the White House witnessed various actors—most notably the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs Henry A. Kissinger—use the situation to undermine others and increase their influence over policymaking.

Introduction

A Neglected Episode, Overview

The 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, during which the US successfully thwarted a Soviet attempt to station intermediate-range nuclear missiles on the island-nation of Cuba, has entered the US public's imagination like no other Cold War confrontation. Indeed, the brief period that credibly threatened nuclear Armageddon has produced a copious amount of scholarly work and entertaining media, much of which celebrates the event as a great American victory in the face of Soviet expansion. The same cannot be said of the so-called Cienfuegos Crisis that occurred eight

years later, when the Soviets once again attempted to introduce nuclear weapons on their ally's territory, this time through the attempted establishment of a nuclear submarine base in the Cuban harbor of Cienfuegos.

The sequence of events during the crisis, specifically recounted from the US perspective, displays the various attributes of the Nixon administration's approach to foreign policy. Crucially, the confrontation occurred early in the era of détente, a segment of the Cold War that prioritized cooperation and reduced tensions between the two superpowers. The imperative to establish a firm détente with the USSR became the central element that guided the US response to the crisis. To accomplish this, the Nixon administration, particularly the president and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, prioritized secrecy and used methods that concealed their actions to all but the most important actors involved in the crisis.

This arrangement, an established trademark of the administration, successfully compelled the Soviets to quietly abandon their base project in Cuba, thereby achieving the Nixon administration's primary goal, but left residual issues that agitated the administration moving forward. Finally, the Nixonian principle of linkage, or making initiatives to a foreign nation in one policy area dependent on the progress with that country in another sector, shaped the president's perception, especially since the situation in the Caribbean occurred concurrently with other crises involving possible or confirmed Soviet efforts and the 1970 midterm elections.

These various elements—the administration's imperative for secrecy, the discreet resolution of the crisis, and the focus on other crises and political issues beyond Cienfuegos—generally allowed Nixon to dictate his policies without interference. This strategy's effectiveness, however, also obscured the crisis from the attention of most contemporary scholars and the wider public. Through a fresh examination of the writings of and interviews with the

principal actors and, most importantly, the documents held at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library in Yorba Linda, California, this investigation seeks to bring this forgotten confrontation into its proper place in the historiography of the Nixon Presidency and the wider Cold War.

Détente Prior to 1969

A brief history of the concept of détente is required, as Nixon largely framed his response to the Cienfuegos Crisis along this line of thinking. Despite coming to the forefront during Nixon's presidency, the Cold War context of the term, meaning "relaxation of tensions" in French, originated in Europe in the early 1960s.¹ The term initially referred to West German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and French President Charles De Gaulle's attempts to increase economic contacts with Eastern European nations and, to a lesser extent, the USSR. These initiatives necessitated reduced tensions between the communist East and capitalist West, which explained the specific use of the term.²

The economic nature of these negotiations provided a pragmatic first step that worked to both sides' advantage and paved the way for the settlement of more contentious issues. Of these, West German Chancellor Willy Brandt's efforts to normalize relations with East Germany produced the most notable European experiment with détente, as the agreements he reached

¹ Raymond L. Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan* (Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1994), 28. According to Garthoff, the word has a long history "in diplomatic parlance," but was particularly used in its Cold War meaning by the French President Charles De Gaulle in the mid-1960s and by many others soon afterwards, although initially Nixon and his administration "went to some lengths to avoid the word" and preferred phrases such as "a new era" and a "structure of peace" instead. Nevertheless, by 1973, détente was used both officially and colloquially. The Soviets, meanwhile, used the Russian term *razryadka napryazhennosti*, which also means "a lessening or relaxation of tension."

² Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, 11-12. For a detailed account of the development of European, especially French and German, détente, see Jeremi Suri, *Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

significantly reduced tensions and created frameworks of understanding between the two German states, particularly regarding normalization and the status of Berlin.³

Following the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Kennedy administration arguably set the US on a limited track of détente, specifically with the USSR. The magnitude of an unsuccessful resolution to the crisis was obvious to most observers, including the president and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, who thereafter cooperated in efforts to reduce the chances of a future nuclear exchange. Specifically, the US and Soviet leaders installed a hotline between Washington D.C. and Moscow and signed the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in August 1963.⁴ Despite Kennedy's, and especially his successor Lyndon B. Johnson's, increased efforts against communist expansion in Vietnam and other peripheral regions of the world, the US and USSR reduced bilateral tensions in the latter half of the 1960s, especially compared to the period before and during the 1962 Missile Crisis; for example, Johnson pressed for and agreed to the international Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968.⁵

Hard-Headed Détente

While Presidents Kennedy and Johnson pursued a policy of limited détente as a response to the 1962 Crisis and restrained Soviet behavior, Richard Nixon deliberately made the concept his central Cold War strategy. The irony of Nixon pursuing this conciliatory policy is striking, as

³ RP Barston, "Soviet Foreign Policy in the Brezhnev Years," *The World Today* Vol. 39, No. 3 (1983): 82-83, <https://www-jstor-org.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/stable/40395674>.

⁴ Raymond L. Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1987), 87-88. Garthoff, the author of multiple works used in this investigation, is a seasoned official in American foreign policy who served in many important posts from the 1950s-1990s with various government and private institutions, including the State Department, the CIA, and the RAND Corporation, and is, at the time of this investigation's publication, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. He became privy to the US deliberations during the Cuban Missile Crisis as a tertiary member of the fabled EXCOM and later the Cienfuegos Crisis. Additionally, in the 1960's and throughout Nixon's presidency the hotline between the US and USSR was a telegraph line, rather than the telephone line commonly depicted in entertaining digital media.

⁵ Sylvia Ellis, "A Foreign Policy Success? LBJ and Transatlantic Relations," *Journal of Transatlantic Studies* Vol. 8, No. 3 (2010): 253, <http://www-tandfonline-com.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/doi/pdf/10.1080/14794012.2010.498126>.

he forged his early political identity as a ruthless anti-communist Cold Warrior.⁶ Nevertheless, this irony is reduced through an examination of the historical context of the late 1960s and early 1970s and Nixon's specific brand of détente that arose concurrently in this period of sociopolitical turmoil. Ultimately, although he utilized peaceful and moral arguments to sell the concept to his audiences, Nixon pursued détente as a pragmatic reaction to deal with the US's perceived decline in the international balance of power.⁷

By 1969, the relative quantitative power of the US compared to the USSR had been dramatically reduced. As a response to US nuclear increases because of a perceived "missile gap," the Soviets embarked on a substantial nuclear weapons buildup in the 1960s, which accelerated after their humiliating reversal in the Cuban Missile Crisis.⁸ Indeed, some analysts argued that the Soviets secured a relative advantage against the US in intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) numbers in 1969. Even if this was not the case, the two nations reached a general numerical parity in nuclear weapons at this time, which was a clear departure from the nuclear advantage the US possessed since 1945.⁹

⁶ Nixon's role as a member of the House Un-American Activities Committee during the trial of alleged Soviet spy Alger Hiss particularly exemplifies this identity and propelled the then junior congressman to national notoriety for the first time. For an overview of the Hiss trial, see JT Gay, "1948: The Alger Hiss Spy Case," *American History* Vol. 33, Issue 2 (1998): 26-34, [1948: The Alger Hiss spy case: Discovery Service for Ohio State University \(ohio-state.edu\)](#).

⁷ Nixon's speech accepting the Republican Party's nomination for president in 1968 demonstrates both his understanding of relative American decline, "we are worse off in every area of the world tonight than we were when President Eisenhower left office," and his early commitment to détente: "And now to the leaders of the Communist world, we say: After an era of confrontation, the time has come for an era of negotiation." Richard Nixon, "Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination," (speech, Miami Beach, Florida, August 8, 1968), The American Presidency Project, [Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Miami Beach, Florida | The American Presidency Project \(ucsb.edu\)](#).

⁸ Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 25, 87. The "missile gap" refers to an alleged US inferiority in missile numbers with the USSR that became an important issue during the 1960 Presidential Election, as Kennedy, then the Democratic nominee, alleged that the Eisenhower administration, in which Nixon, the Republican nominee, served as Vice President, allowed the US to fall behind the Soviets strategically. As Garthoff states in a footnote on page 25, the Kennedy administration later disproved the existence of a missile gap, but still increased US missile production (page 87).

⁹ Richard Nixon, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 415. Although many definitions of "parity" in the context of weapons possession exist, Nixon defined it in his memoirs as the

Additionally, some Soviet systems became more qualitatively advanced, especially with the introduction of the SS-9 ICBM and early anti-ballistic missile (ABM) systems defending Moscow.¹⁰ In the economic sphere, the Soviets were nearing US production levels in traditional industries, most notably coal and steel.¹¹ Many American observers, including the newly elected President Nixon, believed that these Soviet advances threatened the US's ability to resist the USSR with near impunity. Therefore, Nixon sought a new Cold War strategy.¹²

Although the relative gains in Soviet power calculations presented a substantial theoretical problem, the US involvement in the Vietnam War immediately confronted Nixon upon taking office. To many observers, the Tet Offensive of the previous year shattered most remaining support for the war and confirmed that it was unwinnable.¹³ As a result, the US public's confidence in their leaders, especially regarding military operations, collapsed, while many Americans and people of other nations, including Western European nations aligned with the US, condemned the war on strategic and moral grounds.¹⁴

“point in arms development at which each nation has the capacity to destroy the other.” As such, parity in this sense is roughly equivalent to two nations possessing a second-strike capability against each other and is generally measured by the numbers, destructive potential, or throw weight (weight of all components of a self-contained nuclear delivery system, usually a missile, excluding fuel) of the weapons and their delivery systems in the two nuclear arsenals. This will serve as the definition of parity in this investigation.

¹⁰ Robin Edmonds, *Soviet Foreign Policy: The Brezhnev Years*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983). Edmonds, a seasoned British foreign service official, reports that in 1969 the Soviet nuclear arsenal included 1,200 ICBMs (270 of which were SS-9s), 230 submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and 150 nuclear-armed bombers, as well as 67 ABM launchers around Moscow; in contrast, the US had 1,054 ICBMs, 656 SLBMs, 540 bombers, and no deployed ABM systems.

¹¹ Andrei D. Sakharov, *Progress, Coexistence, and Intellectual Freedom*, trans, The New York Times (New York: The New York Times Company, 1968), 72.

¹² Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston, *Nixon in the World: American Foreign Relations, 1969-1977* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 5.

¹³ Robert Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger: Partners in Power* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 61.

¹⁴ Edmonds, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 44.

Unsurprisingly, by the winter of 1970, a reported 84% of Americans favored some form of withdrawal from the war.¹⁵ Additionally, the war proved exceedingly costly: from 1965-1972, the war cost the American taxpayers around \$100 billion, all of which could have been better spent at home or in more vital areas of the world.¹⁶ Ultimately, the catastrophic war and other domestic issues split American society, which created a sense of national malaise and loss of purpose that limited US options on the world stage.

Nixon's solution to this dual threat of a more-powerful USSR and domestic listlessness stemming from the Vietnam War became *détente*. Far from viewing the relaxation of tensions as a peaceful end in and of itself, as some hopeful analysts believed, Nixon's *détente* became a strategy to pursue the previous Cold War imperative of resisting communist expansion using less confrontational means.¹⁷ To accomplish this, Nixon created a policy of *détente* that relied on two connected initiatives: first, a concerted effort to limit the expansion of Soviet power through negotiations and conciliatory partnerships that reduced tensions with communist states; and second, a general disengagement of US, mainly military, forces from areas of the world deemed less strategically important. By simultaneously pursuing these goals, Nixon hoped to consolidate and economize power during a period of relative US decline.

Breaking from the previous policy of unlimited containment, where the US resisted communist expansion with direct military force, Nixon pledged to commit US resources, but not troops, to threatened nations in a policy he dubbed the Nixon Doctrine.¹⁸ The theoretical benefits of this doctrine rested in its ability to economize US resistance to communist expansion, as sending resources, mainly military equipment, to threatened allies was less financially and

¹⁵ Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 183.

¹⁶ Edmonds, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 44.

¹⁷ Logevall and Preston, *Nixon in the World*, 11.

¹⁸ Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 143-144.

politically costly to the US. The seminal example of the Nixon Doctrine in operation became Vietnamization: a two-part strategy that trained and equipped the South Vietnamese military and disengaged the US military from the war. Eventually, the implementation of the Nixon Doctrine through the policy of Vietnamization helped to end direct US involvement in the war, thereby solving the most contentious political issue facing the country and clearing a major roadblock in negotiations with the communist world.¹⁹

From his initial days in office, negotiations with communist states, primarily the USSR but also the PRC after February 1972, became the focus of Nixon's détente, as they served mainly to slow further increases in Soviet power.²⁰ Because of the changing international balance of power, Nixon became the first president to address and deal with his Soviet counterparts as equals. The importance of this change was crucial to relaxing bilateral tensions, as the Soviets resented their unequal treatment by previous American leaders.²¹

Following Nixon's visit to the PRC in 1972—certainly the crowning achievement of détente, as Nixon played the two communist nations off against each other, which improved US relations with both—the US and the USSR initiated a flurry of summit meetings and negotiations, which produced international agreements that reduced tensions between the two superpowers to their lowest levels since 1945.²² Crucially, many of these agreements sought to equalize the strategic power of the two nations, mainly through limitations on nuclear weapons like those contained in the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) agreement.²³ As a result,

¹⁹ Edmonds, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 77.

²⁰ Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 98.

²¹ Edmonds, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 123.

²² Logevall and Preston, *Nixon in the World*, 12.

²³ SALT I was signed on May 26, 1972, during Nixon's first summit meeting in Moscow. Negotiations for SALT II began following the signing of SALT I but was not signed until June 18, 1979, during President Jimmy Carter's term. Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979, Carter withdrew the treaty from the US

détente checked communist, particularly Soviet, power during a period of relative decline in US quantitative power and thereby achieved Nixon's primary goal.

Despite the benefits of cooperation, or at least managed competition, Nixon believed that the communist powers remained ideologically, and therefore inherently, expansionist, which required occasional direct challenges in areas of strategic importance.²⁴ Through these challenges, which sometimes resulted in actual or near confrontations utilizing the use or threat of military force, the Nixon administration demonstrated its ability to use the proverbial stick, or punishment for not adopting policies in the US's interest, while efforts towards détente served as the carrot, or benefit for acting in the US's interest. The key to this dual strategy, therefore, was striking a balance between cooperation and confrontation; in the latter, the Nixon administration had to carefully select both the strategic location of his stand and the level of force, or threat of force, appropriate in an era of relative US decline.

Nixon demonstrated both his resolve and an acceptance of these considerations when he ordered the bombing of North Vietnam's infrastructure and transportation hubs and the mining of the port of Haiphong in Operations Linebacker I and Pocket Money, respectively, in retaliation for a North Vietnamese offensive against South Vietnam in 1972.²⁵ These operations threatened to derail the president's first summit in Moscow but proved the US's dedication to its South Vietnamese ally, which Nixon frequently pledged not to abandon. Additionally, the

ratification process, and it was never ratified. Nevertheless, both nations honored the wording of the agreement until the mid-1980s.

²⁴ Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, 29.

²⁵ John Morocco, *The Vietnam Experience*, vol. 14, *Rain of Fire: Air War, 1969-1973* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company, 1985), 130-138.

operations helped bring the North Vietnamese into the negotiated settlement that ended direct US involvement in the war in 1973.²⁶

Crucially, the Soviet response to the US operations was a feeble protest, and the summit meeting, which became a watershed moment in Nixon's successful détente, occurred without issue.²⁷ Thus, Nixon walked a fine, but effective, line between cooperation and confrontation in the years of detente, and the Cienfuegos situation, like that in Vietnam two years later, demonstrated these conflicting, but ultimately mutually reinforcing, tendencies in crafting a stable American-Soviet relationship.

The critical feature of Nixon's use of détente, therefore, was his ability to sustain US resistance to international communism during the Cold War. Viewed through this lens, Nixon's détente centered on managing competition and avoiding costly confrontations with the communist powers during a period of relative US decline. Rather than acquiesce, the US would respond to overt communist challenges that threatened the international status quo, either through direct and forceful action, where possible and appropriate, or through funding allies in areas deemed less crucial. As Kissinger said during an interview with William F. Buckley Jr. in 1975, "The relaxation of tensions has never been conceived by any of us [in the Nixon administration] as ending competition and the possibility of conflict [with the USSR]. They are a

²⁶ Nixon's "Silent Majority" Speech provides the best example of his ideological convictions regarding the importance of ensuring South Vietnam's survival and his view of the American mission in Vietnam more generally. For a transcript of the speech, see: Richard Nixon, "Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam" (Television Broadcast, Washington D.C., November 3, 1969), The Nixon Library's Online Files, [Good evening, my fellow Americans: \(nixonlibrary.gov\)](https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/good-evening-my-fellow-americans).

²⁷ Henry A. Kissinger, *Leadership: Six Studies in World Strategy* (New York: Penguin Press, 2022), 158-160.

means by which a competition, which is inevitable in...present circumstances, is regulated while reducing the danger of nuclear war.”²⁸

In this way, détente served as a pragmatic “holding action” intended to help the US weather the tempests of the war in Vietnam and a strengthened superpower adversary. Once these storms passed, Nixon expected that the US would emerge with renewed vigor and could once again project strength on the world stage.²⁹ Nixon never wavered in his commitment to an American victory in the Cold War and pursued policies of “hard-headed détente,” as he later termed them, to achieve this goal.³⁰

The Nixon Effect

As with any political theory when put into practice, the personalities of key political leaders affected policy implementation. With Nixon and Kissinger at the helm, US foreign policy took on a highly politicized, clandestine, and often Machiavellian atmosphere that restricted information and increased the power of the primary actors. The understanding of US Cold War détente, then, is inextricably linked to the daily minutia of the Nixon administration, where various intrigues among the principal actors shaped official policy to a remarkable degree. As an exercise in crisis management during the era of détente, these characteristics are central to the Nixon administration’s thoughts and actions during the Cienfuegos Crisis.

²⁸ Henry A. Kissinger, “The Politics of Henry Kissinger,” interviewed by William F. Buckley Jr., On the Television Program *Firing Line with William F. Buckley Jr.* Episode S0198, September 10, 1975, 22:04-22:27, ([55](#)) [Firing Line with William F. Buckley Jr.: The Politics of Henry Kissinger - YouTube](#). William F. Buckley Jr. was a conservative columnist, writer, and public intellectual who hosted the television interview program *Firing Line* from 1966 to 1999. Although he was a friend of both Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon and supported the latter’s presidential run in 1968, he was one of the most influential conservative opponents of détente and partially as a result did not support Nixon for reelection in 1972. He believed that détente emboldened the USSR and reduced the power of the US.

²⁹ Logevall and Preston, *Nixon in the World*, 6, 9-10.

³⁰ Richard Nixon, “Hard-Headed Detente,” *The New York Times*, August 18, 1982, A21.

At a fundamental level, linkage influenced Nixon's thoughts and actions. While all successful politicians certainly draw connections to form orderly strategies, Nixon obsessed over the linkages he perceived and thought that individual efforts occurring simultaneously around the globe were "fundamentally interrelated."³¹ Nixon's obsession with foreign policy linkage was especially heightened when the USSR was involved, as he believed "failure in one region would ultimately lead to capitulation in other areas."³² Concurrently, Nixon always considered the domestic political impact of his foreign policy choices, which meant that the administration's policies always had a basis in Nixon's political calculations, especially before elections, such as those in November 1970.³³

This thinking typified US-Cuban relations. Beyond Nixon, the US public feared the only communist Latin American state's potential for regional influence and heightened East-West tensions, particularly during and after the tense days of the Cuban Missile Crisis.³⁴ While Nixon certainly accepted these general fears, his obsession with Cuba went far deeper. During the 1960 presidential election, Kennedy attacked then-Vice President Nixon for allowing Castro to take power, which Nixon found difficult to counter; in fact, Nixon believed the Cuban issue helped tip the scales against him in the very close election.³⁵ Two years later, Nixon again blamed Cuba for his defeat in the California gubernatorial race, as he believed Kennedy's handling of the Missile Crisis served to bolster Democratic candidates.³⁶ Consequently, President Nixon deeply feared the political effects of Castro's Cuba, or similar situations in other Latin American countries, especially during elections.

³¹ Logevall and Preston, *Nixon in the World*, 8.

³² Asaf Siniver, *Nixon, Kissinger, and U.S. Foreign Policy Making: The Machinery of Crisis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 53.

³³ Logevall and Preston, *Nixon in the World*, 11.

³⁴ Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 98-99.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Henry A Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 633-634.

Correspondingly, the atmosphere within the Nixon administration was one of competition and interdepartmental rivalries: a Machiavellian game in which political intrigue ruled the field and accessibility to the president marked an individual's success. The personal and highly contentious battle between Nixon's Secretary of State William P. Rogers and National Security Advisor Henry A. Kissinger exemplified this division and directly impacted foreign policy creation.³⁷ Kissinger immediately reorganized the National Security Council (NSC) system to fit his interests, mostly through chairing all important committees and reporting directly and often to Nixon, who notoriously limited direct access to a select few.³⁸ Rogers, nevertheless, fought back, and occasionally convinced Nixon to adopt his policy recommendations, which Kissinger would then attack largely because Rogers put them forward.³⁹ As a result, cooperation within the administration broke down, and policy recommendations submitted to the president inherently included benefits for one department, or person, at the expense of others.⁴⁰

Underpinning these various influences, Nixon and Kissinger shrouded their actions in secrecy. Unsurprisingly, then, many biographers have identified heightened self-consciousness, paranoia, and mistrust of others as primary personality traits of Nixon and Kissinger.⁴¹

Operationally, these individuals believed that clandestine methods could circumvent those

³⁷ Logevall and Preston, *Nixon in the World*, 5. Many historians, including Logevall and Preston, report that Rogers was chosen not for his diplomatic expertise, of which he had no history, but for his stoic reliability. Defense Secretary Melvin Laird was similarly undercut by Kissinger, although he generally put up less resistance than Rogers.

³⁸ Siniver, *Nixon, Kissinger, and U.S. Foreign Policy Making*, 46-48. Only HR Haldeman, White House Chief of Staff, and John Erlichman, Assistant to the President for Domestic Affairs, rivaled Kissinger in access to Nixon, until the two were forced from office during the Watergate Affair. By any metric, Kissinger had much greater access to Nixon than Rogers and Laird; for example, see: Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 100.

³⁹ Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 223.

⁴⁰ Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 211-212. The press quickly discovered the animosity between Kissinger and Rogers, to the point that Kissinger accused Rogers of planting unsatisfactory stories about Kissinger's notorious love life in various newspapers.

⁴¹ Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 92.

hostile to the administration, especially the media, which Nixon believed treated him unfairly.⁴² Additionally, Nixon and Kissinger specifically believed that secret contacts would streamline important negotiations, especially with the Soviets; indeed, Kissinger developed a good working relationship with the Soviet ambassador in Washington, Anatoly Dobrynin, and used this personal backchannel to circumvent Rogers' authority.⁴³ Ultimately, therefore, secrecy served to increase the power of those who utilized it, if the information remained classified.

Those left out of the information loop, however, often became disgruntled and sometimes took extreme measures to offset their lost power, which included internal spying. The most infamous case of this intrigue within the administration involved the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The spying began during the Cienfuegos Crisis in November 1970 and operated until December 1971, when John Ehrlichman—the White House Domestic Affairs Advisor, and a key Nixon enforcer—discovered it.⁴⁴ Although Nixon was initially furious that his own military was spying on him, he ultimately decided against bringing charges against any of those implicated, including the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Thomas H. Moorer.⁴⁵ Nixon's de facto clemency did not arise from mercy; rather, he did not want to further embarrass the military hierarchy that was then under intense scrutiny because of the controversial war in Vietnam. Additionally, he concluded that the plot's discovery would force the Chiefs' acquiescence to him

⁴² Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 181.

⁴³ Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 219.

⁴⁴ A Jack Anderson article on the Indo-Pakistani conflict that contained classified information tipped Nixon off that there was an internal leak, and Ehrlichman's team traced the leak to Charles Radford, a US Navy Yeoman and a stenographer-clerk for Admiral Robert O. Welander in the liaison office between the NSC and the office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Radford stole classified documents from the NSC and passed them along to Welander and Admiral Rembrandt C. Robinson, who then gave them to Admiral Moorer and others. Anderson won the 1972 Pulitzer Prize in National Reporting primarily from this article.

⁴⁵ Radford, Welander, and other lower-level personnel implicated in the ring were transferred to remote posts but were not charged. Nixon briefly discussed prosecuting Moorer with Attorney General John N Mitchell and Chief of Staff HR Haldeman but decided against it.

lest he make the spying public—a clear instance of potential blackmail.⁴⁶ Ultimately, then, the spy ring failed and increased Nixon’s power at the military’s expense.

Despite these internal conflicts and moves of pure power politics, Nixon ultimately was a self-conscious, perhaps insecure man who preferred to be and work alone – “an introvert in an extrovert[’s] profession,” as he often characterized himself.⁴⁷ Although he tried, often awkwardly, to feign self-confidence in his daily life, Nixon’s psychological proclivities made it difficult for him to interact with people. This was especially true when any interpersonal conflicts arose, as they often did in his extrovert’s profession, and he avoided all the confrontational situations that he could.⁴⁸

Instead, he usually sent his White House “heavies”—Chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman, Domestic Affairs Advisor John Ehrlichman, and members of their staffs—to confront adversaries or dissenters.⁴⁹ This delegation of power quickly increased tensions within the administration, as each of these officials had their own interests, goals, and enemies that did not necessarily reflect the president’s. Additionally, this arrangement frequently prevented Nixon from adequately dealing with the ever-increasing interpersonal conflicts within the administration that progressively debilitated policy implementation, such as the one between Rogers and Kissinger.

These influences and character traits affected, for the better and often for the worse, the Nixon administration’s policies, including those of détente. This occurrence—imperfect leaders

⁴⁶ James Rosen, “The Men Who Spied on Nixon: New Details Reveal Extent of ‘Moorer-Radford Affair,’” *Fox News*, December 24, 2015, [The Men Who Spied on Nixon: New Details Reveal Extent of 'Moorer-Radford Affair' | Fox News](#).

⁴⁷ Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 8.

⁴⁸ Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 92.

⁴⁹ With these excessive powers, Haldeman, Ehrlichman, and members of their various executive groups became increasingly ruthless in attacking their enemies within and outside the executive branch. Both were imprisoned for their direct involvement in the Watergate Affair.

implementing theoretical strategies—is inherent in political history, as no human is free from their own biases, character traits, or circumstances nor is always rational. Additionally, many of these characteristics, including secrecy and linkage, are required for successful politicians to create effective policies and are not therefore unique to Nixon. However, while other politicians engaged in these behaviors to one degree or another, they specifically characterized the Nixon administration and shaped the implementation of détente in general and the course of the Cienfuegos Crisis in particular.

The Soviet Rationale for Détente

Although this investigation is mainly concerned with US behavior regarding the crisis, a basic understanding of Soviet détente is necessary. Despite an outward façade of strength and unity, the Soviet system faced an acute social, political, and economic crisis in the late 1960s and early 1970s. To preempt this crisis, the Soviet leaders pursued the policies of détente, both to solve the issues they faced and to check the power of the US.

To Western observers during this period, the USSR's strategic power increased dramatically. In addition to the quantitative edge in ICBM's, missile defense systems, and core industrial production, the Soviet military focused on long-range goals beyond traditional territorial defense. The Soviet Navy led the embarkation, as the branch, benefiting from increased budgets and rapid building programs, increased their presence in the Mediterranean and the Caribbean and sailed for the first time into all the world's major oceans and many rivers.⁵⁰ These voyages included the Indian Ocean, which the Soviet Navy first visited in early 1968 where it soon established “virtually permanent” bases. The Soviet nuclear submarine fleet

⁵⁰ Richard C. Thornton, *The Nixon-Kissinger Years: Reshaping America's Foreign Policy* (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1989), 58. As Thornton explains, these movements were part of a worldwide Soviet Naval exercise codenamed OKEAN 70, during which Soviet vessels sailed to Cuba in April.

became the vanguard of these deployments, as the submarines stealthily carried the bulk of the navy's nuclear arsenal and were, therefore, perfectly suited to low-key deployments.

By 1972, the Soviet Navy surpassed the US Navy in the number of submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) aboard nuclear ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs).⁵¹ Finally, the Soviets increased economic and military aid to anti-colonial movements the world over, including North Vietnam, to whom the Soviets provided \$1,660 million in military aid.⁵² Taken together, these efforts presented the USSR as on par with, or ahead of, the US militarily, which the Soviet leaders hoped would lead to political concessions from the US.⁵³

The impetus for this military expansion was not entirely political; rather, the Soviet military and heavy industry leaders pushed their officials towards a more bellicose foreign policy. To international analysts, this situation was like the so-called “military-industrial complex” that President Eisenhower warned about in the US.⁵⁴ Indeed, it is arguable that the “steel-eaters,” as the British diplomat and analyst Robin Edmonds termed the Soviet industrial leaders, and the military elites in Moscow exerted more overt influence than their opponents in

⁵¹ Edmonds, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 108. SSBN is a US Navy term that describes a specific type of submarine: SS designates submarine, the B designates that it carries and fires nuclear ballistic missiles, and the N designates that it has a nuclear powerplant. Although the term is not used in the Soviet Navy, it is used in this investigation to describe Soviet submarines that fit this description. SSBNs can fire SLBMs, which mimic ICBMs in most respects but usually have a shorter range, while submerged, making them effective and clandestine offensive nuclear platforms. Evans' calculation includes “prospective” launchers, or those on submarines under construction.

⁵² Edmonds, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 46. Edmonds estimates that this figure tripled the total amount of military aid the PRC provided to North Vietnam, despite Red Guard units holding up Soviet shipments during the Cultural Revolution.

⁵³ Thornton, *The Nixon-Kissinger Years*, 63; and Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, 50.

⁵⁴ Dwight D. Eisenhower, “President Dwight D. Eisenhower's Farewell Address” (Television Broadcast, Washington D.C., January 17, 1961), The National Archives Milestone Documents Series, [President Dwight D. Eisenhower's Farewell Address \(1961\) | National Archives](#). Eisenhower and others believed that the continuous nature of the Cold War necessitated an expansive arms industry, which he believed was “new in the American experience.” While he understood the benefits of this unprecedented power, Eisenhower also knew the risks of extensive military spending; mainly, that military and industrial leaders both profited from large defense budgets and were tempted to call for more military spending even if such spending was harmful to other sectors of the American economy. Additionally, military spending always increased with a more bellicose foreign policy—up to and including war—and military and industrial leaders could call for war to increase their own power and funding. Paradoxically, then, large military budgets can decrease a nation's security given the existence of a self-interested military-industrial complex.

Washington, as Khrushchev mobilized their hatred of a minimum nuclear deterrence to replace Georgy Malenkov with himself in 1957.⁵⁵ Unfortunately for Khrushchev, when he advocated for a minimum deterrence to increase consumer spending in the mid-1960s, the industrial and military elites also turned on him and contributed to his own downfall.⁵⁶

It is critical to remember, therefore, that the USSR was not a monolithic society, nor were the elites in the Kremlin working towards the same goals. Powerful cliques emerged in both Washington and Moscow, each with their own interests and power blocs. Often, these groups disagreed with each other on fundamental aspirations, including the classic debate of guns, or military appropriations, versus butter, or consumer spending. Once Soviet naval vessels arrived in Cuba and their crews began construction on a base in Cienfuegos in 1970, one cannot assume that all the leaders in Moscow agreed with such a policy. If the military-industrial complex theory is correct, it is probable that the primary supporters of this deployment were Soviet military commanders and steel-eaters, both of whom would have benefitted from the increased spending such a move required.

These expenditures and others like them, however, exacerbated deep socioeconomic problems that threatened the entire Soviet system. Essentially, Soviet quantitative expansion—always the goal of Soviet economic planning—did not lead to a corresponding qualitative increase, especially in critical, emerging high-tech fields that conferred more national power than traditional industries.⁵⁷ As a result, the influential political scientist Hans J. Morgenthau

⁵⁵ The strategy of minimum nuclear deterrence argues that once a state possesses enough nuclear weapons to achieve a second-strike capability against its likely adversaries, any spending on additional nuclear weapons is wasteful. Both the military leaders and the heavy industry coordinators (who Edmonds refers to as steel-eaters) in the USSR opposed a minimum nuclear deterrence, as cuts to defense expenditures was one of the primary reasons to pursue such a strategy.

⁵⁶ Edmonds, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 14.

⁵⁷ Sakharov, *Progress, Coexistence, and Intellectual Freedom*, 72-73.

observed in November 1973 that the USSR was “in a sense, a partially underdeveloped country” whose technology, managerial expertise, and production methods could “not compete effectively with the United States” or other Western countries.⁵⁸ On the military front, then, the US could theoretically offset, or overcome, the considerable numbers of Soviet systems with more advanced technology, particularly with state-of-the-art multiple independent reentry vehicles (MIRVs), Minuteman-III ICBMs, and Trident SSBNs.⁵⁹ Even more concerning, by 1970, the state-run Soviet economic system had exhausted its labor reserves, which threatened production stagnation or decline.⁶⁰

All the while, the Soviet people simultaneously demanded quantitative and qualitative increases in consumer goods, which the industrial and military-focused economy could not deliver. Indeed, shortages of daily necessities increased, especially in the agricultural sector, which reached a near-critical point in 1970.⁶¹ Concurrently, a growing sense of internal malaise among Soviet citizens combined with new ideas coming from the PRC, reformers in Czechoslovakia, and the American New Left resulted in a sharp increase in political dissent against the Kremlin’s orthodoxy. This dissension manifested in many different movements and

⁵⁸ Hans J. Morgenthau, interviewed by William F. Buckley Jr, *Firing Line with William F. Buckley Jr.: The Middle East Explosion and American Détente*, The Hoover Institution’s Library and Archives Digital Collections, November 12, 1973, 8:37-9:25, [The Middle East Explosion and American Detente – Works – Digital Collections \(hoover.org\)](https://www.hoover.org/pubs-digital-collections/morgenthau). Morgenthau was one of the preeminent international relations scholars of the 20th century and is considered one of the leading developers of contemporary realism, or the notion that independent states operate on the basis of power calculations related to national interests in an inherently anarchic world. Many scholars broadly define both Nixon and Kissinger as foreign policy realists in outlook, but most, including Morgenthau in this interview and in other statements, believe that they often let other factors, especially domestic political considerations, influence their policymaking. Morgenthau and Kissinger—both Jewish emigres who fled Nazi Germany in the 1930s—were acquaintances while the former taught at the University of Chicago and the latter at Harvard University, but their relationship deteriorated during Kissinger’s time in Washington. Nevertheless, the two became cordial to each other once again after Kissinger left the State Department in 1977.

⁵⁹ Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, 154-156. MIRVs are multiple nuclear warheads attached to a single missile, each of which follows an independent trajectory once separated from the missile. With MIRVs, a single missile can attack multiple targets, thereby increasing the overall damage one missile can cause.

⁶⁰ Edmonds, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 83.

⁶¹ Harry Schwartz, “Soviet Union Continues to Debate Old Issue of Guns vs. Butter,” *The New York Times*, July 21, 1970, 45, 49.

events, from the Czechoslovakian uprising in 1968 to Andrei Sakharov's civil rights movement and Alexander Solzhenitsyn's anti-neo-Stalinist publications in Russia.⁶²

To confront this socioeconomic threat, the Soviet government implemented a two-pronged strategy based on détente with the West and a crack-down on internal dissent. Much like Nixon, the Soviets viewed détente as an avenue to decrease military spending, as equal bilateral strategic agreements with the US would limit the arsenals, and therefore the military spending, of each state. In these negotiations, the recent, unsustainable Soviet quantitative advances proved diplomatically beneficial, as their enlarged arsenals achieved nuclear parity and forced Nixon to deal with his Soviet counterparts as equals.⁶³ Unlike Nixon, however, the Soviet leaders prioritized détente to increase economic cooperation with the West. Under improved relations, the Soviets hoped to increase their economy's productive efficiency through the importation or licensed production of Western technology and avenues to study, and implement, Western production and managerial methods.

Nevertheless, the Soviets feared that increased cooperation with the West, especially the importation of ideas and products, would only spur further calls for political freedom; indeed, the dissidents themselves made this point, as many of them believed that scientific and industrial progress is inseparable from intellectual, and thereby political, freedom.⁶⁴ Unwilling to radically change their politics to meet the demands of dissidents, the Soviet authorities intensified internal ideological discipline. This focus on discipline prompted state repression of dissidents, including the suppression of the Czechoslovakian uprising, and any movements like it, under the so-called

⁶² Edmonds, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 84-85.

⁶³ Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 6-9. Garthoff contends that the Soviets enlarged their nuclear arsenals for this diplomatic purpose and cites Khrushchev's memoirs as evidence.

⁶⁴ Sakharov, *Progress, Coexistence, and Intellectual Freedom*, 29-30.

Brezhnev Doctrine, the persecution of Sakharov and his civil rights movement's supporters, and the deportation of Solzhenitsyn, to name a few.⁶⁵

Soviet-Cuban Relations, 1962 – 1970

As with the history of Soviet détente, a brief explanation of contemporary Soviet-Cuban relations is necessary. Disappointed in perceived Soviet acquiescence to the US during the 1962 Missile Crisis, Fidel Castro briefly charted an independent foreign policy that deferred to neither the USSR nor the PRC and launched ambitious programs of rapid industrialization and economic centralization.⁶⁶ However, these economic programs collapsed in 1963, and Castro began mending fences with his Soviet counterparts to offset his rapidly faltering economy.⁶⁷

The Soviets, worried that the only Marxist state in Latin America may fall in line with the Chinese, welcomed this change and offered long-term low interest loans to the Cuban government and signed purchasing agreements, mainly involving Cuban sugar, at inflated rates. By 1972, Soviet loans, repayable into the 21st century, and other economic agreements with the Cubans cost the USSR an estimated \$1.5 million a day.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, the Soviet's underwriting of the Cuban economy revived their bilateral political relationship and offered strategic opportunities to the increasingly powerful USSR.

Castro's public support for the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, which he classified as a "bitter necessity," cemented the two nations' renewed relationship and indicated

⁶⁵ Harvey Fireside, "Dissident Visions of the USSR: Medvedev, Sakharov & Solzhenitsyn," *Polity* Vol. 22, No. 2 (1989): 214-216.

⁶⁶ Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 92. Castro briefly attempted to chart his own course in communist foreign policy, primarily through an emphasis on further revolutions in non-aligned nations. As Garthoff notes, however, he achieved little.

⁶⁷ Edmonds, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 51, 53-54.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

the importance of military operations in their cooperation.⁶⁹ Unsurprisingly, then, the presence of Soviet military forces in and around Cuba incrementally increased after 1968. Concurrent with their expanded size and role, the Soviet Navy dominated these overtures to the island nation, as gradually larger fleets and aircraft squadrons headed to Cuba.⁷⁰

Additionally, in November 1969, the Soviet Minister of Defense, Andrei Grechko, along with the Deputy Chief of the Soviet Naval Staff, journeyed to the island in “a highly publicized visit.”⁷¹ The following year, on both April 22 and August 23rd, Castro “made public remarks welcoming close military ties with the Soviets.”⁷² In the late summer and early autumn 1970, these initiatives resulted in the voyage of Soviet vessels for servicing nuclear submarines and embarking shore-based construction units that eventually landed, and began work, in Cienfuegos harbor.

Crisis Management Under Détente, An Ironic Impossibility?

The temptations to support ideological and political allies, pursue perceived opportunities, and generally seek to increase national power at the expense of a competitor continued to affect the thinking of US and Soviet leaders, especially in the early years of détente before the opening to China in 1972. These factors inevitably led to crises and confrontations, including in Cuba in 1970. The question this investigation seeks to answer, therefore, is how US and Soviet leaders attempted to balance their interest in détente, crucial as it was, with other

⁶⁹ Fidel Castro, “Castro Comments on the Czechoslovak Crisis,” trans. by the US Government Foreign Broadcast Information Service (Television and Radio Speech, Havana, Cuba August 24, 1968), Castro Speech Data Base, The University of Texas, [Castro Speech Data Base - Latin American Network Information Center, LANIC \(utexas.edu\)](http://www.utexas.edu/lanic/castro).

⁷⁰ Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 102.

⁷¹ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 636.

⁷² Memorandum for the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Soviet Naval Facilities in Cuba, Washington, September 22, 1970, Document 212, Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1969-1976, Volume XII, Soviet Union, January 1969-October 1970.

political commitments? In particular, how could Nixon and his principal advisors simultaneously compel the Soviets to back down in Cuba and pursue conciliatory, and politically valuable, policies of détente?

Part I: The Tension Before the Storm

Similarities With, and Unresolved Issues From, the Previous Cuban Crisis

The Cienfuegos episode in 1970 ultimately stemmed from the Cuban Missile Crisis eight years earlier. Since much has been written on that previous event, let it suffice to say generally that the Kennedy administration successfully compelled the Soviets to remove nuclear missiles they had discretely deployed to the island nation through a US naval blockade and intense diplomatic negotiations. In addition to the general course of events, specific details of the 1962 Crisis reflected, and often affected, the 1970 confrontation and deserve further attention.

First and foremost, the first missile crisis occurred at a time when the US enjoyed a substantial strategic advantage over the USSR. Many analysts argue that this imbalance, mainly in the numbers of nuclear weapons able to strike the opponent's homeland, drove the Soviets to deploy the missiles to Cuba, as the stationing of medium and intermediate-range rockets would help offset the Soviet's substantial nuclear inferiority.⁷³ Backed up by this nuclear superiority, President Kennedy immediately decided that compelling the Soviets to remove the missiles, or removing them through US action, presented the only acceptable solution to the crisis.⁷⁴

Fortunately for Kennedy, the Soviet missiles and launchers were not completely assembled when the US spy plane discovered them, which reinforced the US nuclear superiority

⁷³ Arnold L. Horelick, "The Cuban Missile Crisis: An Analysis of Soviet Calculations and Behavior," *World Politics* Vol. 16, No. 3 (1964): 374-376, <https://www-jstor-org.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/stable/2009577>.

⁷⁴ Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 24.

during the crisis.⁷⁵ Beyond these strategic concerns, the Kennedy administration had publicly committed itself to a hardline policy when on September 5th, 1962, reporters questioned the president on how the US would respond to nuclear missiles in Cuba. Kennedy responded that the US would not tolerate such a move, and reversing course on this critical issue would have posed a political problem for the president's Democratic party prior to the November 1962 US midterm elections.⁷⁶ Therefore, Kennedy had both the strategic means and the political desire to force the removal of the Soviet missiles, although he certainly understood the cataclysmic consequences of a nuclear exchange that the crisis risked.⁷⁷

Irrespective of these political considerations, in 1962, relative nuclear superiority granted the US leaders a great degree of leeway in formulating an effective response to the crisis. To debate his options, Kennedy created the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (commonly referred to as the EXCOM), which included only the top officials in government.⁷⁸ Over the course of a week, the members of the EXCOM mainly discussed military solutions to the crisis, including air strikes, an invasion of Cuba, and a naval blockade, the last of which became the main US response. Notably, the idea of discreetly communicating a US protest to the

⁷⁵ Arthur I. Cyr, "The Cuban Missile Crisis After Sixty Years," *Orbis* Vol. 66, Issue 3 (2022): 303, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2022.05.002>.

⁷⁶ Laurence Burd, "Cuba and Russia Warned: Kennedy Tells Red Missile Build-Up," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Sept. 5, 1962, 1-2. Kennedy stated that there was no evidence of Soviet offensive systems in Cuba, but that he would not tolerate them if they arrived.

⁷⁷ Even with nuclear superiority, the Kennedy administration could not act with impunity, as even the relatively limited Soviet arsenal still proved a major threat, particularly to Western Europe, which most Soviet warheads and delivery systems, in addition to conventional forces, could credibly threaten. Additionally, and especially with the benefit of an expanded historiography, many contemporary academics cite the 1962 Crisis as one of the most dangerous moments of the Cold War, as some form of nuclear war could have occurred on many occasions. Still, the options available to a leader with strategic superiority are greater than those afforded to one operating in a period of strategic parity.

⁷⁸ Cyr, "The Cuban Missile Crisis After Sixty Years," 303-304. The creation of EXCOM (spelled differently in different accounts) allowed Kennedy and his principal advisors to weigh their options in a confidential manner free from outside pressure. Many accounts of the deliberations during EXCOM meetings exist, including some recordings secretly kept by Kennedy.

missiles' deployment, specifically through a secret letter to Khrushchev, was considered.⁷⁹ Such a course could have allowed the Soviets to back down without humiliation, as the world might have never learned of the missile's deployment nor their coerced removal. Ultimately, however, the administration utilized more confrontational means instead.⁸⁰ This strategy proved effective, as the Soviets, both unwilling and most likely unable to risk a nuclear conflict with the US over Cuba, backed down and publicly agreed on October 28th to remove their missiles for a US non-invasion pledge and an unofficial promise to remove outdated nuclear missiles from Turkey.⁸¹

Crucially, however, this agreement never became official, and further negotiations left many specific issues unresolved. Despite Soviet desires to the contrary, Castro categorically refused to allow any inspection teams onto Cuban soil to verify the removal of the nuclear weapons.⁸² As Kennedy considered verification non-negotiable, the contents of the public resolution of the crisis from October 28th were never solidified in any official agreement. Nevertheless, general adherence to the unofficial October 28th settlement created an "understanding" between the two nuclear states.⁸³ This understanding went largely unchallenged for eight years, until the Soviets decided to capitalize on unresolved ambiguities inherent in the unofficial status quo.

⁷⁹ Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 28-29. Garthoff explains how Ambassador Charles E. Bohlen and his staff attempted to write this letter from Oct. 18-20 but concluded that this action could cause a public crisis and would defer the initiative to the Soviets.

⁸⁰ Ibid. Garthoff believes that the letter could have caused a crisis and would have deferred the initiative to the Soviets. Regardless, the EXCOM deliberations prove that most members approved of military actions, although the debates over which action to choose proved more contentious.

⁸¹ Cyr, "The Cuban Missile Crisis After Sixty Years," 307.

⁸² John F. Kennedy, "Letter from President Kennedy to Chairman Khrushchev," November 3, 1962, in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XI, Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath* (Washington: Government Printing Office), Document 140. [140. Letter From President Kennedy to Chairman Khrushchev - Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963, Volume XI, Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath - Historical Documents - Office of the Historian.](#)

⁸³ Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 81.

Even before they learned of the missiles in Cuba, the issue of a nuclear submarine base on the island concerned US policymakers. After following the development of an alleged fishing port in the Cuban port of Mariel, Foy D. Kohler, the US ambassador to Moscow, asked Khrushchev if there were military aspects to the construction, which the Soviet leader denied on October 16th, incidentally the day Kennedy learned of the missiles in Cuba.⁸⁴ Unsurprisingly, after the October 28th resolution, the negotiations between the US and the USSR focused on permissible and impermissible Soviet deployments to Cuba, including nuclear submarine bases.⁸⁵ Kennedy, in subsequent EXCOM meetings and letters to the US negotiators in New York City, explicitly called for a formal agreement against such bases; however, the negotiators focused on the pressing issue of Soviet IL-28 bombers then stationed in Cuba, and when the bombers finally returned to the USSR in exchange for the termination of the blockade on November 19th, further negotiations ceased without formal resolution.⁸⁶

As shown, the Kennedy administration successfully compelled the Soviets to back down during the Cuban Missile Crisis through strong, and very public, military deployments and not-so-public negotiations decided upon in highly restricted EXCOM deliberations. Nevertheless, the hasty informal understanding regarding Cuba left exploitable issues unresolved, which allowed future crises to develop. The confrontation over Cienfuegos represented one of these developments, and the Nixon administration simultaneously based its response to this new Cuban situation on Kennedy's policies and important circumstances that changed following the 1962 Crisis.

⁸⁴ Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 13-14.

⁸⁵ Garthoff, *Reflections on the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 75-77.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

“My Schedule is Full”: Concurrent Crises in Cambodia, Jordan, and Chile

Although serious, the situation in Cienfuegos was not the only international development confronting the Nixon administration in late summer and early fall 1970; rather, Kissinger later dubbed the period “the autumn of crises” in which the international status quo was under threat, or appeared to be, in various parts of the world.⁸⁷ While only tangentially related to Cienfuegos, the aftershocks of the US incursion into Cambodia, the threat to government legitimacy in Jordan, and the election of a socialist president in Chile obstructed the administration's ability to conduct successful policies and highlighted aspects of Nixon’s presidency that became apparent during the new Cuban crisis.

The US and South Vietnamese incursion into the neutral country of Cambodia in April 1970 sought to destroy North Vietnamese troop concentrations and infiltration routes into South Vietnam. Nixon, who believed that a military solution to the war was possible at this point in his presidency, made the decision against the advice of many of his advisors, who feared that the US public wouldn’t accept a broadening of the war or the repudiation of the newly created Nixon doctrine.⁸⁸ These reservations proved correct, as the operation, which achieved some tactical success but further damaged the US position strategically, unleashed a swarm of domestic protests, which led to the death of four students at Kent State University in Ohio when the responding national guard troops opened fire.

The resistance to Nixon’s plan within the administration, especially from State Department personnel including Secretary Rogers and Defense Secretary Laird, incensed Nixon, who increasingly felt isolated despite his position. In this environment, the ever-shrewd

⁸⁷ Kissinger, *White House Years*, xi. Kissinger used this phrase as the title of three consecutive chapters in his memoirs: Chapter XV, The Autumn of Crises: Jordan; Chapter XVI, The Autumn of Crises: Soviet Submarine Base at Cienfuegos; and Chapter XVII, The Autumn of Crises: Chile.

⁸⁸ Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 196-198.

Kissinger supported Nixon's view after initially opposing it, which established a pattern where Nixon and Kissinger personally developed policy largely without other cabinet members' input.⁸⁹ Likewise, Brigadier General Alexander M. Haig Jr., who previously served as a battalion commander in Vietnam and, starting in 1969, Kissinger's military advisor, became more prominent within the administration during the crisis, as Nixon increasingly valued his advice.⁹⁰

Finally, large segments of the public and politicians opposed to the president and his policies pointed to Nixon's alleged double talk—promising to end the war but enlarging it into a neutral country—as evidence that the White House was dishonest, especially concerning controversial international developments.⁹¹ Concurrently, the vociferous reaction against the incursion and the public's decreasing trust in their president certainly augmented Nixon's penchant for secrecy, as he could reasonably expect debilitating resistance to future policies deemed politically contentious. Congress' repeal of the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and passage of further legislation to limit the duration and scope of the incursion, which compelled the removal of US forces from the campaign in June, only increased Nixon's move towards secrecy.⁹² Thus, the Cambodian experience damaged Nixon politically—both inside and outside the administration—and heightened his reliance on secrecy.

Unlike the Cambodian incursion, Nixon did not orchestrate the 1970 Jordanian Civil War; nonetheless, the intricacies of the situation forced him to craft a careful response. The crisis

⁸⁹ Ibid. Dallek states that the cabinet's dissension before the incursion "allowed a compliant Kissinger to become, more than ever, the president's most important advisor."

⁹⁰ Siniver, *Nixon, Kissinger, and U.S. Foreign Policy Making*, 83; and Alexander M. Haig "Ali G NATO," interviewed by Sacha Baron Cohen in the guise of fictional character Alistair L. Graham "Ali G," on the television program *The 11 O'Clock Show*, 1998-2000, YouTube Video, uploaded November 12, 2016, 2:50-2:59, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EKs5rKga27g>.

⁹¹ Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 200-201. Even though Nixon's popularity remained intact, as a majority of the nation supported the incursion, Nixon felt beleaguered by the intense reaction from anti-war groups, opponents in congress, and members of the executive branch who resigned in protest, including three of Kissinger's principal aides.

⁹² Logevall and Preston, *Nixon in the World*, 194.

began on September 6th, when revolutionary Palestinians seized three international airliners and took the passengers, which included Americans, hostage. On the 16th, King Hussein retaliated and attacked Palestinian refugee camps, which led the Syrians to intervene on the side of the Palestinians. The Syrian intervention against Jordan—one of the US's few Arab allies—shocked the US government, as both Syria and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) under Yasser Arafat were allied with the USSR. Over six tense days, Nixon contemplated authorizing a US or Israeli intervention to help the Jordanian Army, which initially seemed on the verge of collapse, but other than ordering two aircraft carrier task forces into the region as a show of force, neither the US nor Israel intervened. Nevertheless, the Jordanians defeated the Syrians, who withdrew from the country, on the 22nd and signed a tacit ceasefire with the PLO on the 27th.⁹³

During the Syrian intervention, Nixon and Kissinger understood the Jordanian Crisis as a Soviet confrontation against the US. Early in his presidency, Nixon viewed the Middle East as a relatively unimportant region that only required his full attention when the Soviets were involved.⁹⁴ Consequently, Nixon and Kissinger, who increasingly discussed their options alone as the crisis intensified, penned a strong message of resistance that nominally addressed the Syrians and the PLO but was actually aimed at the Soviets. Likewise, Kissinger argued that the collapse of the Jordanian army would necessitate a US intervention, mainly to send a strong message to the Soviets.⁹⁵ Finally, the previous election of the Socialist Salvador Allende in Chile

⁹³ For a more in-depth investigation of the Civil War, especially from the Jordanian perspective, see: Bruce Riedel, "Fifty Years After "Black September" in Jordan: Remembering a Triumph in Intelligence," *Studies in Intelligence* Vol. 64, No. 2 (2020): 35-41, [Fifty years after "Black September" in Jordan \(brookings.edu\)](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/fifty-years-after-black-september-in-jordan/).

⁹⁴ Siniver, *Nixon, Kissinger, and U.S. Foreign Policy Making*, 117.

⁹⁵ Garthoff, *Détente and Confrontation*, 98. Garthoff discounts Nixon and Kissinger's view that the Soviets were directly involved in the crisis and says that they were "only marginally and indirectly involved." Nevertheless, they perceived the Soviet threat as real and substantial, and crafted their policy, and their resulting worldview, accordingly.

and the subsequent situation in Cienfuegos convinced Nixon and Kissinger that the Jordanian Crisis was part of a worldwide communist offensive that required strong action in all locations.⁹⁶

Nevertheless, Nixon was hesitant to intervene in Jordan. Certainly, the unpopularity of the ongoing war in Vietnam, and especially the reaction against the Cambodian operation, tempered the president's penchant for strong military action. He could not expect the US public to support another unpredictable intervention in a similarly volatile and relatively misunderstood region of the world.⁹⁷ Secretary Rogers shared Nixon's trepidation and, unlike Kissinger, argued for a policy of caution and multiple incremental responses, including an UN-brokered arrangement, as the situation deteriorated.

The Kissinger-Rogers split reached its irritating zenith during these discussions, and Nixon reportedly considered firing one of the two.⁹⁸ Nevertheless, as the crisis wore on, Nixon shifted towards Kissinger's position and began coordinating contingency plans for an Israeli airstrike, Israeli ground intervention, and a deployment of the US's 82nd Airborne Division, or any combination of these options. Fortunately, the Jordanians stabilized their position, and these operations, which could have escalated the crisis to a showdown against the Soviets, were abandoned.⁹⁹

Closer to Cienfuegos, the socialist Dr. Salvador Allende's September 4th victory in the 1970 Chilean presidential elections terrified the Nixon administration. Both Nixon and Kissinger believed that Latin America lacked geopolitical and economic importance, unless another fell nation to "Soviet-Cuban Communist influence," which they thought Allende's victory

⁹⁶ Siniver, *Nixon, Kissinger, and U.S. Foreign Policy Making*, 124-125.

⁹⁷ Siniver, *Nixon, Kissinger, and U.S. Foreign Policy Making*, 129.

⁹⁸ Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 226. Nixon voiced these frustrations and ideas to Haldeman, who argued against any firings in the middle of a crisis and prior to the upcoming elections. The president relented, and both officials remained at their posts.

⁹⁹ Riedel, "Fifty Years After "Black September" in Jordan," 39.

represented.¹⁰⁰ More directly, advisors and members of the administration likened Allende's victory to "another Cuba."¹⁰¹ From September 4th onwards, therefore, the Nixon administration concocted schemes to drive Allende from power.

Reminiscent of Kennedy's opaque policies that led to the overthrow of South Vietnam's President Diem in 1963, Nixon's general support for a coup against Allende led to the failed kidnapping and subsequent assassination of the Chilean General René Schneider by CIA-supported pro-coup officers on October 22nd.¹⁰² Although the operations against Allende were toned down following Schneider's assassination and the Chilean congress' confirmation of the election three days later, they, along with Allende's own failures, eventually resulted in a successful coup that plunged the nation into the oppressive rule of General Augusto Pinochet.

Thus, the Nixon administration found itself engaged in successive, often simultaneous, crises from April 1970 to the conclusion of the year. The nature of these events, and their effects on the administration, impacted subsequent US policies, relationships within the administration, and the administration's standing in domestic and international opinion. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the crises in Cambodia, Jordan, and Chile highlight attributes that will become apparent during the Cienfuegos investigation, and a basic knowledge of these crises is essential to understand the US response to Soviet moves in Cuba in 1970.

Indications and Preliminary Intelligence, July 20, 1969-September 18, 1970

Beginning in the late 1960s, the Soviets incrementally stepped up their missions in the Caribbean, which elicited US attention but not protests or retaliatory actions. The first Soviet

¹⁰⁰ Dallek, *Nixon and Kissinger*, 228, 233.

¹⁰¹ Telephone Conversation (Telecon), Don Kendall and Henry A. Kissinger, September 14, 1970, 10:20 a.m., Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 6), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹⁰² Logevall and Preston, *Nixon in the World*, 278.

naval vessels to travel to Cuba during Nixon's presidency reached Havana in late July 1969. The voyage, which coincided with the annual July 26th Movement celebrations, included two Foxtrot-class diesel-electric attack submarines and multiple cruise missile carrying destroyers and cruisers. As part of their worldwide OKEAN 70 naval exercises, the Soviet navy returned to Cuba, this time to Cienfuegos, from May 14-29th with a fleet that included a nuclear-powered Echo II-class cruise missile submarine. This visit occurred concurrently with a flight of two Tu-95D's—unladen reconnaissance versions of the strategic "Bear" bomber—from the USSR to Havana.

Although the US remained silent during these visits, later analysts, benefitting from historical hindsight, noted the increasingly offensive nature of the fleets "from a formal show-the-flag visit" to "more of an operational flavor which shifts emphasis from Havana to Cuba" more generally.¹⁰³ Prior to the crisis, however, these visits seemed like innocuous extensions of the Soviet Navy's expanded role, while the lack of nuclear weapons aboard these vessels precluded a US protest, as conventional weapon-carrying ships, even nuclear-powered ones, did not breach the 1962 Kennedy-Khrushchev understanding.

Like these visits, a call on July 31st from the Soviet chargé d'affaires in Washington, Yuli M. Vorontsov, to Kissinger in San Clemente, California, was initially written off, but later, with hindsight, indicated greater problems.¹⁰⁴ During the call, Vorontsov told Kissinger that he had an official message from Alexei Kosygin, Premier of the USSR, to deliver, which Kissinger received on August 4th when he returned to Washington. When Kissinger called and told Nixon

¹⁰³ Memo, Irwin M. Tobin to Mr. Cline, October 7, 1970, National Security Council (NSC) Files, Henry A. Kissinger (HAK) Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹⁰⁴ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 632. The Kremlin recalled Dobrynin for consultations shortly before this exchange, and he would not arrive back in Washington until the crisis was underway. Kissinger recalled Vorontsov as "clever, amiable, and discreet but quite powerless," as most Soviet chargés had "little discretion."

about the conversation, neither one of them could deduce the message's content, although Kissinger argued that it was probably important and Nixon hoped that it confirmed US requests for a summit meeting, which would help increase the pace of the slowly budding detente.¹⁰⁵

During their August 4th meeting in Washington, Vorontsov read Kissinger Kosygin's note, which contained two related paragraphs. The first expressed Moscow's displeasure with increased hostility among Cuban exile groups operating from Florida against Castro's government and "an increase in number of provocative appeals in the American press and of ambiguous statements on the part of certain officials of the United States" related to this issue.¹⁰⁶ The Soviet protest gained some credence the following day, as Kissinger informed Nixon that a boat manned by Cuban exiles planned on attacking a Soviet tanker headed to Cuba off the coast of Florida, and Nixon, at Kissinger's suggestion, order the US Coast Guard to protect the tanker.¹⁰⁷ When Kissinger pressed Vorontsov on the Soviet rationale for the protest, the latter reported that "there had been...many incorrect allegations about Soviet buildups in Cuba."¹⁰⁸

The second paragraph, however, proved more consequential. It stated briefly that the Soviets remained committed to the Kennedy-Khrushchev framework regarding Cuba and hoped that the US would "also strictly adhere to this understanding."¹⁰⁹ Kissinger again asked Vorontsov for more specifics, and the chargé explained that he thought the understanding related

¹⁰⁵ Telecon, HAK with the President, July 31, 1970, 2:00 p.m., Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 6), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹⁰⁶ Soviet Note, August 4, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹⁰⁷ Telecon, HAK with the President, August 5, 1970, 10:18 p.m., Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 6), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹⁰⁸ Memorandum of Conversation, Yuli M. Vorontsov and HAK, Washington, August 4, 1970, Document 192, FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume XII, Soviet Union, January 1969-October 1970.

¹⁰⁹ Soviet Note, August 4, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

mostly to the US pledge not to invade Cuba. Additionally, Vorontsov requested an oral statement from Kissinger that confirmed this understanding, to which Kissinger replied that he would have to confirm that with the president.¹¹⁰ The mention of the 1962 understanding surprised both Nixon and Kissinger, and the latter ordered the State Department to summarize its contents. After the State Department briefed him, Kissinger explained the general framework of the 1962 understanding—that the US would not invade Cuba if the Soviets removed their nuclear missiles and kept them out—and added that the understanding was “implicit,” or unofficial.¹¹¹

Both Nixon and Kissinger viewed the Vorontsov exchange optimistically; indeed, they hoped that the reclarification of the understanding indicated that the Soviets were shoring up their interests before announcing a summit meeting for some time in the fall.¹¹² Therefore, on August 7th, Kissinger gave Vorontsov Nixon’s verbal reaffirmation of the understanding, but noted that the recent Tu-95D flights to Havana “approach[ed] the limit of our understandings.”¹¹³ Regardless, Kissinger voiced Nixon’s support for a summit meeting, or at least a meeting with Kosygin at the United Nations (UN), in the fall; however, subsequent meetings proved that the Soviets were less interested in the idea than Nixon and Kissinger.¹¹⁴ Because of their focus on a detente-building summit, and because of the ambiguity of the Soviet note, neither Nixon nor Kissinger deduced any nefarious intent on the part of the Soviets in Cuba in August 1970. In any

¹¹⁰ Memorandum of Conversation, Yuli M. Vorontsov and HAK, Washington, August 4, 1970, Document 192, FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume XII, Soviet Union, January 1969-October 1970.

¹¹¹ Memorandum from the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, Undated, Document 194, FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume XII, Soviet Union, January 1969-October 1970.

¹¹² Kissinger, *White House Years*, 634.

¹¹³ Memorandum of Conversation, *Conversation with Vorontsov*, Washington, August 7, 1970, Document 195, FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume XII, Soviet Union, January 1969-October 1970.

¹¹⁴ Memorandum of Conversation, Chargé Vorontsov and HAK, Washington, August 13, 1970, 2:30 p.m., Document 196, FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume XII, Soviet Union, January 1969-October 1970; Memorandum from the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Washington, August 19, 1970, Document 197, FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume XII, Soviet Union, January 1969-October 1970.

event, troubles between Israel and Egypt in the Suez Canal Zone, and the emerging crisis in Jordan, understandably received more attention within the administration.¹¹⁵

Nevertheless, on August 26th, an American U-2 spy plane discovered recent construction of a barracks and a wharf on the island of Cayo Alcatraz in the rugged harbor of Cienfuegos on Cuba's southern coast. Although this information alone did not raise any American eyebrows, a Soviet flotilla that included an Urga-class submarine tender, two salvage ships, a tanker, and an amphibious landing ship (LST) carrying two eighty-foot barges and headed for Cuba certainly did.¹¹⁶ This flotilla reached Havana on September 6th, where the two barges were offloaded and taken under tow, and then travelled to Cienfuegos, which it entered on the 9th.¹¹⁷ Soon thereafter, all the Soviet ships except for the tender, one salvage ship, the tanker, and the two barges departed Cienfuegos.¹¹⁸

The weather finally cleared for further U-2 flights on the 14th, which Cuban MiG fighters attempted, with some success, to harass. Nevertheless, the photo reconnaissance proved that the Soviets had significantly increased the pace of their construction, as Cayo Alcatraz now housed two barracks, various administration buildings, and recreation facilities.¹¹⁹ Additionally, the tender and the barges were moored together in the harbor, which was blocked off with antisubmarine nets, while a new dock, fuel storage facilities, and the beginnings of a major radio

¹¹⁵ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 637.

¹¹⁶ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 635. A submarine tender is a naval vessel that replenishes, restocks, and repairs submarines on active duty while at sea. At the time of the Cienfuegos Crisis, the Urga-class was new, specifically designed to support the most advanced Soviet nuclear submarines, and often served as flagships of submarine groups—clearly a significant operational deployment. At this early stage, Kissinger notes that the fleet worried US analysts far more than the construction in Cienfuegos harbor.

¹¹⁷ Recent Chronology of Key Soviet Vessels in Cuba, Undated, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹¹⁸ Chronology on Soviet Activity in Cuba, December 23, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹¹⁹ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 638. Kissinger recalled in his memoirs, on this cited page, that he knew the base was intended for Russian sailors, as the recreation facilities included a soccer field—a sport that he believed Russians, but not Cubans, played.

station, all protected by radar-directed anti-aircraft missiles, were stationed on the mainland. This information, which Kissinger forwarded to Nixon in a memo on September 18th, provided clear evidence that the Soviets were attempting to build a long-term nuclear submarine base in Cuba.¹²⁰

Deliberation, Gameplans, and Opening Salvos: September 16-24, 1970

Like the Kennedy administration during the previous Cuban Crisis, the Nixon administration weighed its options before responding to the Soviet initiative. Also, like Kennedy, Kissinger used the occasion of a press briefing on September 16th to explain the US position regarding Cuba; however, unlike Kennedy, Kissinger was already aware of the buildup in Cuba when he spoke. Indeed, so was the press, as Bill Todd of the *Rockford Star* asked Kissinger if the Soviets were “sneaking into Cuba.” While Kissinger acknowledged the recent naval visit, he stated that such visits were permissible and declined to offer any details about the flotilla or the base at Cienfuegos.

Kissinger, however, ended his statement with a vague forecast of future US action that resembled a threat: “If they [the Soviets] start operating strategic forces out of Cuba, say Polaris type submarines and use that as a depot, that would be a matter we would study very carefully...If one significantly changes the deployment of one’s strategic forces, that is something that the other side is bound to notice.”¹²¹ In this circuitous manner, Kissinger attempted to warn the Soviets that the US was aware, and disapproved, of their actions, which offered them a quiet

¹²⁰ Memorandum for the President, From: Henry A. Kissinger, Subject: Recent Soviet Naval Activity in Cuba, September 18, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹²¹ Excerpt from Kissinger Backgrounder, Chicago, Sept. 16, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

way to back down without an international embarrassment like in 1962—the first of many uses of this tactic during the crisis.¹²²

After the backgrounder, the administration restricted information regarding the crisis. After speaking with the president on the afternoon of the 18th, Rogers called Kissinger to recommend limiting paperwork on the situation and, ironically, not talking about it on the telephone. Kissinger agreed and told Rogers that only the “principals” had been, and should continue to be, sent related paperwork, which consisted of the two men on the phone, Nixon, General Haig, Secretary Laird and his deputy David Packard, the Director of Central Intelligence Richard Helms, the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs U. Alexis Johnson, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Thomas Moorer.¹²³ Rogers’ advice was generally heeded, although information continued to spread as each principal’s staff worked on their designated tasks. Additionally, Rogers said that he and Kissinger should “guard against...high level tension,” which most likely referred to the souring relationship between the two, especially during recent crises like Cambodia.¹²⁴

The following morning, Kissinger held the first of many committee meetings on the situation in Cuba.¹²⁵ In the absence of staff preparation at this early stage, “opinions therefore

¹²² Kissinger, *White House Years*, 638. Kissinger also writes that he intentionally spoke vaguely because the evidence on Cienfuegos was still rudimentary at this point. His penchant for controlling and closely guarding information was probably another reason.

¹²³ These individuals typically attended, or oversaw, special committee meetings dedicated to the Cienfuegos Crisis. Hereafter, any references to the Nixon administration’s principals will generally refer to these individuals, their highest ranked staffers (such as Haig in Kissinger’s department), and any other individual the administration brought in to study this issue.

¹²⁴ Telecon, Secretary Rogers and Mr. Kissinger, September 18, 1970, 4:30 p.m., Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 6), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹²⁵ Like many future meetings on this subject, the Senior Review Group (SRG) was chosen as the appropriate committee. Siniver notes that while the SRG and the Washington Special Actions Group (WSAG) effectively had the same members, the former was considered more low-key than the latter, which specifically met to handle known crises. Therefore, the choice of the SRG as the appropriate outlet reflected the administration’s desire to restrict information on the Cienfuegos Crisis. Both groups were created and chaired by Kissinger as part of

gyrated randomly in a conversational manner,” as Kissinger wrote in his memoirs and the meeting minutes reflect these gyrations.¹²⁶ Nevertheless, many different aspects were considered, including the limits of the Kennedy-Khrushchev understanding, the post-Cuban Missile Crisis negotiations over IL-28s and submarine bases, and the probability of information leaks.¹²⁷

Additionally, the participants agreed that nuclear parity between the US and the USSR made the contemporary situation vastly different from 1962 and that, as a result, caution was essential. The group decided to meet again on the 23rd after they had time to formulate departmental recommendations. In the intervening days, Kissinger restricted discussion of the topic, even between departments, to increase secrecy, and told the principals to “stone-wall” any questions from the press by “simply saying we constantly receive such reports and we constantly and carefully evaluate them; [I have] no further comment.”¹²⁸

Within twenty minutes of the end of the SRG meeting, Nixon called Kissinger to give him his general impressions of the unfolding crisis, which exposed two of his primary characteristics. Unsurprisingly, Nixon began the call by further emphasizing the importance of

his efforts to subvert Laird and Rogers’ authority, so U. Alexis Johnson typically represented the State Department at these meetings instead of Rogers, as did Deputy Secretary of Defense David Packard instead of Laird.

¹²⁶ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 639.

¹²⁷ Additionally, most of the participants believed that the establishment of a submarine base in Cienfuegos mainly served the tactical purpose of increasing the number of Soviet nuclear ballistic missile submarines operating off the US coast, although Admiral Moorer said that he wanted to study these ideas in more detail before drawing any conclusions. Deputy Secretary of Defense David Packard, co-founder of Hewlett-Packard, opined that the Soviets were trying to quickly establish the base to serve as a *fait accompli* against the US and to strengthen their position before the upcoming SALT talks scheduled to begin on November 1st, 1970, either through the increased operating number of submarines or as a bargaining chip to reduce the number of American forward-operating submarine bases near the USSR, of which there were many in 1970. If correct, this interpretation suggests that the Soviets pursued efforts in détente, epitomized by the later SALT agreements, concurrently with more militaristic means to further their own interests, which the author of this investigation argues in the introduction.

¹²⁸ Senior Review Group Meeting Minutes, September 19, 1970, 10:00 a.m. - 10:45 a.m., White House Situation Room, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. Kissinger also requested that the State Department contact Llewelyn “Tommy” Thompson—then, as during the Cuban Missile Crisis, considered the foremost US expert on Soviet affairs—to see if he could come in and advise the group on possible Soviet intentions.

secrecy, specifically “within our own grouping.” Nixon then linked secrecy to his deep-seated anxiety surrounding Cuban affairs before elections, stating “[this is a] hell of a crisis before the election. I do not want that sort of thing [like in 1962].” Specifically, the president did not “want some clown Senator asking for another Cuban blockade” and concluded that “our own people must be very careful.” He also emphasized to Kissinger that he thought the situation was serious, but not serious enough to immediately and openly face it.¹²⁹ Clearly, then, the Cuban connection reinforced Nixon’s penchant for secrecy.

Just as Nixon explained his true feelings on the crisis the previous day, on Sunday September 20th, Kissinger made a strikingly insightful phone call to H.R. Haldeman, Nixon’s powerful Chief of Staff.¹³⁰ Kissinger told Haldeman that he opposed Rogers’ Jordanian cease-fire plan because Rogers’ talks with Dobrynin would undermine Kissinger’s backchannel to the ambassador. To prevent this interference, Kissinger ruminated on sending out a directive, including to Rogers, that restricted any contacts with Soviet officials before the planned NSC meeting on the 23rd. Haldeman believed that such a directive would only increase tensions in the White House and tried to dissuade Kissinger from proceeding.¹³¹ Despite Haldeman’s objections, the following day Kissinger circulated a memorandum for the White House staff that forbade

¹²⁹ Telecon, The President and Mr. Kissinger, September 19, 1970, 11:05 a.m., NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. Kissinger also broached the idea of consulting with Tommy Thompson, to which Nixon replied: “I do not want him in but you can have him in.” Nixon probably knew of Thompson’s role in the EXCOM and might have avoided him because of his service to Kennedy during the 1962 Crisis, which Nixon had bad personal, electoral memories of.

¹³⁰ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 642. On this page of his memoirs, Kissinger states that he initiated the call to Haldeman because he knew Haldeman would report Kissinger’s feelings to Nixon “faithfully and literally without injecting his own views.” Using Haldeman as an intermediary between himself and the president was a common tactic of Kissinger’s, which he would use “whenever personal persuasion [with Nixon] failed.”

¹³¹ H.R. Haldeman, Diary Entry: Sunday, September 20, 1970, *H.R. Haldeman Diaries Collection, January 18, 1969-April 30, 1973*, The National Archives and Records Administration Online Public Access: Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

“contacts, social or otherwise, with diplomatic representatives of the USSR.”¹³² As his later actions proved, Kissinger excluded his backchannel to Dobrynin from this directive’s purview. So much, then, for Rogers’ previous call to limit interdepartmental conflict during concurrent crises.

Kissinger told Haldeman that he was “very concerned with the President’s attitude.” He believed that the president’s mind was not “working on it [the crisis]” and that he was “trying to duck it.” Haldeman agreed that the upcoming election was primarily to blame for Nixon’s avoidance of the crisis and declared that “he’d like to see whether he could slip it until November.” Kissinger’s main concern was that “ducking” the crisis and allowing a summit meeting—almost certainly between either Rogers and Dobrynin or Rogers and the Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko—would signal US acceptance of the Cienfuegos base.¹³³ As with the ongoing Jordanian Civil War, therefore, Kissinger preferred to meet the Cienfuegos Crisis with decisive action to compel the Soviets to abandon their efforts.

The following day, the Kissinger-Rogers divide reached its boiling point. As on the previous day, the Jordanian crisis took precedent, and during a NSC meeting that Nixon attended, Rogers accused Kissinger of withholding information from the president. When Kissinger called Rogers into his office after the meeting to urge “they work together in crises, not [to be] at each other's throats,” Rogers repeated the charge and claimed that Kissinger was trying to “force [the] President [into a] rash decision” on Jordan. This left Kissinger highly

¹³² Henry A. Kissinger, Memorandum for the White House Staff: Contacts with Diplomatic and Official Representatives of the USSR and Soviet Bloc Governments, September 21, 1970, National Security Council (NSC) Files, Alexander M. Haig Chronological Files (Box 971), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹³³ Telecon, Mr. Kissinger and Mr. Haldeman, Date: 9/20?, Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Home File, 1970-1972 (Box 29), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. The date (and the corresponding question mark) was handwritten in on the document retroactively, likely by the Kissinger secretary who transcribed the call.

agitated, especially since Kissinger believed Rogers would soon “win out” in their ongoing battle for presidential influence. Nixon could not avoid these squabbles, and he told Haldeman that “either Kissinger or Rogers has to go—no other solution,” but Haldeman noted that “he gave no clue as to which.” In his diary, Haldeman summed up the situation and the corresponding conundrum:

I believe letting Kissinger go would be a disaster even though he's a lot harder to deal with than Bill [Rogers], and I can't imagine [the] President letting Bill go. He knows Kissinger is right. He feels, though, that Kissinger does distort information to suit his purpose. [The president is] not worried about Kissinger pushing too hard because [he] feels he's perfectly able to defer decisions until necessary and won't let Kissinger shove him.

Although both Rogers and Kissinger retained their jobs for the remainder of the crisis, this confrontation was a distraction from more important matters.

Despite the clash of personalities, the departmental analyses of the Cuban situation were circulated to the principals in anticipation for the NSC meeting on September 23rd. As was typical of these meetings, each department's reading of the situation and consequent recommendations reflected their biases and expertise. Within Kissinger's department, Viron P. Vaky—then considered the foremost expert within the Nixon administration on Latin American affairs—wrote a memo considering the Cuban side of the crisis in which he argued that the Soviets coerced or bribed Castro into accepting the submarine base.¹³⁴ This meshed with the analysis of William Hyland, one of Kissinger's deputies and NSC member, which stated that the

¹³⁴ Viron P. Vaky, Memorandum for Dr. Kissinger: The Cuban Side of the Soviet Military Activity in Cuba, September 22, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

Soviet installation was probably part of the USSR's recent naval expansionism. Nevertheless, he concluded that the Soviets would back down if the US allowed them to do so quietly or without a public humiliation like in 1962, which required some form of a US ultimatum.¹³⁵

The 1962 Crisis framed the State Department's approach. Ray S. Cline, the Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at the department and Kennedy's CIA chief during the Missile Crisis, believed that Cuba was the natural place for the Soviets to flex their new strategic muscles, as doing so would help dampen the lingering humiliation from the previous crisis. Nevertheless, he believed that the changed strategic picture made the significance of the contemporary move much lower than in 1962, as the intermediate range missiles would have given the Soviets a credible threat against the US for the first time, while between 1962 and 1970, both the US and the USSR achieved a second-strike capability, and the stationing of more SLBM's out of Cuba would not have affected the force levels much. Finally, like with the trading of Soviet missiles in Cuba for US missiles in Turkey, Cline believed that the Soviets might demand the closure of US submarine bases across the world in return for ceasing work at Cienfuegos.¹³⁶

Llewelyn "Tommy" Thompson, the foremost Soviet expert in Washington who advised the EXCOM in 1962, provided a more psychological reading of the problem. In a conversation with Deputy Secretary Johnson at the Walter Reed Medical Center—the seminal Soviet expert

¹³⁵ William Hyland, Memorandum for Dr. Kissinger: Cuba—The Problem of Soviet Intentions, September 22, 1970, NSC Office Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹³⁶ Ray S. Cline, To the Secretary [of State Rogers], The Soviets at Cienfuegos, September 21, 1970, NSC Office Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. In a separate document, Kissinger notes that the US submarine base in Holy Loch, Scotland was like the projected Soviet installations in Cienfuegos harbor. If Cline's theory on a tit-for-tat trade proved correct, Holy Loch could have, therefore, been included in a theoretical settlement: Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Soviet Naval Facility in Cuba, Washington, September 22, 1970, FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume XII, Soviet Union, January 1969-October 1970.

was in a battle with cancer that took his life in less than two years—Thompson said that the Soviets were suffering from their characteristic inferiority complex vis-à-vis the US. In his estimation, the Soviets were fifteen years behind the US in military technology and global political influence and were desperately trying to catch up to prove that they were an equal power to the US. They were, therefore, trying to emulate US action from roughly fifteen years prior, which included the establishment of overseas submarine bases. As a result, their move was largely symbolic, and Thompson suggested that a discussion between Rogers and the Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko at the UN could compel the Soviets to abandon Cienfuegos.¹³⁷

Unlike Cline, the Joint Chiefs feared Cienfuegos' potential. In their view, a Cuban submarine base would greatly increase the “strategic and tactical capabilities” of the Soviet Navy. Most important, the new base would significantly increase the amount of time Soviet nuclear ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) could spend off the US East Coast and in the Gulf of Mexico.¹³⁸ Effectively, this would allow the Soviets to station ten to twelve additional SSBNs off the US coast.¹³⁹ The new Soviet Yankee-class SSBN, of which the Soviets had thirteen in service during the crisis and with more under construction, was particularly concerning, as they

¹³⁷ Telecon, Mr. Kissinger and U. Alexis Johnson, September 22, 1970, 6:40 p.m., Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 6), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹³⁸ Impact of a Soviet Naval Base in Cuba on Soviet Strategic and Tactical Capabilities, Undated, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. In addition to SSBNs, the Soviets could deploy attack submarines to sink US naval and merchant ships and non-nuclear ballistic missile boats to attack US shore installations from Cienfuegos. By departing from Cienfuegos instead of the submarine pens in the Kola Inlet of Russia, Soviet submarines would reduce their travel time to and from port, and increase their time on station, by an estimated thirty days. The new base would also reduce crew fatigue on all these vessels, as they could return to base more frequently, which would increase crew effectiveness.

¹³⁹ Minutes of Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, September 23, 1970, 9:30 a.m., Document 214, FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume XII, Soviet Union, January 1969-October 1970.

carried 16 N-6 SLBM's, each with an estimated range of 1,300 nautical miles, and were considered roughly equivalent to US Polaris submarines.¹⁴⁰

In a separate memo, Admiral Moorer reiterated the military's view that the deployment to Cienfuegos was one of many contemporary examples of Soviet aggressive behavior and expansion the world over that resulted from relative increases in Soviet power since 1962.¹⁴¹ In his conclusion, Moorer argued that the US should stand firm against the new Cuban challenge as Kennedy did eight years prior, otherwise "the Soviets might mistake acquiescence for weakness and be encouraged to develop other bases in this hemisphere." Unlike the Joint Chiefs in 1962, however, Moorer recommended diplomatic, rather than offensive military solutions to the crisis.¹⁴²

Kissinger consolidated all these reports, as well as his own opinions, into a memo for Nixon ahead of the upcoming NSC meeting. As with the ongoing Jordanian Civil War, Kissinger generally agreed with Hyland and argued that Soviet expansionist tendencies best explained the Cuban buildup. With the global context in mind, however, Kissinger linked the Cuban and Jordanian crises together and suggested that the Kremlin coordinated the two crises to occur

¹⁴⁰ Ibid; Soviet Submarines: Missile Submarines, Undated, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. Analysts estimated that the Soviet's rapid submarine building program would produce, then exceed, 41 Yankee-class boats by 1974, and thereby numerically overtake the US's Polaris submarine fleet. Additionally, with the range of their SLBMs, the Soviets could launch their missiles from submarines in Cienfuegos harbor and still hit targets across the southern US, rather than sail to their typical, yet hazardous, station due east of Bermuda where the US Navy had a strong presence.

¹⁴¹ Moorer, however, did classify the Cienfuegos base as "perhaps the most serious challenge to US security interests."

¹⁴² Paper Prepared by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Moorer), Assessment of Soviet Military Activities, Washington, Undated, Document 211, FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume XII, Soviet Union, January 1969-October 1970. Kissinger reported in his memoirs that another proposed military solution to show American resolve was a call-up of the nation's reserve forces, which he deemed impractical so shortly after the Cambodian Incursion: Kissinger, *White House Years*, 641.

concurrently to test the administration's resolve and crisis management abilities.¹⁴³

Consequently, Kissinger believed that the Cienfuegos base would eventually lead to a confrontation between the two superpowers, and he recommended that the president compel the Soviets to back down, although he did not support any of the departmental proposals.¹⁴⁴

The NSC meeting on September 23rd began with a discussion on Jordanian situation—which, unbeknownst to the meeting participants, just reached its zenith, as the Syrian tanks were then retreating—and then pivoted to Cuba. From the outset, Nixon warned that all information on the subject must remain confidential, as, in Nixon's words, “we were faced with a major election issue which opponents could seize upon for their own political advantage.” Each department head then presented his views on the situation and responded to Nixon's follow-up questions. Through these questions, Nixon concluded that the 1962 understanding was “very fuzzy” and essentially nonexistent, that intelligence reports suggested the presence of nuclear weapons aboard some of the Soviet ships, and that the Soviets, if unchallenged, might seek similar bases elsewhere.¹⁴⁵ Clearly, then, Nixon simultaneously believed that the situation was dire, which necessitated a strong response, but that it should remain confidential.

Despite Kissinger's recommendation to act, Nixon wanted “considerably more study and analysis” before he decided on a response.¹⁴⁶ Therefore, he mainly authorized further studies, meetings, and contingency planning, including plans for blockading Cuba and mining Cienfuegos harbor, scheduling a SRG meeting for the following day, and drafting approved

¹⁴³ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 641.

¹⁴⁴ Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Subject: Soviet Naval Facility in Cuba, Washington, September 22, 1970, Document 212, FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume XII, Soviet Union, January 1969-October 1970.

¹⁴⁵ Minutes of Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, September 23, 1970, 9:30 a.m., Document 214, FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume XII, Soviet Union, January 1969-October 1970.

¹⁴⁶ The President's Talking Points NSC Meeting – Cuba, September 23, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

statements if the story leaked, respectively. To Secretary Laird, the last task was especially pertinent, as recent budgetary meetings with Congress proved that some members of congress were aware of the situation and that, as a result, the story would soon leak. To assuage these fears and to give further general guidance, Nixon envisioned a best-case scenario where the US responded strongly yet secretly to the Soviet deployment.¹⁴⁷ Although he did not directly state this requirement, the president expected the participants to construct a response based on his vision.

Nixon's proposed strategy left Kissinger feeling "extremely uneasy."¹⁴⁸ In his view, the story would soon leak and merely downplaying the issue would not solve the probable public outcry.¹⁴⁹ Additionally, even if the crisis remained confidential, he thought that Nixon's strategy of stalling for time, especially until after the November elections, would allow the Soviets to develop their installation to an operational capacity and thereby make it much more difficult for the US to compel the Soviets to abandon the base. Likewise, if the Soviets accepted Nixon's coveted summit proposal during this interval, Nixon would find it extremely difficult to simultaneously manage a crisis and plan a cooperative meeting.¹⁵⁰ Therefore, while Nixon believed that time was on his side and that detente and the elections were of primary concern, Kissinger thought that stalling favored the Soviets and that the crisis required an immediate response.

¹⁴⁷ Minutes of Meeting of the National Security Council, Washington, September 23, 1970, 9:30 a.m., Document 214, FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume XII, Soviet Union, January 1969-October 1970.

¹⁴⁸ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 643.

¹⁴⁹ H.R. Haldeman, Diary Entry: Wednesday, September 23, 1970, *H.R. Haldeman Diaries Collection, January 18, 1969-April 30, 1973*, The National Archives and Records Administration Online Public Access: Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹⁵⁰ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 643.

Nevertheless, Kissinger followed Nixon's directives, "much as [he] disagreed with them," and chaired the proposed SRG meeting the following day.¹⁵¹ As per Nixon's instructions, the group simply discussed "contingency press guidance...in the event that information concerning a Soviet base in Cuba became known publicly." During the meeting, Kissinger reiterated Nixon's directive "to find a happy medium that would keep the public calm and quiet and at the same time stir up the Soviets enough to get them to close down the base."¹⁵²

The following day, Kissinger sent the prepared statements to Laird, Rogers, Helms, and Moorer, with the reminder that "the President has directed that there be rigid adherence to existing press guidance...He wants no backgrounding, comment, or speculation of any kind on this subject by U.S. spokesmen or officials." Specifically, Kissinger included a scripted response, as well as possible questions and their approved answers, for the Departments of Defense and State, which essentially stated that the administration was aware of the developments, was continuing to monitor the situation, and hoped that the USSR would adhere to the 1962 understanding.¹⁵³

Following the meeting, Kissinger received a call from Ambassador Dobrynin, who had just returned to Washington and wanted to "see the President about two points – the summit and things about Jordan."¹⁵⁴ With the ongoing crises, Kissinger was "very cool to him" and asked Nixon if he wanted to speak with Dobrynin, which the president later refused by saying "I am not going to go to him and take a message unless it is positive—I am not going to waste my

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Meeting of the Senior Review Group on Cuba, September 24, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹⁵³ Henry A. Kissinger, Memorandum, Subject: Public Comment on Possible Submarine Base in Cuba, September 25, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹⁵⁴ Telecon, Dobrynin and Kissinger, September 24, 1970, 3:04 p.m., Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 6), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

time” and instead instructed Kissinger to accept the message.¹⁵⁵ Kissinger promptly called Dobrynin back with the news, and the latter reported that he would have to check with Moscow, as he received specific instructions to speak with Nixon and even came back early to see him before the presidential trip to Europe.¹⁵⁶ From the exchange, Kissinger assumed that the Soviets would either delay or reject entirely Nixon’s summit proposal, which, under the present circumstance, he probably approved of despite Nixon’s disappointment.¹⁵⁷

Clearly, from the beginning of the crisis to September 24th, political realities and détente considerations affected Nixon’s Cuban response. Both factors limited the perceived and actual options Nixon had available: the threat of military force, which was more available to Kennedy eight years prior, was unattractive, as nuclear parity mitigated US military options to the point that even the Joint Chiefs did not offer a military response and the public disapproved of new crusades against communism, lest another Vietnam occur. Nevertheless, Nixon feared a jingoistic call, probably from a member of his own party seeking votes, for such a response to the crisis.

On the domestic front, Nixon desperately sought some public gesture that proved détente was developing, hence his desire, even during concurrent crises, for a summit with the Soviets. Another public crisis would signal the partial or, if grave enough, complete failure of his efforts towards détente, which would have further damaged his and his party’s political prospects. Unsurprisingly, Nixon’s initial response was to keep the situation secret and avoid any public

¹⁵⁵ Telecon, Mr. Kissinger and the President, September 24, 1970, 6:40 p.m., Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 6), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹⁵⁶ Telecon, Ambassador Dobrynin [and HAK], September 24, 1970, 7:00 p.m., Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 6), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹⁵⁷ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 644.

confrontations until the political stakes were lowered. Nevertheless, Nixon realized the gravity of the Soviet actions and therefore sought, at some point, to compel them to abandon their efforts.

September 24th proved to be the penultimate day of the “low-key” crisis, as the whole house of cards that Nixon meticulously created came crashing down the following day. Despite the relative peace on the 24th—Nixon spent the day playing golf and hosting a dinner—the administration’s clandestine approach to the crisis was bound to cause problems, as the magnitude and nature of the situation were too great and could not be contained indefinitely. Additionally, the divisions within the administration, especially between Kissinger and Rogers generally but also between Kissinger and Nixon on the response to the Cienfuegos Crisis specifically, and the simultaneity of multiple, threatening crises across the world reduced the time and level of attention that should have been spent considering a more detailed and cooperative response to the Soviet base. Nevertheless, a chance mishap beyond Nixon’s and Kissinger’s tight control immediately set the secret crisis on a course towards a public confrontation.

Part II: Unto the Breach

“He Spilled His Guts”: September 25, 1970

As if to confirm all the anxieties regarding the Cienfuegos Crisis within the administration, *The New York Times* published an article by C.L. Sulzberger titled “Ugly Clouds in the South” on the morning of September 25th that included information on the Soviet base. Although Sulzberger “stressed that there is not yet any confirmation of these reports,” he accurately summed up the situation:

Initial information suggests, however, that a naval installation is being built at Cienfuegos, on the southern coast [of Cuba], and that it is designed to service “Y” class submarines, Moscow’s equivalent to the American Polaris-launching vessels...This would be the equivalent of installing land-based missiles as Russia attempted in 1962, then touching off a dramatic confrontation.

Additionally, Sulzberger linked the situation in Cienfuegos with Allende’s victory in Chile, which led him to conclude “the entire effort to arrange a global détente between Washington and Moscow could be jeopardized.”¹⁵⁸ This was hardly the concluding sentence Nixon wanted Americans to read, but certainly a position he, like Sulzberger, held and feared. Reflecting this view, Rowland Evans and Robert Novak of *The Washington Post* published an article titled “End of Nixon Honeymoon” the previous day, which announced the crumbling of Nixon’s detente and similarly reported that “Soviet policy is fast reverting to the old and customary role of hostility for the U.S.”¹⁵⁹ Bad as this press was, the situation soon became much worse.

Despite the articles, Kissinger proceeded with his scheduled meeting with Dobrynin at 10:00 a.m. Given the ongoing crises and his battle with Rogers, Dobrynin reported that the Kremlin agreed “in principle” to a summit but that it could not occur until after the Soviet Party Congress in May 1971. Kissinger thought Dobrynin actually meant sometime “in June or in July or in September, August probably being a vacation month for both sides.” Dobrynin agreed with Kissinger’s conjecture and added that Premier Kosygin did not plan on “attending the United

¹⁵⁸ C.L. Sulzberger, “Ugly Clouds in the South,” *The New York Times*, September 25, 1970, 43. Some commentators have suggested that Kissinger himself might have leaked the story to Sulzberger to force Nixon to respond more promptly to the crisis. Although Kissinger, and Nixon, had a track record of leaking select information to the press, no evidence exists to establish such an example in this situation. Additionally, as Laird reported during the September 23rd NSC meeting, rumors of the base were already spreading around Washington, and it is more likely that the sources of these rumors, and the rumors themselves, informed Sulzberger.

¹⁵⁹ Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, “End of Nixon Honeymoon,” *The Washington Post*, September 24, 1970, A21.

Nations 25th Anniversary Celebration in New York this fall.”¹⁶⁰ These revelations certainly helped assuage Kissinger’s two biggest fears: a summit occurring concurrently with the Cienfuegos Crisis, and thus undercutting the US’s bargaining position on the latter issue; and Rogers using the UN venue to meet with Kosygin and solve the crisis, which Kissinger saw as both a poor tactic and a threat to his influence over Nixon.

Kissinger then consulted with Nixon and afterwards called Dobrynin to report that he would deliver the president’s reply to the summit proposal during a brief meeting later that day.¹⁶¹ Shortly after the call, chaos ensued within the US foreign policy apparatus. Without any prompting, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs Jerry Friedheim gave the press a detailed report on the Soviet installations in Cienfuegos harbor, which he concluded by saying “we are keeping a close watch on these activities and are continuing to obtain information on Soviet activities there.” This last statement was an almost verbatim regurgitation of the prepared statement Kissinger sent to the Defense Department on the previous day. By 12:55 p.m., the story went out across the nation via the Associated Press (AP), and the administration scrambled to determine what went wrong.¹⁶²

At 1:30 p.m., Kissinger had a terse but illustrative telephone conversation with the Deputy Secretary of Defense David Packard:

K [Kissinger]: Have you read what Jerry Friedheim put out today?

¹⁶⁰ Memorandum of Conversation, Participants: Dr. Henry A. Kissinger and Soviet Ambassador Anatoliy Dobrynin, Washington, September 25, 1970, 10 a.m., Document 218, FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume XII, Soviet Union, January 1969-October 1970.

¹⁶¹ Memorandum of Conversation, Dr. Henry A. Kissinger and Soviet Ambassador Anatoliy Dobrynin, Washington, September 25, 1970, 5:30 p.m., Document 219, FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume XII, Soviet Union, January 1969-October 1970.

¹⁶² Bulletin: Soviet Subs, The Associated Press, Washington, September 25, 1970, 12:55 p.m., NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

P [Packard]: No

K: He spilled his guts, put out everything we know about that business.

P: Cuba?

K: Everything: barges, U-2 intelligence...

P: My God no. Let me check on this.¹⁶³

Twenty minutes later, Packard called Kissinger back. Apparently, Friedheim received Kissinger's press guidance memo from September 24th, but without the cover sheet that bluntly stated, "the President...wants no backgrounding, comment, or speculation of any kind on this subject by U.S. spokesmen or officials," which explained Friedheim's prearranged statement on "keeping a close watch on these activities." In his spokesman's defense, Packard reported that Friedheim called Robert G. Houdek, the liaison between Kissinger's office and the White House Press Secretary Ron Ziegler, who gave him the "go ahead" on the press briefing.¹⁶⁴ When Kissinger inquired how Friedheim, who was not one of the principals, got such detailed information, Packard stated simply "a lot of people have the facts." Finally, Kissinger told Packard "No one should say one more word until we have worked it out."¹⁶⁵ As before, Kissinger intended to restrict the administration's response to his and Nixon's direct ideas and actions.

¹⁶³ Telecon, David Packard and HAK, September 25, 1970, 1:30 p.m., Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 6), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹⁶⁴ In both Kissinger's and Packard's opinion, Houdek's go ahead referred to the prearranged statement should the story leak, not giving a detailed report of the crisis to the press. Obviously, however, Friedheim did not share their reading of Houdek's order.

¹⁶⁵ Telecon, Packard and Kissinger, September 25, 1970, 1:50 p.m., Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 6), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

Five minutes later, Laird called Kissinger, who asked: “What do we do from here, all hell is going to break loose. Can the President go on a trip knowing a Soviet base is being built?” In a tongue-and-cheek yet politically insightful answer to his own question after Laird balked, Kissinger responded, “If the President were called ‘Kennedy’ and you were in the House of Representatives, wouldn’t you give him a good working over for going off now?” Laird and Kissinger then debated what line the administration should take, with Laird oscillating between a “hard” and “soft” response and Kissinger sternly favoring a “hard” line. Regardless, Kissinger said he would seek further guidance from Nixon, especially since Kissinger had a scheduled backgrounder at 2:30 p.m., where he expected “to take the first blow” from the press on this issue. He closed the conversation with his characteristic dry humor: since Friedheim “really spilled his guts” on the crisis, Kissinger joked that “at least you [Laird] won’t have a credibility gap.”¹⁶⁶

Kissinger then met with Nixon and recommended a dual-front strategy based on the president’s previous general guidelines. With the information out, Kissinger “told the President that we had no choice now except to face the Soviets down, but we should do so in a manner that gave them a way out.” To do so, Kissinger recommended giving the Soviets a stern warning against a base during his 2:30 p.m. briefing on the upcoming European trip; however, he “would leave open whether the base already existed, so that a clear line of retreat [for the Soviets] was available.” Kissinger also proposed confronting Dobrynin directly yet privately in a meeting scheduled for 5:30 p.m., by “telling him that we considered Cienfuegos an offensive base and

¹⁶⁶ Telecon, Secretary Laird and HAK, September 25, 1970, 1:55 p.m., Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 6), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. Although Kissinger reports the time of his scheduled briefing as 2:30 p.m. in this call, transcripts of the briefing, supported by press documents, set the time as 3:20 p.m. Perhaps Kissinger misspoke, these other documents are inaccurate, or he delayed the briefing for fifty minutes to investigate the situation further. The author of this study concludes that the briefing took place at or near 3:20 p.m.

would treat it accordingly. We would insist on its disarmament.” Likewise, Nixon suggested moving a US destroyer near Cienfuegos to reinforce the US calls.¹⁶⁷ Additionally, the administration restricted any further public comments on the issue following Kissinger’s briefing, which would help the Soviets to retreat somewhat quietly.

Unsurprisingly, following Kissinger’s briefing on the European trip, most of the press’ questions centered on the Cienfuegos Crisis. During this interaction, Kissinger delivered the statements he and Nixon drafted, including the stern warning: “The Soviet Union can be under no doubt that we would view the establishment of a strategic base in the Caribbean with the utmost seriousness.” He then addressed the 1962 understanding by first reading a statement Kennedy made regarding offensive weapons as violations of the understanding and then commented “This, of course, remains the policy of this government... . Obviously, a Polaris type submarine is an offensive weapon.” Nevertheless, he added the agreed-upon ambiguity over the state of the base: “We are watching the events in Cuba. We are not at this moment in a position to say exactly what they mean. We will continue to observe them and at the right moment we will take the action that seems indicated.”¹⁶⁸

Because Kissinger’s briefing was originally under a press embargo until September 26th, the journalists requested an override to publish their stories immediately.¹⁶⁹ Kissinger agreed, although the AP bulletin, which was released within thirty minutes of the briefing’s conclusion, attributed the statements to an unnamed official “who declined to be quoted by name.”¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁷ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 645-646.

¹⁶⁸ Background Briefing (Soviet Presence in Cuba), At the White House with Dr. Henry A Kissinger, Friday, September 25, 1970, 3:20 p.m., National Security Council (NSC) Files, Alexander M. Haig Special Files, Cuba (Box 1000), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹⁶⁹ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 646.

¹⁷⁰ Bulletin: Soviet Subs, The Associated Press, Washington, September 25, 1970, 3:52 p.m., NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

Nevertheless, the AP sent the bulletin out too quickly for Kissinger's liking. Haig had Richard T. ("Dick") Kennedy, the Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Council Planning, instruct the United States Information Agency to hold the story "until we can get a fix on how we would like to see it played."¹⁷¹ Afterwards, Dick Kennedy informed Haig that, although it reached Voice of America News, the bulletin was withheld until further notice, but it could not be held for long.

Not everyone within the administration was convinced of the merits of Kissinger's strategy, and Rogers was the main detractor. According to Haldeman's diary, Rogers called Kissinger "in a blind rage, yelling at him, regarding the briefing. [He] said Kissinger had tricked President into hard line about Cuba. [He] also claims Kissinger indicated there'd be a new peace initiative and that's why Kissinger going to Paris tonight (not true)."¹⁷² Nevertheless, no transcript for such a call exists; however, Kissinger did call Rogers at 4:50 p.m., and Rogers expressed disappointment in the leak, saying "I just don't see why everybody can't say 'no comment.' Why do we talk so much?" to which Kissinger replied, "For once, I am in 100 percent

¹⁷¹ Telecon, Memorandum of Conversation, Dick Kennedy, NSC; and Henry Loomis, Acting Director, USIA, September 25, 1970, 4:40 p.m., NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹⁷² H.R. Haldeman, Diary Entry: Friday, September 25, 1970, *H.R. Haldeman Diaries Collection, January 18, 1969-April 30, 1973*, The National Archives and Records Administration Online Public Access: Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. Kissinger was planning on travelling to Europe ahead of Nixon and other administration officials, including Rogers, to prepare for the preplanned trip, not because of any new developments regarding a Vietnam peace initiative. Most likely, Rogers assumed that Kissinger had some hand in an unofficial peace proposal presented by the South Vietnamese Vice President Nguyễn Cao Kỳ in Paris on the same day, see: Telecon, Mr. Kissinger and Amb. William Sullivan, September 25, 1970, 7:30 p.m., Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 6), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. In this conversation, Sullivan gibes Kissinger on the Cienfuegos Crisis by saying, "have a good trip [to Europe] and don't go to Cuba," to which Kissinger chuckles back "okay--fine!"

agreement.” Rogers concluded the call with a melodramatic statement: “I must say my worst fears have been realized.”¹⁷³

Kissinger called Laird fifteen minutes later to explain his thinking. Regarding his admission to the possible base and the warning to the Soviets, Kissinger told Laird: “I couldn’t very well not say it. After the Defense story and I said I didn’t know about this, it would have reflected on the President... . That’s when I made the Kennedy statement. I had no choice, did I?” to which Laird simply said, “No.” Nevertheless, Kissinger, for the first time, openly noted his true feelings on the leak, as he told Laird, “These things happen, and it may be a blessing in disguise.”¹⁷⁴ The blessing related to the necessary policy change following Friedheim’s mistake, as Kissinger noted in his memoirs, “Now, however, we would be forced into my own preferred course,” which, like with the Jordanian, involved facing “the Soviets down,” although in a controlled way as he explained to Nixon earlier in the day.¹⁷⁵ Thus, whatever the merits or detriments of Kissinger’s strategy, the content of Roger’s alleged blind rage call—over taking advantage of the situation to force the president into a hard stance—proved accurate, as that is exactly what Kissinger did.¹⁷⁶

The 5:30 p.m. meeting between Kissinger and Dobrynin was ostensibly centered on Nixon’s reply to the Soviet summit proposal but was mainly focused on the Cienfuegos Crisis.

¹⁷³ Telecon, HAK and Secretary Rogers, September 25, 1970, 4:50 p.m., Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 6), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹⁷⁴ Telecon, Laird and Kissinger, September 25, 1970, 5:05 p.m., Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 6), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹⁷⁵ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 645. On this page, Kissinger doubled down on his perceptions of the blessing: “Yet when all was said and done the Pentagon bloopers were actually our salvation.”

¹⁷⁶ Again, this has led researchers to conclude that Kissinger was behind some, or all, of the leaks regarding Cienfuegos, perhaps even Friedheim’s briefing. As no evidence of this exists, it is more likely that Kissinger was simply doing what Rogers charged him with: taking advantage of new circumstances to suit his position, and he was, therefore, shrewd and lucky.

From the outset, Kissinger said that Dobrynin's "face was ashen," while Haldeman wrote that "Kissinger says he's [Dobrynin] shaking. Feels Dobrynin is more worried now than ever before."¹⁷⁷ On the unofficial topic of Cuba, Kissinger noted that the ambiguity over the base's state of construction and purpose in his press conference was deliberately aimed at the US press "in order to give the Soviet Union an opportunity to withdraw without a public confrontation."¹⁷⁸

Kissinger, as he recalled in his memorandum of the meeting, then bluntly informed Dobrynin that the US was aware of the base and wanted it removed. Nonetheless, Kissinger specifically noted that if the construction ceased and the ships, especially the tender, left Cienfuegos, the US would consider the whole operation a "training exercise" and drop the matter. This suggestion gave the Soviets a way to back out of Cienfuegos without embarrassment. Dobrynin then asked if the alleged base violated the US's interpretation of the 1962 understanding, which Kissinger affirmed and added that, to the US, "Cuba was a place of extreme sensitivity" and that the US took "drastic action" in 1962 without any understandings in place. Understandably, Dobrynin told Kissinger that he would have to report their conversation to the Kremlin, and he hoped that they would have an answer for him soon.

To emphasize the US's displeasure with the base, Kissinger cut Dobrynin off when he tried to change the subject to Middle Eastern affairs. Reflecting the ironic and counterintuitive nature of the meeting—simultaneously attempting to further détente through a summit and then discussing a serious ongoing crisis—Dobrynin, with his characteristic dry humor, implored Kissinger, "Why do you have to give me good news and bad news simultaneously?" to which

¹⁷⁷ H.R. Haldeman, Diary Entry: Friday, September 25, 1970, *H.R. Haldeman Diaries Collection, January 18, 1969-April 30, 1973*, The National Archives and Records Administration Online Public Access: Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹⁷⁸ Kissinger reports that Nixon requested the Cuban topic remain off the official record, "Otherwise, we would put matters into official channels," which would have garnered unwanted publicity.

Kissinger said he was simply giving him the present news. Kissinger then delivered an ultimatum: it was up to the Soviets to decide whether “to go the route of conciliation,” by abandoning the base and pursuing détente, “or the route of confrontation” if the base remained, and that the US was “prepared for either.” Dobrynin noted with chagrin that the US government was likely to stir their press up over the situation, to which Kissinger noted that the administration would avoid that but that they were determined to stop the Soviets from replacing “land-based by sea-based missiles in Cuba,” whatever the “phraseology of the understandings.” Once again, Dobrynin reported that he would consult with the Kremlin and deliver their response, and the meeting ended.¹⁷⁹

With this exchange, the ongoing Cienfuegos Crisis entered its confrontation stage. Nevertheless, Nixon, Kissinger, and the other principals now sought to limit the public exposure to the crisis as much as possible, although the domestic American media went into a frenzy that night, with some television programs even showing photographs of the Soviet barges in Cienfuegos harbor. Still, in a phone call with U. Alexis Johnson, Kissinger reported that Nixon ordered all administration officials to refrain from talking about the crisis indefinitely, with Kissinger joking that “if anyone opens his mouth he [Nixon] will hang him!”

Therefore, the trip to Europe, arranged long before the Soviets began their construction in Cienfuegos, became another blessing in disguise, as all the principals, including Nixon, Kissinger, and Rogers, became relatively unavailable to the domestic media for over a week. In the interim, Kissinger granted Johnson and Haig primacy over the various NSC committees, as

¹⁷⁹ Memorandum of Conversation, Dr. Henry A. Kissinger and Soviet Ambassador Anatoliy Dobrynin, Washington, September 25, 1970, 5:30 p.m., Document 220, FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume XII, Soviet Union, January 1969-October 1970.

well as the unenviable responsibility of dealing with the media fallout.¹⁸⁰ Beyond the communist response, which could be carefully considered in Moscow and Havana until Nixon returned to the US, the only thing left up to chance, therefore, was the intensity of the public's reaction to the crisis, especially in the press and Congress.

Letting Them Sleep on It: September 26-October 4, 1970

The administration's policy of media stonewalling began in earnest the following morning, with Kissinger naturally striking first. As before, he circulated a memo to the principals that restricted any future public comments regarding the Cienfuegos Crisis. This time, however, the tailor-made responses for each department were rescinded and all officials were instructed to say simply: "I have nothing to add to what has been said on this subject."¹⁸¹ Although the principals welcomed this media blackout, some began to question the logic of Kissinger's course. Most importantly, in a conversation with Haig and Haldeman, Nixon explained that he thought that Kissinger revealed too much during his press conference the day before and that he should have simply stonewalled the press.¹⁸² As Kissinger himself was now in Paris, he had no way of defending his actions in-person nor dissuading Nixon's *post-facto* regret.

Despite his newfound disappointment in Kissinger's previous tactics, Nixon believed that the best way forward was to follow his National Security Advisor's general strategy; however, the president had nothing but disdain for the ongoing Kissinger-Rogers battle and its effects. In the same conversation with Haig and Haldeman, Nixon explained that both men were "acting

¹⁸⁰ Telecon, Mr. Kissinger and U. Alexis Johnson, September 25, 1970, 8:00pm, Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 6), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹⁸¹ Henry A. Kissinger, Memorandum, Subject: Public Comment on Possible Submarine Base in Cuba, September 26, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹⁸² H.R. Haldeman, Diary Entry: Saturday, September 26, 1970, *H.R. Haldeman Diaries Collection*, January 18, 1969-April 30, 1973, The National Archives and Records Administration Online Public Access: Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

like little children, trying to nail the other and prove him wrong.” This petty battle, by the president’s own admission, was negatively affecting the administration’s response to the crisis, and Nixon once again broached the idea of sacking Kissinger and replacing him with Haig.¹⁸³ As before, however, Nixon dismissed the idea since both he and Haldeman agreed that losing Kissinger would constitute “a major loss” and would increase the power of Rogers and the State Department’s bureaucracy, which Nixon loathed.¹⁸⁴ In this atmosphere, Nixon’s trip to Europe, which began for the president the following morning, had a benefit beyond granting the Soviets a period of careful consideration: with Rogers and Kissinger constantly by his side, Nixon could temporarily keep their hostility in check.

Irrespective of Kissinger’s stonewalling instructions, major newspapers began reporting on the Cienfuegos Crisis. Of the major weekend papers, both the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* ran first-page articles on the subject, although the two articles on Cienfuegos reiterated Kissinger’s intentional ambiguity over the true nature of the base.¹⁸⁵ The Congressional response proved similar: although there was bipartisan concern over the situation—with the Republican Senator, and 1964 Presidential Nominee, from Arizona Barry Goldwater linking the base to a Soviet “bid for world domination,” and the Democratic Senator, and Senate Majority Leader, from Montana Mike Mansfield expressing alarm—most congressional leaders declined to draw any conclusions, as their knowledge of the situation was

¹⁸³ Ironically, Haig would replace Haldeman as Nixon’s White House Chief of Staff in 1973 when Nixon sacked Haldeman during the Watergate Scandal. Haig later served as President Ronald Reagan’s Secretary of State, a position that Kissinger held under Presidents Nixon and Ford from 1973-1977.

¹⁸⁴ H.R. Haldeman, Diary Entry: Saturday, September 26, 1970, *H.R. Haldeman Diaries Collection*, January 18, 1969-April 30, 1973, The National Archives and Records Administration Online Public Access: Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹⁸⁵ Robert M. Smith, “U.S. Warns Soviet Not to Build Base for Subs in Cuba,” *The New York Times*, September 26, 1970, 1, 8; Peter Braestrup, “U.S. Warns Russians on Sub Base in Cuba,” *The Washington Post*, September 26, 1970, A1, A9.

little better than the media's.¹⁸⁶ Finally, while the crisis was front-cover news, the American media focused more attention on other issues, such as the European Trip and the Jordanian Civil War.¹⁸⁷ Kissinger's ambiguity regarding the Cienfuegos base during his briefing worked as he intended: the issue, as reported, was unclear and did not throw the media into a frenzy as the administration initially feared.

While Kissinger was initially able to control the narrative on the crisis, partisan politics quickly spun the coverage. During an interview on September 27th on ABC's television program *Issues and Answers*, the Democratic Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee J. William Fulbright questioned the existence of the base and inferred that Nixon concocted the crisis for political gain: "nearly every year just before we have an appropriation bill in the Senate we get these stories, so it may or may not be true. I read the story in the paper. It isn't conclusive at all." Additionally, Fulbright questioned the ability of the US to compel the Soviets to abandon the possible base because of the new nuclear parity and suggested that the US had little credibility to do so even with a nuclear advantage, as the US had similar bases and weapons stationed near the USSR. Finally, he argued that Nixon should focus on efforts towards détente, such as SALT, rather than a relatively unimportant and politically charged Cuban crisis.¹⁸⁸

On September 30th, the *New York Times* ran another article on the Cienfuegos base, but this time the article noted that intelligence officials considered the evidence on the base's

¹⁸⁶ "Plan Not Clear on Cuba Base: Alarm Sounded in Congress by Goldwater and Mansfield," *The Atlanta Constitution*, September 27, 1970, 3A. Mansfield served as the Senate Majority Leader from 1961-1977, which means that he, at the time of this investigation's publication, holds the record as the longest serving Senate Majority Leader. Additionally, Mansfield generally supported Nixon's Vietnam policies, particularly Vietnamization, and the two leaders established a good working relationship on foreign policy issues, despite their party differences.

¹⁸⁷ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 648. Kissinger recalls on this page in his memoirs that, "The Cuban story was slow in building."

¹⁸⁸ Interviewers John Scali and Bob Clark of ABC News and Guest Senator J. W. Fulbright, Excerpt from ABC's *Issues and Answers*, Sunday, September 27, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

existence “dubious and dated.” Additionally, the article reported that the same officials were baffled as to why the administration released the information, while others insinuated that Nixon probably released the old and exaggerated information to increase the public’s fears of communist moves in the Middle East and Chile for electoral gain.¹⁸⁹ The following day, the Idaho Democratic Senator Frank Church chaired a closed senatorial hearing on the Cienfuegos Crisis that included a presentation from the Defense Intelligence Agency, which Haig unsuccessfully tried to prevent.¹⁹⁰

Following the hearing, Senator Church publicly commented: “I think the present evidence would not sustain a reasonable conclusion one way or the other [on the base’s significance] But I must say some of the stories that have been circulated made a very big mountain out of what at present is a molehill...”¹⁹¹ Following a similar hearing in the House of Representatives, a reporter for Reuters asked Dobrynin for a comment, which he “declined with a smile.”¹⁹² Later that same day, the Soviet press agency Pravda mimicked Fulbright’s and Church’s comments by charging that the administration “thoughtlessly fabricates hollow-sounding propaganda campaigns without thinking about their consequences”: the first Soviet comment on the Cienfuegos Confrontation.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁹ Tad Szulc, “White House Charge on Cuba Puzzles U.S. Officials,” *The New York Times*, September 30, 1970, 2.

¹⁹⁰ Colonel [Richard T.] Kennedy, Confidential Memorandum for General [Alexander M.] Haig, September 28, 1970, NSC Files, President’s Trip Files, President’s European Trip 1970 (Box 467), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California; Al Haig, Secret Memorandum to White House ATTN Col. [Richard T.] Kennedy, USS Saratoga [on Station off the coast of Italy in the Mediterranean Sea], September 29, 1970, 12:57 a.m. [Eastern Standard Time], NSC Files, President’s Trip Files, President’s European Trip 1970 (Box 467), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. Brackets added by the author for clarification.

¹⁹¹ Press Wire Report: Missiles, Washington—Sen. Frank Church, D-Idaho, United Press International, October 1, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹⁹² Reuters Report, Washington, September 30, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹⁹³ Memorandum from the Am[erican] Embassy Moscow to the Secretary of State, [Forwarded to the] Am[erican] Consul Naples, Subject: Pravda Accuses Administration of Creating “Atmosphere of Military Hysteria,”

Ironically, these critical analyses of the Nixon administration buttressed Kissinger's strategy. Along with the presence of other concurrent crises and issues, the administration's stonewalling, and the escape from the American media's crosshairs provided by the European trip, these comments and articles doubting the significance of the Cienfuegos base reinforced Kissinger's ambiguous statements during his September 25th briefing and thereby decreased the American people's focus on the crisis, at least in comparison to a media firestorm announcing a second Cuban Missile Crisis. Perhaps even more ironically, those within the Republican Party who publicly announced the perils of the situation, like Goldwater, threatened the administration's policy more than their partisan opponents, as the last thing Nixon wanted was a media frenzy. As Nixon predicted on September 19th, therefore, the greatest threats to his administration's management of the crisis came from "clown Senator[s]" within his party who wanted a swift and offensive response to the crisis, rather than those who questioned the truth of the situation and his political machinations.

Although Nixon certainly scoffed at the idea that he created the crisis for political gain, these accusations achieved his and Kissinger's primary domestic aim concerning the crisis: keeping the issue low-key so that they, and the Soviets, could solve the issue quietly. And although the first Pravda statement indicated that the Soviets may regurgitate similar statements to cover their continued construction in Cienfuegos, Kissinger's unequivocal, yet private, statements and ultimatum to Dobrynin on September 25th clearly communicated the administration's actual thoughts and intentions regarding the Confrontation and the need for a

Soviet withdrawal.¹⁹⁴ Instead of taking Soviet news statements as indisputable facts, the principles awaited an official Soviet reply upon their return to Washington on October 5th.

As Kissinger noted in his memoirs, these ironies were a consequence of “the era of Vietnam.”¹⁹⁵ As the public noted the discrepancies between their government’s official statements on the war and the actual progress, or lack thereof, on the ground, the American people began to increasingly doubt their government’s claims in general, which constituted the infamous credibility gap of the era. Although this gap became notable during Johnson’s Presidency, Nixon continued to widen it, especially with his Cambodian incursion, as many Americans concluded that Nixon’s claims to end the war were double talk. Consequently, when Senator Mansfield read Kissinger’s and Friedheim’s statements, followed the resulting news stories, and noted that defense appropriations were approaching, he, and others, concluded that a credibility gap existed between the aforementioned official statements and the actual Soviet efforts in Cuba. Therefore, in this specific instance, the credibility gap aided, rather than hindered, the president’s policy.

While the Soviets waited to respond to Kissinger’s ultimatum until Nixon’s return to Washington on October 6th, some lower-level discussions between the two nations did occur beforehand. Specifically, on October 1st, the chargé Vorontsov broached the subject of the Confrontation during a luncheon conversation on the forthcoming SALT talks in Helsinki with Raymond L. Garthoff, then the Deputy Director of the Bureau of Politico-Military Affairs for the State Department. Without officially acknowledging the Cienfuegos base’s existence, Vorontsov

¹⁹⁴ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 648. On this page of his memoirs, Kissinger characterized the Pravda article as “a single, rather lame comment, complaining about hostile propaganda.”

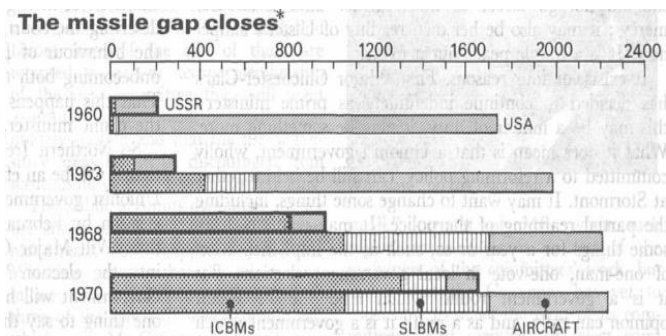
¹⁹⁵ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 648.

reported that the USSR would find it hypocritical for the US to demand the removal of overseas Soviet submarine bases while the US operated from similar bases.¹⁹⁶

Therefore, it is very likely that the Soviets intended in part to use their construction in Cienfuegos to reach a tit-for-tat trade for submarine bases during SALT or to simply offset US submarine bases ahead of the arms-reduction talks. This revelation confirmed many of the principal’s conviction that the Soviets were augmenting their military position prior to any détente negotiations. If the base remained, the Soviets could credibly expect concessions from the US during these negotiations. Thus, the base threatened to undermine Nixon’s vision of détente as a strategy to consolidate the US’s strength and limit the USSR’s military growth.



As seen in *The New York Times*: A map depicting the location of the city and bay of Cienfuegos in relation to other major sites in and around Cuba. From: Benjamin Welles, “Soviets Removal of Vessel in Cuba is Awaited by U.S.,” *The New York Times*, November 15, 1970, 22.



*The Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) and the aircraft in the chart have a range of 5,000 miles or more. The Submarine Launched, Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs) are of the Polaris type.

The changes in the strategic nuclear balance between the 1962 and 1970 Cuban crises. While the US retained an overall advantage during the Cienfuegos crisis, the Soviets had surpassed the Americans in the ICBM category. From: “How the Bear Learned to Swim,” *The Economist*, Volume 237, Issue 6635, October 24, 1970, 17. Charles W. “Chuck” Colson, the White House counsel during the Cienfuegos crisis, sent a copy of the article to Jeb S. Magruder, another Nixon White House operative, and carbon copied Al Haig. In his cover memo, Colson called the story “one of the most frightening articles I have ever seen.”: NSC Files, Country Files – Europe, USSR Vol. IX-X, August 1-November 1970 (Box 713), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹⁹⁶ Raymond L. Garthoff, Memorandum of Conversation: Soviet Intentions Regarding a Cuban Base, Conversation with Yuli M. Vorontsov, October 1, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.



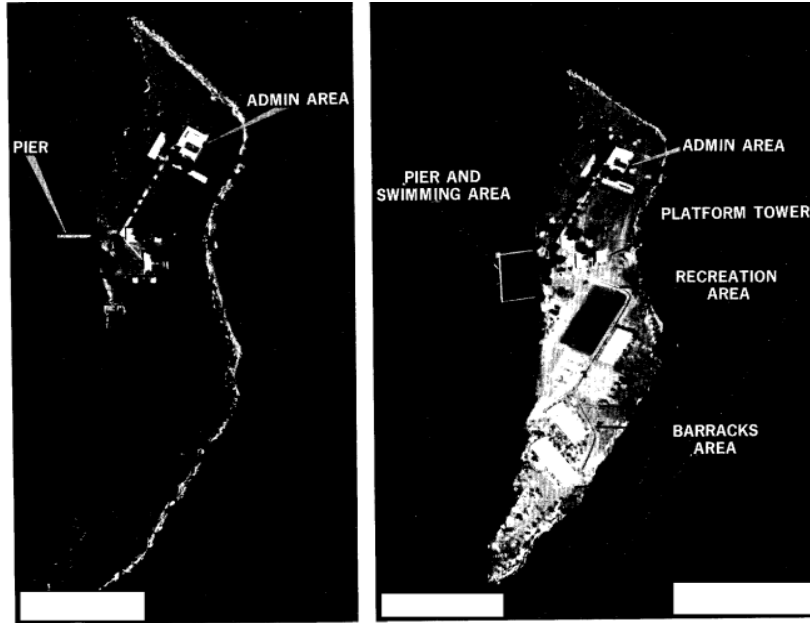
President Richard M. Nixon photographed in the Oval Office on September 25, 1970, the day that Jerry Friedheim "spilled his guts" on the Cienfuegos Crisis during a press conference. Image 4538-01, Photo Gallery, The Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California, <https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/president/photo-gallery>.



National Security Advisor Henry A. Kissinger (right) and President Nixon (left) stand at an Oval Office window during the later stages of the Cienfuegos Crisis. February 10, 1971, Image: WHPO 5628-20A, Photo Gallery, The Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California, <https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/president/photo-gallery>.



A 1986 US Navy photograph of a Soviet Yankee-class SSBN, the most advanced Soviet SSBN class in service during the Cienfuegos Crisis, although none sailed to Cuba. While 34 were ultimately completed, about a dozen were in service by May 1971, with the one pictured above, *K-129*, then under construction. *K-129* suffered an explosion in one of her missile tubes (hole visible behind the sail) and was lost on October 3, 1986. During the event, twenty-year-old Seaman Sergey Preminin prevented a nuclear meltdown, and a probable environmental catastrophe, by manually shutting down the reactor. Tragically, Preminin died after the intense heat and pressure in the compartment sealed the hatch shut. Photo from the Digital Public Library of America, <https://dp.la/item/8d556eeac8957f6d22119fb2f4df105c>.



CIA aerial photographs of Soviet construction activity on Cayo Alcatraz in Cienfuegos Bay, Cuba. The installations seen here constituted the attempted nuclear submarine base. The National Photographic Interpretation Center, Basic Imagery Interpretation Report, Summary of Activity in Cuba (Sanitized), April 1, 1970, Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room, Historical Collections, CIA, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp78t04563a001000010025-9>, Figure 4.



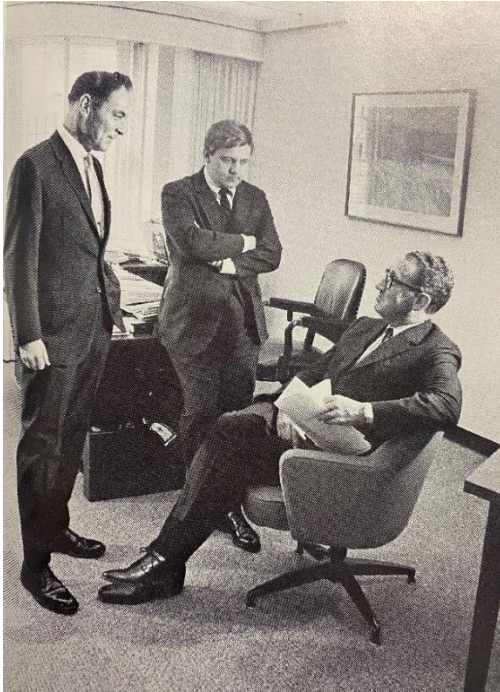
CIA aerial photograph of Soviet Naval Activity in Cienfuegos Bay, Cuba. The *Urga*-class submarine tender, a naval tug, and the anti-submarine net are visible, as is the island of Cayo Alcatraz (see image above). The National Photographic Interpretation Center, Basic Imagery Interpretation Report, Summary of Activity in Cuba (Sanitized), April 1, 1970, Freedom of Information Act Electronic Reading Room, Historical Collections, CIA, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp78t04563a001000010025-9>, Figure 2.



Nixon's interview with John Chancellor, Nancy Dickerson, Howard K. Smith, and Eric Sevareid for "A Conversation with the President," during which Nixon personally acknowledged the Cienfuegos Crisis for the first and only time during his presidency. January 4, 1971, Image: WHPO 5428-19A, Photo Gallery, The Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California, <https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/president/photo->.



President Nixon and his principals in the Oval Office during the latter stage of the Cienfuegos Crisis, January 1971. From left, seated: Richard Helms, Henry Kissinger, William Rogers, Richard Nixon, Melvin Laird, Thomas Moorer. Kissinger, *White House Years*, Photo Collection 2, Image 3. Kissinger reports that the group discussed military operations in Laos during this meeting.



View of Alexander Haig (left, standing) and Henry Kissinger (right, sitting) in Kissinger's office in the White House basement, May 1969. Kissinger's Executive Assistant Lawrence S. Eagleburger, who served in that position during the Cienfuegos Crisis, stands between them. Kissinger, *White House Years*, Photo Collection 1, Image 3.



"The Channel." Photograph of Henry Kissinger (left) and Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin (right) in the Map Room of the White House, March 1972. Many of their meetings before, during, and after the Cienfuegos Crisis occurred in this room. Kissinger, *White House Years*, Photo Collection 3, Image 1.

Confrontation Controlled: October 5-22, 1970

With the Jordanian Crisis winding down, Nixon and his foreign policy principals focused their attention on the Cienfuegos Crisis upon their return to Washington on October 5th; indeed, a Senior WSAG meeting on the subject was scheduled for the following morning. At this stage, the principals were mainly concerned with determining the limits of US demands. Some advocated for the complete removal of the base, while others thought limitations placed on its use was more realistic. No one, however, thought the US should make no demands and thereby accept the Soviet base. Additionally, the principals disagreed on how to respond if the Soviets

resisted, and some “at the extreme” proposed an immediate naval blockade of the port. As for suggested responses, maintenance of the administration’s low-key press posture was not questioned, while a candid meeting with a Soviet official to communicate the US’s position and demands was recommended.¹⁹⁷

At first glance, this final recommendation appears misplaced, as Kissinger already completed this step on September 25th during his meeting with Dobrynin. However, the cover letter of Haig’s memorandum clears up this ambiguity; apparently, Kissinger failed to inform many of the principals of this meeting.¹⁹⁸ Predictably, this was yet another example of Kissinger using secrecy to increase his control over the situation, as this confidentiality allowed him to craft the US’s diplomatic response to the crisis. Therefore, to retain this advantage, Haig recommended that Kissinger keep the previous meeting a secret, but also secure Nixon’s official acceptance as the primary intermediary between the US and Soviet governments in the crisis, as Rogers was likely seeking this position as well.¹⁹⁹ Clearly, then, interdepartmental rivalries were still affecting Nixon’s ability to manage the crisis.

Regardless of the Kissinger-Rogers maneuvering, the Soviets solved the issue in Kissinger’s favor. On the morning of October 6th, Dobrynin called Kissinger and requested an urgent meeting, which occurred at 2:15 p.m. At the beginning of the meeting, Dobrynin handed

¹⁹⁷ U. Alexis Johnson, Memorandum for Mr. Henry A. Kissinger, Subject: Cuba, Washington, October 5, 1970, National Security Council (NSC) Institutional Files (H-Files), Meeting Files, Washington Special Actions Group (WSAG) Meetings, WSAG Meeting Cuba 10/6/70 (Box H-076), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

¹⁹⁸ At least officially, as Haldeman’s diary entries definitively proved that he was aware of the meeting. Since this meeting occurred ten days prior, it is likely that word of it spread within the administration, but to an unknown extent.

¹⁹⁹ Al Haig, Memorandum for HAK, October 5, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. If Rogers resisted, Haig recommended having the president tell him that Kissinger’s appointment would draw less public attention, as the post of National Security Advisor was typically more low-key than Secretary of State. As Kissinger was already a quasi-celebrity in the media, and probably even more well-known to the public than Rogers, this excuse is clearly arbitrary, illogical, and was merely a negotiating tactic to outmaneuver the Secretary of State.

Kissinger a note from Moscow in reply to Kissinger's statements during the meeting on September 25th.²⁰⁰ As part of the introduction and conclusion, the note proclaimed that the USSR continued to strictly adhere to the 1962 understanding and applauded Nixon's efforts to do the same since August 1970. Regarding Cienfuegos, the note categorically denied "anything of the kind that would contradict that mentioned understanding," and reiterated the Soviet government's disapproval of "creating military bases by foreign states on the territory of other states" and their efforts to limit such bases, and areas of navigation for SSBNs, during recent SALT meetings.²⁰¹

After Kissinger finished reading the note, Dobrynin added verbally that Moscow could not guarantee that Soviet submarines would never visit Cuba, but that they would not do so in an "operational capacity," which Kissinger commended as a "forthright statement." Nonetheless, Kissinger considered the note's use of the word "base" as ambiguous and reported that the administration would submit questions to the USSR to reach a more specific definition to avoid any future issues. As an example, Kissinger noted that the presence of submarine tenders and related barges would violate the US's interpretation. Following a brief, and fruitless, discussion on the Middle East, the upcoming UN 25 Year Anniversary Celebration, and Vietnam, the meeting adjourned.²⁰² Despite the vague definition, the note indicated the Soviet's willingness to

²⁰⁰ Henry A. Kissinger, Memorandum of Conversation with Soviet Ambassador Anatoliy Dobrynin, The Map Room of the White House, October 6, 1970, 2:15 p.m., National Security Council (NSC) Files, President's Trip Files, Dobrynin/Kissinger Vol. 2 - Vol. 4 (Box 490), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²⁰¹ Copy of Soviet Note, Delivered by Anatoli Dobrynin to Henry A. Kissinger, The Map Room of the White House, October 6, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²⁰² Henry A. Kissinger, Memorandum of Conversation with Soviet Ambassador Anatoliy Dobrynin, The Map Room of the White House, October 6, 1970, 2:15 p.m., NSC Files, President's Trip Files, Dobrynin/Kissinger Vol. 2 - Vol. 4 (Box 490), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

cease construction on the base, which had largely stopped following Kissinger's meeting with Dobrynin on September 25th.²⁰³

Analyses of the note reflected this positive general trend, albeit with similar reservations. The following day, William Hyland of the NSC staff remarked that the note proved the Soviets sought a "quick and easy end to the incident...by taking refuge in the 1962 agreement." Nevertheless, he also argued that the ambiguity in the statement was intentional and that the Soviets would likely follow a narrow definition of the 1962 understanding so that they could continue to operate in the Caribbean.²⁰⁴

Likewise, the Joint Chiefs of Staff commended the note but created a list of acceptable and unacceptable activities that the administration should consider in the definition of a base, the latter of which mainly concerned facilities to service nuclear weapons and SLBM launchers.²⁰⁵ A Soviet acceptance of this list would greatly strengthen the 1962 understanding, and if the Soviets did so in writing, the understanding would become a formal agreement. Consequently, all the principals agreed that they must clear up the ambiguity in the Soviet note before they could agree to anything further.

²⁰³ Memorandum for Henry A. Kissinger, Talking Points for WSAG Meeting on Cuba, October 6, 1970, NSC H-Files, Meeting Files, WSAG Meetings, WSAG Meeting Cuba 10/6/70 (Box H-076), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. Since September 25th, the only change to the base at Cienfuegos was the addition of a fourth anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) installation, which was not considered significant.

²⁰⁴ William Hyland, Memorandum to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Subject: The Soviet Reply, Washington, October 7, 1970, Document 225, FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume XII, Soviet Union, January 1969-October 1970.

²⁰⁵ Captain (USN) Rembrandt C. Robinson, Memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff's Liaison at the National Security Council [Captain Rembrandt C.] (Robinson) to the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Subject: Cuba, Washington, October 8, 1970, Document 226, FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume XII, Soviet Union, January 1969-October 1970. Brackets added by author. Robinson was later promoted to the rank of rear admiral and returned to sea in 1971 in charge of a destroyer flotilla in the Gulf of Tonkin off the coast of Vietnam. In preparation for Operation Pocket Money, the mining of Haiphong harbor ordered by Nixon following the Easter Offensive in 1972, he was killed in a helicopter crash. Robinson was the only U.S. Navy flag officer (rear admiral or higher) killed during the Vietnam War.

Despite these positive developments, the administration maintained the secrecy surrounding the Crisis. Shortly after Dobrynin called him to schedule the meeting on October 6th, Kissinger received a call from Congressman Mendel Rivers, a South Carolina Democrat. During the call, Rivers repeatedly declared his support for the president on this issue but noted his dissatisfaction with not receiving any official information. Kissinger promised to speak with Nixon on this issue but warned Rivers that Nixon intended to “get our ducks in a row before we move.”²⁰⁶

The following day, Kissinger, Rogers, Laird, and other officials of the executive branch held a bi-partisan congressional meeting in the Cabinet Room of the White House, which included, among others, Senator Mansfield, Congressman Rivers, and Congressman Gerald Ford of Michigan.²⁰⁷ Kissinger led the briefing on the Cienfuegos confrontation. Although Kissinger, as per Nixon’s orders, informed the congressmen that the administration was taking a strong stand, he also told them to “keep quiet” to avoid forcing “the Soviets to act out in the open.” The congressmen agreed to Kissinger’s demand, and they pledged their full support for the president and his Cuban policy.²⁰⁸

On the morning of October 9th, the Soviet state’s official news agency (TASS) reprinted an article from the Soviet newspaper *Izvestiya* on the confrontation. The article itself made the same points as the Soviet note delivered to Kissinger—that the base did not exist, that the USSR

²⁰⁶ Telecon, Cong. Mendel Rivers and Kissinger, September 6, 1970, 10:00 a.m., Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 7), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²⁰⁷ List of Participants, Bi-Partisan Congressional Meeting, Wednesday, October 7, 1970, 6:00 p.m., NSC Files, President’s Trip Files, President’s European Trip 1970 (Box 467). Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. Although invited, Senator Fulbright had a previous commitment and could not attend.

²⁰⁸ Telecon, The President and HAK, October 9, 1970, 10:25 a.m., Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 7), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California, page 3.

opposed overseas bases, and that the USSR continued to honor the 1962 understanding—and mirrored Senator Fulbright’s argument that the administration created the issue to pass increased military appropriations through Congress.²⁰⁹ Once again, while these charges of inflated saber rattling certainly displeased Nixon, they provided public cover for both the administration’s diplomacy and the Soviet’s withdrawal from Cuba. In any event, the principals valued official Soviet declarations and, especially, actions more than opinion pieces in state-run communist publications that had a long history of attacking US policies.

More importantly, Kissinger met with Dobrynin later in the day and delivered the US’s reply to the Soviet note from three days prior. Largely the result of the Joint Chief’s list of permissible and impermissible activities from October 7th, Kissinger, with help from Captain Robinson, wrote the note to specifically define the term base. The definition read as follows: “Any facility in Cuba that can be employed to support or repair Soviet naval ships capable of carrying offensive weapons, i.e., submarines or surface ships armed with nuclear capable, surface-to-surface missiles.” Five additional bullet points restricted: storage facilities for nuclear weapons; the transfer of nuclear weapons from, or to, Soviet ships in Cuban ports; naval repair facilities ashore in Cuba; “basing or extended deployment” of submarine tenders in Cuban ports; and the construction of onshore communication posts for submarines in Cuba.²¹⁰

After reading the note, Dobrynin reported that the point on communication facilities would probably bother Moscow, but he agreed to deliver the note and await word from his superiors. As with the *Izvestiya* article from that day, Dobrynin also noted that TASS would

²⁰⁹ Text Reprinted from TASS International and Translated to English, *Izvestiya* Article on Cuba – Vikentiy Matveyev, October 9, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²¹⁰ Copy of US Note, Delivered by Henry A. Kissinger to Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin, October 9, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

publish its own article that reiterated the points in the previous Soviet note.²¹¹ That night, Dobrynin called Kissinger and again questioned a specific point in the US note, this time the restriction on repair facilities, which did not differentiate between those for conventional and nuclear-armed vessels. Kissinger responded that, as with all the other points, the repair facilities referred to vessels with strategic nuclear systems aboard, which cleared up all confusion on the definition of a nuclear submarine base, at least technically.²¹²

The next day began with more promising news. At 8 a.m. the morning of October 10th, the Soviet rescue tug, four merchant ships, and five Cuban patrol boats departed Cienfuegos harbor and headed south, followed by the submarine tender two and a half hours later. Additionally, U-2 reconnaissance flights indicated that the tug had the two barges under tow, at least to the harbor entrance. As before, the CIA did not spot any additional construction on the shore facilities, and the only Soviet ship remaining in the harbor was a naval tanker that was preparing to put out to sea.²¹³ A further report on the 12th confirmed that the two barges, support buoys, and the anti-submarine nets remained in the harbor; nevertheless, the Soviet ships entered the Gulf of Mexico that day and appeared to head towards the open ocean.²¹⁴

²¹¹ Memorandum of Conversation, Dr. Henry A. Kissinger and Soviet Ambassador Anatoliy Dobrynin, Washington, October 9, 1970, 5:30 p.m., Document 228, FRUS, 1969-1976, Volume XII, Soviet Union, January 1969-October 1970.

²¹² Telecon, Mr. Kissinger and Amb. Dobrynin, October 9, 1970, 10:20 p.m., Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 7), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²¹³ CIA Situation Report #20, Memorandum: Soviet Naval Activity in Cuba, Information as of 1400, October 10, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. As per Nixon's previous instructions, a US Navy destroyer stationed outside the harbor entrance trailed the Soviet ships and reported their movements.

²¹⁴ CIA Situation Report #22, Memorandum: Soviet Naval Activity in Cuba, Information as of 1600, October 12, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. As per Nixon's previous instructions, a US Navy destroyer stationed outside the harbor entrance trailed the Soviet ships and reported their movements.

These Soviet naval retreats gave Nixon and Kissinger reason to celebrate, which they promptly did. While at the so-called “Florida White House” in Key Biscayne with the president, Haldeman recalled that Kissinger phoned in from Washington and was “ecstatic—because [the] Russians have folded in Cuba—pulling everything out.” Consequently, Haldeman predicted that Kissinger would try to use the experience to his advantage against Rogers, as his recommended policy led to an evidentially successful outcome. Nixon was also very pleased with the situation, especially since the policies he adopted forced the Soviets out of Cuba without a near showdown before the midterm elections like in 1962. Nevertheless, during this call, Kissinger first broached a complaint that both he and Nixon would repeat henceforth: that the quiet resolution meant that “no one will believe they [the Soviets] were really there.”²¹⁵

Despite this soon-to-be reoccurring observation, the president’s media blackout regarding the Cienfuegos Situation continued indefinitely, as both Nixon and Kissinger explicitly supported the Soviet’s use of denial to cover their retreat from Cuba. At this stage, Nixon did not want to publicly gloat over the USSR’s retreat and thereby spoil any reciprocated goodwill from the Soviets for letting them quietly back down: “they [the Soviets] played fair with us on this [Cienfuegos] and whenever they play fair with us we must play fair with them.” Kissinger agreed and said, “We must not make it public that we faced them down.”²¹⁶ Clearly, Nixon desired a more stable detente with the Soviets and a departure from cascading crises like those in Jordan and Cienfuegos.

²¹⁵ H.R. Haldeman, Diary Entry: Friday, October 9 - Sunday, October 11, 1970, *H.R. Haldeman Diaries Collection, January 18, 1969-April 30, 1973*, The National Archives and Records Administration Online Public Access: Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²¹⁶ Transcript of a Telephone Conversation between President Nixon and the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, October 12, 1970, 6:10 p.m., Document 2, FRUS, Volume XIII, Soviet Union, October 1970-October 1971.

The continuing press blackout indirectly expressed this desire to the Soviets, as the Nixon administration, unlike Kennedy's in 1962, specifically forbade any public celebrations following the Soviet's withdrawal from Cuba. Nixon believed that the Kennedy administration's gloating deeply embarrassed the Soviets and reinforced their desire to augment their nuclear forces. Towards the end of their discussion, Nixon reiterated this point, as well as his desire for a stable detente, to Kissinger: "The main thing is don't embarrass the Russians. We have bigger fish to fry... . We want this summit thing."²¹⁷

October 13th became one of the busiest yet most promising days of the Crisis. That morning, the TASS article Dobrynin mentioned during his last meeting with Kissinger was printed and made the same points that previous Soviet articles and the unofficial statements of Soviet officials had made: that the USSR opposed overseas bases; that both the USSR and the US maintained the 1962 understanding; and that no attempted or completed base ever existed in Cuba.²¹⁸ Unlike the previous sources, however, the Kremlin specifically authorized this TASS article, which meant that it indicated the Soviet government's official line regarding the Cienfuegos Crisis moving forward. As previously explained, Nixon and his principals welcomed this line despite their clear knowledge that it was inaccurate, as it covered the Soviet withdrawal from Cienfuegos.

Also that morning, Nixon chaired another NSC meeting on Cuba. At the outset, Nixon described both his instructions to Kissinger—to speak strongly, yet vaguely, to the press and to speak forcefully and clearly to the Soviets—before the latter's September 25th briefing and the subsequent meeting with Dobrynin, as many of the principals, including Rogers, had not been

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Copy of TASS Article Translated to English, TASS On Cuba, October 13, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

officially briefed on these occurrences. As for his present policy, Nixon reiterated that although the TASS article and the Soviet ship movements were promising, the Crisis was not over and, therefore, the administration would continue to monitor the situation. Consequently, the confidential approach to the press was still in effect, and any public or private “breast-beating” over the Soviets’ retreat was specifically prohibited. Finally, Nixon congratulated his principals for their great “teamwork” during the crisis.²¹⁹

The irony of this statement could not have been lost on either Kissinger or Rogers, particularly the latter. Following the meeting, Rogers pulled Haldeman aside and complained about the lack of transparency from Kissinger regarding his Dobrynin meetings, especially since the Secretary of State now felt that he “looked foolish” in recent meetings with Dobrynin since he was unaware of the back channel and its developments. Rogers demanded that Haldeman talk to Nixon and wanted to know why he allowed Kissinger to restrict this information. While Nixon did not provide an answer to this question, he told Haldeman to talk to Kissinger and require him to inform Rogers on the upcoming meeting with Gromyko at the UN and the general agreement for a summit, both of which Haldeman, certainly reflecting Nixon’s view, regarded as a “good maneuver before [the] elections.”²²⁰

Irrespective of these squabbles, the principals correctly guessed that the TASS statement would arouse the domestic media, and a restricted meeting of the SRG was held following the NSC meeting to arrange press guidance.²²¹ As expected from the president’s remarks, the

²¹⁹ The President’s Talking Points, NSC Meeting: Cuba, October 13, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²²⁰ H.R. Haldeman, Diary Entry: Wednesday, October 14, 1970, *H.R. Haldeman Diaries Collection*, January 18, 1969-April 30, 1973, The National Archives and Records Administration Online Public Access: Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²²¹ Attendees included Kissinger, Laird, Laird’s Military Assistant Colonel (USAF) Robert E. Pursley, Admiral Freeman, Colonel Richard T. Kennedy, Thomas Karamessines of the CIA, and, since Rogers was busy talking with Haldeman, U. Alexis Johnson from the State Department.

selected principals opted for an administration-wide response that noted the positive TASS statement but reiterated that they were continuing to watch the situation, which Nixon promptly approved.²²² Soon thereafter, the Defense Department released a memo for the media that summarized the administration's previous statements regarding Cienfuegos, expressed the president's continued vigilance on the matter, and reported that the tug and salvage ship were at sea north of Havana.²²³ A spokesperson for the State Department was even more terse during a question-and-answer session following a scheduled briefing, as the spokesperson stonewalled all questions on the TASS statement and the Cienfuegos Crisis by merely expressing the positive nature of the former, and the administration's continued attention to the latter.²²⁴

At 3:30 p.m., the CIA reported that the Soviet tanker departed Cienfuegos harbor that afternoon, which meant that all Soviet naval vessels had left. Furthermore, although the barges remained in the harbor, no further construction was noted, and the Cuban navy—which lacked nuclear power vessels or weapons—began utilizing the facilities on Cayo Alcatraz, which further demonstrated the Soviets' withdrawal.²²⁵ Armed with this information, Kissinger called Laird and advised him to cancel a US Navy exercise in the Baltic Sea and refrain from rerouting a similar mission code named Silver Fox in the Black Sea closer to the Soviet coast “as a counter

²²² Memorandum of Conversation, Subject: Restricted SRG/WSAG on Cienfuegos, The Situation Room, October 13, 1970, 10:00 a.m., National Security Council (NSC) Institutional Files (H-Files), Minutes of Meetings, Washington Special Actions Group (WSAG), WSAG Minutes (Originals) 1969 and 1970 (Box H-114), Richard Nixon Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²²³ Memorandum for Correspondents [from the Department of Defense], Cuba, October 13, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. Brackets added by the author. The memo also described Soviet naval efforts in the Mediterranean Sea, which were at an all-time high since the OKEAN-70 maneuvers in March 1970.

²²⁴ Transcript of Press, Radio and Television News Briefing, Department of State, Tuesday, October 13, 1970, 12:30 p.m., NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²²⁵ CIA Situation Report #23, Memorandum: Soviet Naval Activity in Cuba, Information as of 1530, October 13, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. Subsequent reconnaissance determined that the tanker returned to the Soviet Northern Fleet bases on the Kola Peninsula, USSR: CIA Situation Report #28, Memorandum: Soviet Naval Activity in Cuba, Information as of 1400, October 18, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

action to present Soviet naval sorties, especially in the...Western hemisphere.”²²⁶ The following day, after discussing the matter with the president, Kissinger’s recommendations to Laird became a direct order.²²⁷ As with Nixon’s restrictions on gloating in the face of a Soviet retreat, the president and Kissinger were trying to avoid any offensive US moves that would compromise the developing disarmament of the Cienfuegos Confrontation.

Concurrently, Nixon and especially Kissinger began a two-front, somewhat counterintuitive effort with the domestic press. On the 13th, Kissinger received a call from Benjamin Welles of the *New York Times*, as Wells was writing a cover story on the TASS reports and, as he understood it, relatively unimportant construction on Cayo Alcatraz. Although he refrained from giving exact information, Kissinger told Welles “you’ve been fed a pack of lies” and, when Wells asked about the extent of the construction, “I am not saying what it is and what it wasn’t, I just wouldn’t take as truth what other people said it wasn’t.”²²⁸ Nevertheless, Welles’ piece, printed the next day, downplayed the significance of the construction and reported that the alleged Soviet barracks resembled “chicken houses.”²²⁹ While cryptic, Kissinger’s remarks prove that he wanted to simultaneously keep the issue low-key and convince the media that the Soviet efforts were legitimate and serious.

²²⁶ Telecon, Secretary Laird and HAK, October 13, 1970, 4:15 p.m., Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 7), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California; Secret Message to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Subject: Black Sea Operations, October 2, 1970, National Security Council (NSC) Files, Subject Files, USSR US Ships in the Black Sea (Silver Fox) (Box 405), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²²⁷ From HAK, Memorandum for Secretary of Defense, Subject: Black Sea and Baltic Sea Operations, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²²⁸ Telecon, Benjamin Well[e]s (NYT) and HAK, October 13, 1970, 5:35 p.m., Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 7), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. Brackets added by the author: Kissinger’s secretary transcribing the call misspelled Welles’ name. Kissinger called back to make sure Welles would refrain from quoting him directly, to which Wells responded, “We wouldn’t quote you for anything on earth.”

²²⁹ Benjamin Welles, “U.S. Now Dubious on Cuba Sub Base,” *The New York Times*, October 14, 1970, 1, 4.

More specifically on this same issue, Kissinger called Chuck Bailey of *The Chicago Sun Times* on October 16th after Bailey wrote a column that stated the “Nixon/Kissinger group was crying wolf too much on Cuba.” Again, although he did not provide any facts, Kissinger simultaneously expressed the gravity of the Crisis and the need to keep the situation quiet:

They [the Soviets] were making a substantial effort [in Cienfuegos]. We wouldn't have done this [the September 25th backgrounder] if there hadn't been something. I'm not asking that you write about this again... . I don't think anything is served now by writing about it again. The more low-key the better.

This counterintuitive strategy—of noting to journalists how serious the situation was and forbidding them from writing about it—was all about timing. Surely, compelling the Soviets to back down from Cuba reflected positively on Nixon and Kissinger. Nevertheless, they both believed that their efforts towards détente were better served by keeping the issue quiet, especially since the Soviet ships were still near the island. Once the crisis passed, however, Nixon and Kissinger certainly expected to reveal how potentially dangerous the confrontation was and how their efforts solved the issue in the US's favor.

Unfortunately for Nixon, information on Cuba continued to leak. At noon on October 15th, the destroyer escort USS *Forster* (DE-334) sighted the Soviet tug and tender entering the Cuban port of Mariel, a naval port west of Havana.²³⁰ As Kissinger noted during a phone call with Rogers the next day, this was hardly news, as Mariel was the traditional refueling point for Soviet vessels entering and departing Cuba, and nothing suggested that the Soviets would not

²³⁰ CIA Situation Report #26, Memorandum: Soviet Naval Activity in Cuba, Information as of 1600, October 16, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. Exactly one year after the Friedheim blunder, the USS *Forster*—an *Edsall*-class destroyer escort built during World War II that served in both the US Navy and the US Coast Guard—was loaned to South Vietnam, where she was eventually captured by the North Vietnamese during the Fall of Saigon and pressed into service with their navy.

soon depart. Without authorization, and within three minutes of the White House receiving this information, a Defense Department spokesperson again briefed the press on the Soviet's position in Cuba, which dealt mostly with the flotilla's arrival in Mariel. Such revelations worried Kissinger, as he told Rogers, "This now puts them [the Soviets] into the position where they seem to have backed down": which, in his mind, threatened the summit specifically and SALT generally.²³¹

Unsurprisingly, when he learned about the briefing, "the President went through the ceiling."²³² This occurred during a call with Kissinger, as Nixon barked: "Who the hell over there [in the Defense Department] is doing it [authorizing the leaks]? We ordered them not to say a damn thing... I am raising holy hell about it." Once he cooled down slightly, Nixon advised Kissinger to tell Dobrynin that the administration still desired a summit and broach the idea of having Gromyko formally invite the president during the upcoming UN meeting.²³³ Kissinger did as he was instructed when he met with Dobrynin the next day, and the ambassador reported that Kremlin viewed a summit as, once again, "positive," especially if it was in Moscow, and reported that Gromyko would mention it if his meeting with Nixon was going well.²³⁴ In this roundabout way, Nixon sought to assuage any negative Soviet reactions to the Defense Department briefing and thereby foster his moves towards a greater *détente*.

The situation in Cuba remained unchanged while Nixon and his principals met with Gromyko in New York from October 20-23rd. On the first day, Rogers met the Soviet foreign

²³¹ Telecon, Secretary Rogers and HAK, October 16, 1970, 6:30 p.m., Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 7), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. Haig also spoke with Rogers at the beginning of the call while Kissinger was preoccupied.

²³² *Ibid.*

²³³ Telecon, Mr. Kissinger/The President, October 16, 1970, 1:15 p.m., Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 7), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²³⁴ Memorandum of Conversation, Henry A. Kissinger and Ambassador Dobrynin, Washington, October 17, 1970, 5 p.m., Document 14, FRUS, Volume XIII, Soviet Union, October 1970-October 1971.

minister to set the tone for Nixon's meeting the following day, and the Cienfuegos Confrontation was only briefly discussed. Rogers began the discussion and noted the administration's satisfaction with Moscow's recent words and actions—very much in keeping with Nixon's approved guidance on the subject. Likewise, Gromyko repeated his government's approved line: that Moscow was surprised with the American hysteria, particularly since the USSR never intended on building a submarine base and concluded that the whole Crisis was the result of domestic political considerations within the US. As Kissinger had done with Dobrynin, Rogers coolly remarked that the US was aware of what had happened in Cuba and changed the subject after he reiterated the administration's satisfaction over recent Soviet decisions.²³⁵

Irrespective of Gromyko's statement's factual basis, the Rogers-Gromyko exchange reinforced Nixon's conclusion that the Soviets were adhering to the 1962 understanding and, as a result, were retreating from Cuba. Overall, Rogers also succeeded in conveying the administration's desire to move towards a more stable *détente* and away from "eyeball-to-eyeball confrontations" like in Cuba and Jordan. Additionally, the Americans present reported that Gromyko seemed "subdued" rather than confrontational with Rogers; consequently, John N. Irwin II, the Under Secretary of State, argued that the Soviets were surprised that the administration firmly resisted these "probes" despite the recent nuclear parity and the "US preoccupation with Vietnam and internal problems." Therefore, Irwin recommended a strong,

²³⁵ Helmut Sonnenfeldt, Memorandum for General Haig, Subject: Additional Material on Rogers-Gromyko Conversations, October 21, 1970, NSC Files, Country Files – Europe, USSR Vol. IX-X, August 1-November 1970 (Box 713), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

but conciliatory, attitude towards Gromyko, as the president prepared to meet him on the 22nd. If the Cienfuegos Crisis came up, Irwin suggested that Nixon repeat Rogers' statements.²³⁶

From Gromyko's point of view, the Cuban aspect of his meeting with Nixon was anticlimactic. Although the issue was on the discussion docket, Nixon never brought the subject up, which amazed Gromyko and made him wonder whether the US had any secret plans regarding Cuba. Consequently, Gromyko had Dobrynin speak with Kissinger on the following day, October 23rd, to explain what the foreign minister would have said if the president mentioned the subject. Unsurprisingly, Gromyko's prepared statement was the same as the one he made to Rogers on the 20th, although he added that the USSR intended to "abide strictly" by the 1962 understanding and the additional diplomatic exchanges—mostly between Kissinger and Dobrynin—since August 1970.²³⁷

By October 22nd, the principals believed that the Cienfuegos Confrontation was effectively over. Although the Soviet tug and tender remained at Mariel, the CIA reports indicated that they were merely refueling before their voyage back to the USSR. Meanwhile, the Soviets turned their facilities in Cienfuegos harbor over to the Cubans, which ended their offensive nuclear threat. Still the tender's presence necessitated continued vigilance and a press embargo, although Kissinger now began setting the stage for public celebrations of his efforts. During a call with Kissinger on the 22nd, Chalmers Roberts, a correspondent for the *Washington Post*, requested more information on the confrontation, since "Cuba is taken care of," to which Kissinger joked, "How could we take care of something that didn't exist?" More generally, and

²³⁶ John N. Irwin II, Memorandum for the President, Subject: Your Meeting with Gromyko, October 22, 11:00 a.m., October 21, 1970, NSC Files, Country Files – Europe, USSR Vol. IX-X, August 1-November 1970 (Box 713), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²³⁷ Henry A. Kissinger, October 23, 1970 Discussion on Cuba and Summit with Ambassador Dobrynin in New York City at the Soviet Mission, October 23, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

seriously, Kissinger remarked that the US and USSR were now moving in a positive direction away “from confrontation to negotiation,” and when Roberts again asked when the administration would tell the press “what really happened in Cuba,” Kissinger merely replied: “In due course.”²³⁸

Part III: Tender Diplomacy

“All You Have is Gossip”: October 23 – November 16, 1970

That “due course” proved much farther off than Kissinger anticipated. As he tersely explained in his memoirs, “nothing with the Soviets ever works this simply.”²³⁹ Thereafter, the Soviets continued to test the administration’s patience over the augmented understanding, albeit with less confrontational means. This final caveat, however, benefits from historical hindsight and was then unknown to Nixon and his principals—as far as they knew, the Soviets might have relaunched the confrontation at any time. As it happened, the voyages of submarines and submarine tenders, rather than the existence of submarine bases, reignited the crisis.

Signs of trouble first arose during Kissinger’s meeting with Dobrynin on October 23rd. After he explained Gromyko’s official position on the recent crisis, Dobrynin stated that Moscow could not officially agree to Kissinger’s list of prohibited systems, since “it was not based on reciprocity” such as limitations on US-supported Cuban exile groups that were still fighting Castro. Still, the ambassador added that the list enabled the Kremlin to understand what the US considered a submarine base and noted that the Soviet leaders would take the provisions “into

²³⁸ Telecon, Chalmers Roberts/Kissinger, October 22, 1970, 5:27 p.m., Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 7), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²³⁹ Kissinger, *White House Years*, 651.

serious consideration.²⁴⁰ Clearly, the Soviets were disappointed that Nixon failed to offer any tit-for-tat exchange, as Kennedy had clandestinely done with the US Jupiter missiles in Turkey for the Soviet missiles in Cuba in 1962.

More ominously, Dobrynin said that Moscow was particularly concerned that the list prohibited any Soviet naval ships and submarines from visiting Cuba. Kissinger explained that the composition of the vessels was critical: the US would consider any vessels that “extended the operating radius or length of time that a ship could stay at sea,” like a tender, a threat if it loitered in the Caribbean or in a Cuban port for over a month. Dobrynin shot back: “Well, in due time, it [the submarine tender then in Mariel] will probably leave, but we...simply cannot accept the proposition that we do not have a right to make an occasional visit.” Kissinger repeated his hope that Moscow would adhere to his list even if they would not officially agree to it, and the meeting ended after Dobrynin made one final reference to the TASS statement from October 13th.²⁴¹

Following his presence at the UN until October 23rd, Nixon focused on his heavy campaign schedule until the midterm elections on November 3rd.²⁴² Meanwhile, the Soviet submarine tender and tug had left Mariel by November 1st, which Friedheim announced on

²⁴⁰ Henry A. Kissinger, October 23, 1970, Discussion on Cuba and Summit with Ambassador Dobrynin in New York City at the Soviet Mission, October 23, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² H.R. Haldeman, Diary Entry: Thursday, October 29, 1970, *H.R. Haldeman Diaries Collection, January 18, 1969-April 30, 1973*, The National Archives and Records Administration Online Public Access: Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. For example, the president visited Chicago and Rockford Illinois, Rochester New York, Omaha Nebraska, and San Jose California on this day. At San Jose, Haldeman states that the president and his staff intentionally angered protesters and allowed them to attack their motorcade, which resulted in Haldeman’s car stalling and an ensuing collision, as part of a political stunt. Once he arrived at his home in San Clemente California, Nixon accidentally started a minor house fire, which greatly amused him. Clearly, Nixon had other fish, and houses, to fry, and was not entirely focused on the Cuban situation as his political campaigning intensified.

election day.²⁴³ As Kissinger's last conversation with Dobrynin had indicated, the submarine tender, after initially heading out to the open sea, set a course for southern Cuba and returned to Cienfuegos on November 9th. Although annoyed, Kissinger was not initially alarmed by the news, as his previous meeting with Dobrynin had made clear that the duration of the tender's visit was more concerning than a visit in general. At this stage, he told Laird that the Soviets were "just playing a game" with the administration, most likely to signal their continued naval independence in the Caribbean despite the recent strengthening of the 1962 understanding.²⁴⁴

Even if this visit was merely a game, the administration intensified its press silence. This withholding of information extended to the reinforcement of the 1962 understanding, which was guarded, although not completely, by the principals and led to another tense phone call between Kissinger and a columnist, this time with Robert Toth of the *LA Times*. After Toth asked about the new understanding, Kissinger shot back: "I have heard so much nonsense on Cuba from middle class officials in the past two months. I just do not care," although he did indicate that the 1962 understanding was augmented.²⁴⁵ In a less confrontational manner, Admiral Moorer also followed Nixon's press guidance when, on the same day, he accurately denied the contemporary existence of a Soviet submarine base in Cuba at a meeting of the Economic Club of Detroit.²⁴⁶

²⁴³ Associated Press, "Two Russian Ships Leave Port in Cuba," *The Washington Post*, November 3, 1970, A2.

²⁴⁴ Telecon, Secretary Laird and HAK, November 9, 1970, 8:45 a.m., Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 7), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²⁴⁵ Telecon, Mr. Kissinger and Robert Toth (*LA Times*), (paraphrased), November 9, 1970, 7:02 p.m., Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 7), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²⁴⁶ [Robert G.] Houdek, Question and Answer on Soviet Submarines in and around Cienfuegos, Cuba, Admiral Moorer at Economic Club of Detroit, November 9, 1970, 9 p.m., NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. The phrasing of the question—"Do the Russians actually have a submarine base in Cuba?"—and the suspension of onshore construction in Cienfuegos harbor, allowed Moorer to truthfully answer the question: "No, they don't actually have a submarine base in Cuba." If the question asked if the Russians had tried to build a base, then Moorer would have had more difficulty in answering factually.

By November 13th, the administration could not conceal the augmented understanding, and Nixon released an official statement that recognized it as a fusion of Kennedy's 1962 statements and the TASS article from October 13th. Likewise, the tender's return leaked to the press, and Kissinger grew increasingly concerned and confused as its length of stay increased. He expressed these frustrations to U. Alexis Johnson during a phone call, "I just cannot believe that they [the Soviets] will be wanting a showdown at this point." Johnson reiterated Kissinger's previous point that the Soviets were merely trying to prove their "ability to make 'courtesy calls,'" and recommended that Kissinger speak with Dobrynin, which he did the following morning.²⁴⁷

Kissinger immediately noted that although he was hesitant to raise the subject of Cuba again, both he and the president believed that the tender's return violated "the whole thrust" of their recent meetings with Soviet officials and "made it extremely difficult...to claim the Cuban issue was resolved." Dobrynin stated simply that he would convey this message to Moscow but also expressed amazement that both Kissinger and Nixon took the tender's presence so seriously.²⁴⁸ That afternoon, Kissinger discussed the meeting on the phone with Nixon and informed him that the tender was "in a corner...on the Cuban side of the harbor," which indicated that it was not in an operational capacity. Consequently, Kissinger's anxiety waned, and he told Nixon that the Soviets were "trying to kick us a little... . It's a salami tactic where they always test you."²⁴⁹ Thus, Kissinger returned to his original understanding of the tender's significance.

²⁴⁷ Transcript of a Telephone Conversation Between the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) and the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs (Johnson), Washington, November 13, 1970, 12:05 p.m., Document 40, FRUS, Volume XIII, Soviet Union, October 1970-October 1971.

²⁴⁸ Memorandum of Conversation, Participants: Ambassador Dobrynin and Henry A. Kissinger, Washington, November 14, 1970, 10 a.m., Document 41, FRUS, Volume XIII, Soviet Union, October 1970-October 1971.

²⁴⁹ Telecon, Mr. Kissinger and the President, November 14, 1970, 2:20 p.m., Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 7), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum,

The following day, Ben Welles, on the orders of the *New York Times*' chief Washington correspondent Max Frankel, called Kissinger to discuss a story he was writing on rumors that the administration expected the tender to leave in a few days. Kissinger believed that printing this false information would anger the Soviets and force the tender to either leave in a few days or, more probably, stay longer than anticipated to prove Soviet mettle. He strongly advised Welles to delete the time frame from his article. Kissinger then rerouted the conversation by stating, "We consider the removal of the tender [as] desirable." The conversation soon became tense:

W[elles]: You have given me nothing but you say it is irresponsible to put in a time limit.

K[issinger]: Do not have 2 or 3 days. Anyone who told you that did not know what he was talking about.

W: Possibly.

K: Certainly... . I think that I have gone as far as I am going to on this. Thank you for calling.²⁵⁰

Five minutes later, Kissinger called Frankel about this "painful, semi-blackmailing conversation with Ben." He then explained publishing the time frame then "would be the worst possible timing and would jeopardize" his negotiations with the Soviets, to which Frankel responded, "I

Yorba Linda, California. In political parlance, salami tactics describe many small, semi-controversial, and often incremental steps taken to slowly wear down an opponent into accepting a change to the *status quo*. In this case, Kissinger used the term to suggest that the Soviets would likely continue to send tenders to Cuba—an offensive move, but not as intolerable as an established base—until the US accepted tender visits as normal.

²⁵⁰ Telecon, Mr. Kissinger and Ben Wells (NYTimes), November 14, 1970, 2:00 p.m., Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 7), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. Earlier in the call, Kissinger decried what Welles referred to as "my accurate sources of information" by barking, "You have no other sources of accurate information. All you have is gossip. I do not know who gave you this information, but it is just not right."

think I get the picture” and agreed to talk to Welles.²⁵¹ The following morning, Welles’ long article appeared on the cover of the *New York Times* and included the statement that US “officials said they would regard the departure of a Soviet submarine tender...as proof that the Russians accept the understanding.” It was a paraphrased version of Kissinger’s “desirable” statement. Nevertheless, Welles then added that, “officials disputed a report from another highly credible source that the tender would leave within the next two or three days.”²⁵² Clearly, Kissinger’s “semi-blackmailing conversation” and his subsequent call with Frankel only had a limited effect on Welles.

On November 16th, Dobrynin and Kissinger met again. During the meeting, Dobrynin mentioned two recent articles that he took issue with: Welles’ and one in the *Washington Post* titled “U.S., Russia Dispute Cuba ‘Pact’ Claims.”²⁵³ Ironically, the former did not particularly bother Dobrynin for the same reason that it infuriated Kissinger: it was “inaccurate in essential parts,” most likely the time frame; however, the latter specifically mentioned five secret meetings between the two men, which led Dobrynin to believe that Kissinger leaked their meetings in order to put pressure on the Soviets to withdraw their tanker, which he described as a “veiled ultimatum.” Although Kissinger denied this charge, Dobrynin stated that his government would probably keep the tender in Cienfuegos for another week, rather than a few days, “just to show that they [the Soviets] are not to be intimidated by us.” Finally, when Kissinger, on

²⁵¹ Telecon, Mr. Kissinger and Max Frankel, November 14, 1970, 2:05 p.m., Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 7), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²⁵² Benjamin Welles, “Soviets Removal of Vessel in Cuba is Awaited by U.S.,” *The New York Times*, November 15, 1970, 1, 22.

²⁵³ “U.S., Russia Dispute Cuba ‘Pact’ Claims,” *The Washington Post*, November 15, 1970, A12.

Nixon's orders, tried to discuss the summit Dobrynin was evasive, and said he was not prepared to discuss it for a few weeks.²⁵⁴

Concurrently, the Kissinger-Rogers battle resurfaced. That day, Haig talked to Haldeman and reported that Rogers was bitter that he and the State Department were being kept out of the loop on Cienfuegos and the tender. Worse still, Haig alleged that Rogers was intentionally speaking disparagingly of the administration on this issue with reporters to "protect and build his [own] position," which he thought would damage Nixon's credibility and lead to further near or actual confrontations with the Soviets. Finally, Haig suggested that Kissinger was once again "on the verge of quitting" because of Rogers' actions and the fact that Kissinger's access to the president was recently limited. Haldeman wrote that Kissinger's complaint was accurate, but also that "no one has [had access to Nixon recently]—except re politics."²⁵⁵

(Silver) Fox Hunt: November 17 – December 2, 1970

As the situation stagnated, Nixon sought creative solutions to demonstrate the US's resolve and thereby compel the Soviets, through linkage, to abandon their Caribbean salami tactics. Kissinger, therefore, recommended augmenting and changing the course of a scheduled US Navy visit to the Black Sea, as had been suggested on October 2nd.²⁵⁶ The plan enhanced the US task force from two destroyers to three, doubled the length of the voyage from three days to six, and set a course that would take them within 39, rather than 47, nautical miles of the Soviet coast. These increases, Haig reported, "would represent a significant change from previous Black

²⁵⁴ Memorandum of Conversation, Ambassador Dobrynin and Henry A. Kissinger, The Map Room, White House, November 16, 1970, 3:00 p.m., NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²⁵⁵ H.R. Haldeman, Diary Entry: Monday, November 16, 1970, *H.R. Haldeman Diaries Collection, January 18, 1969-April 30, 1973*, The National Archives and Records Administration Online Public Access: Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²⁵⁶ Memorandum from the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) to President Nixon, Subject: US Ships in the Black Sea, Washington, November 18, 1970, Document 49, FRUS, Volume XIII, Soviet Union, October 1970-October 1971.

Sea visits.” Unsurprisingly, Haig also noted that Rogers’ State Department would likely oppose the plan, and he advised Kissinger “to obtain the President’s approval for this type of mission prior to” informing the other cabinet officials.²⁵⁷

Nixon obliged his National Security Advisor and approved the expanded operation on November 19th. Nevertheless, Haig repeated his warning about the State Department’s disapproval and recommended that Kissinger tell the NSC about the plan, and the president’s approval, at a meeting of the 40 Committee scheduled that afternoon.²⁵⁸ Kissinger followed his deputy’s advice, and told members of the committee that Nixon, codenamed “higher authority,” had approved the plan “in principle.” U. Alexis Johnson then confirmed Haig’s State Department suspicions and disapproved of the enhancement, especially since the tender had left Cienfuegos that morning. Additionally, Johnson stated that the Turkish government would protest the move, which Admiral Moorer seconded, as the Montreux Convention recommended an eight-day, and required a fifteen-day, advance warning for naval vessels entering the Black Sea.²⁵⁹ The original mission was scheduled to begin eight days later.

Kissinger agreed with Moorer’s assessment and considered keeping the original number of destroyers but disagreed with Johnson’s assessment of the tender’s departure, as it was still in Cuban waters and was likely to dock at another port. The Soviets, then, would probably continue their salami tactics, and Kissinger hoped that the expanded Silver Fox mission would coerce the

²⁵⁷ Al Haig, Memorandum for Henry A. Kissinger, Subject: Destroyers in the Black Sea, November 18, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²⁵⁸ Memorandum from Alexander Haig to Henry A. Kissinger, November 19, 1970, NSC Files, Subject Files, USSR US Ships in the Black Sea (Silver Fox) (Box 405), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²⁵⁹ The Montreux Convention was signed in 1936 and, in addition to the advance warning period, limits the number and tonnage of naval vessels allowed to pass through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles Straits.

tender to return to the USSR. Finally, he instructed Moorer to check the specifics of the Montreux Convention, and the group moved on to other subjects.²⁶⁰

On the 21st, Moorer altered the US Navy's Sixth Fleet—then, as now, stationed in the Mediterranean Sea—that “higher authority” sought an increased length of time for the mission and a revised “track to follow navigation points” closer to the USSR.²⁶¹ Although the message also mentioned the addition of the third destroyer, Kissinger, Moorer, and Rogers discussed the issue with the Turkish government through the US embassy in Ankara. The Turks remained firm in their fifteen-day requirement but noted that they would approve an expanded mission thereafter.²⁶² Not wanting a disagreement with the Turks while the Cienfuegos situation continued, Nixon finally approved the enhanced mission, albeit with the originally planned two destroyer complement.

Task Force (TF)-68—as the Silver Fox participants USS *Perry* (DD-844) and USS *Allen M. Sumner* (DD-692) were dubbed—entered the Black Sea on November 27th. Soon after, a Soviet intelligence collection ship illuminated the destroyers with its searchlights and began shadowing them the following day. A Soviet destroyer then joined the intelligence ship, and three Soviet aircraft overflew TF-68, including a Tu-16 bomber that flew at a low level of 500 ft. On the 29th, the *Perry* made sonar contact with a Soviet submarine and jammed the submarine's telecommunications. The next day, another Soviet destroyer replaced the intelligence ship and continued to shadow TF-68 until it left the Black Sea on December 2nd. Although the Soviets

²⁶⁰ Memorandum for the Record, Subject: Minutes of the Meeting of the 40 Committee, 19 November 1970, Washington, November 19, 1970, Document 50, FRUS, Volume XIII, Soviet Union, October 1970-October 1971.

²⁶¹ Secret Transmission, From the Department of Defense's National Military Command Center's Message Center, Subject: Silver Fox, November 21, 1970, NSC Files, Subject Files, USSR US Ships in the Black Sea (Silver Fox) (Box 405), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²⁶² Secret Telegram, From the US Embassy in Turkey to the Secretary of State (Rogers) in Washington, Subject: Silver Fox, November 24, 1970, NSC Files, Subject Files, USSR US Ships in the Black Sea (Silver Fox) (Box 405), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

clearly noticed the augmented Silver Fox mission, Admiral Robinson informed Kissinger that these Soviet actions were routine in the Black Sea and that “the U.S. destroyers were not harassed” beyond normal levels.²⁶³

Despite Nixon and Kissinger’s expectations, Silver Fox did not compel the Soviet ships to leave Cuban waters. The mission was a poor compromise born of counterintuitive interests. On the one hand, Nixon believed that communists across the world responded best to shows of force and he often called on the US military for such demonstrations. However, his desire to avoid confrontations and move towards détente with the USSR decreased the level of force that he was prepared to use. A diplomatic precept contends that a response to a challenge is effective only if it matches or exceeds the intensity of the challenge. Slightly changing a regularly scheduled voyage neither matched nor exceeded a policy of deploying SSBNs and support ships to Cuba. Therefore, Silver Fox did not credibly threaten the Soviets and, consequentially, had little impact on their Caribbean deployments.

Verbal Resolution: December 1970 – May 12, 1972

The failure of Silver Fox necessitated a return to diplomatic measures to quell the Soviet’s continued salami tactics in the Caribbean. While these measures failed to end tender voyages entirely, Nixon and Kissinger successfully prevented the Soviets from servicing SSBN’s in Cuban waters. Additionally, the Soviets never resumed construction of the base at Cienfuegos or began any comparable construction elsewhere.²⁶⁴ Therefore, while Soviet naval voyages

²⁶³ Secret Memorandum for Dr. Kissinger, From Admiral Robinson, Subject: Soviet Surveillance of Black Sea Operations, November 27 – December 2, 1970, December 3, 1970, NSC Files, Subject Files, USSR US Ships in the Black Sea (Silver Fox) (Box 405), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²⁶⁴ Memorandum for the President From Henry A. Kissinger, Subject: Status of the Soviet Support Facilities at Cienfuegos, Cuba, December 22, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. Kissinger reported that “construction had virtually ceased” and that the anti-aircraft and field artillery emplacements were removed. Only

continued to pester the administration, Nixon and Kissinger achieved their primary goal of keeping Soviet offensive nuclear weapons out of the Caribbean.

Compelling the Soviets to entirely cease their naval deployments to Cuba would have been legally and operationally challenging. The Soviet Navy, like the US Navy, freely navigated the seas and visited friendly nations without violating any international agreements. The Soviets' refusal to formally accept Kissinger's definition of a base, which included provisions on submarine support ships, proved critical in this regard, as it predicted further naval deployments to their Latin American ally. Reflecting this reality, Vorontsov told the reporter Hans Meyer that the tender would operate "on the high seas which is its right and which is not restricted by any 'understanding.'" Additionally, the chargé said that the tender would dock in Cuba for "replenishment and maintenance," which was "also not subject to any 'understanding.'"²⁶⁵ These statements concerned Nixon, as the tenders could serve as mobile submarine bases in and around Cuba.²⁶⁶

Media interest in tenders, submarines, and Cienfuegos generally waned after October 1970, but each subsequent Soviet voyage or related statement garnered some limited press coverage. Late in November 1970, Chalmers Roberts of *The Washington Post* teased Kissinger on one of these occurrences: "I hear your favorite tender is back in Cienfuegos." Prophetically, Roberts also asked, "What are you going to do when the first submarine shows up there?" Kissinger simultaneously avoided the question and reciprocated Roberts' humor in his response:

radar installations and basic structures for the technologically limited Cuban military remained, such as a fishing pier and barracks.

²⁶⁵ Memorandum for Mr. Kissinger from Helmut Sonnenfeldt, Subject: Reported Vorontsov Statement on Soviet Submarine Tender in Cuba, November 24, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²⁶⁶ Although submarine bases are more effective, defensible, and repairable than tenders, the support ships serve the same purpose as port facilities: servicing, repairing, and re-arming submarines.

“Look, I have to keep a margin of ambiguity.”²⁶⁷ Less amusingly for the administration, a Soviet diesel-electric Foxtrot-class attack submarine and three other vessels entered Antilla—a port on the northeast coast of Cuba—on December 7th.²⁶⁸ Five days later, the loitering tender serviced the submarine in the harbor, and the five-ship group arrived in Cienfuegos on December 21st.²⁶⁹

The following day, Kissinger discussed the Soviet voyage with Nixon and then met with Dobrynin for a three-and-a-half-hour luncheon. Representative of Nixon’s view, Kissinger began the conversation on Cuba with the observation that “there was now added a growing personal irritation.” More specifically, Kissinger commented that servicing nuclear submarines “in or from Cuban ports...would lead to the most grave situation between” the two superpowers. Finally, Kissinger noted that if the Soviets did not intend to service nuclear submarines in the Caribbean, then they had no reason to station tenders near the island. Dobrynin tactfully evaded the merits of Kissinger’s conditional statement and changed the subject.²⁷⁰

These evasions frustrated Nixon, and soon after this meeting, he decided to press the Soviets with a public declaration of his views. In response to a question about Cuba during a live multi-network television and radio interview on January 4, 1971, Nixon publicly revealed Kissinger’s confidential warning to Dobrynin: “Now, in the event that nuclear submarines were

²⁶⁷ Telecon, Chalmers Roberts and Mr. Kissinger, November 27, 1970, 6:20 p.m., Kissinger Telephone Conversation Transcripts, Chronological File, 1969-1974 (Box 7), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²⁶⁸ The Foxtrot-class was neither nuclear powered nor carried strategic nuclear ballistic missiles. As an attack submarine, it was designed to attack enemy merchant and naval ships with torpedoes, not to fire strategic weapons. While Soviet and American attack submarines did carry nuclear torpedoes, these were considered tactical, not strategic, weapons. Therefore, its arrival did not cause intense alarm; however, it did conform to Kissinger’s salami tactic prediction, which indicated that the Soviets were increasing the stakes with each voyage. If this continued, Kissinger feared that the Soviets would eventually sail a SSBN to Cuba.

²⁶⁹ Memorandum, Recent Chronology of Key Soviet Vessels in Cuba [Author and Date Missing], NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. Brackets added by the author.

²⁷⁰ Memorandum of Conversation, Henry A. Kissinger and Ambassador Anatole [sic] Dobrynin, Map Room of the White House, December 22, 1970, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

serviced either in Cuba or from Cuba, that would be a violation of the understanding.”²⁷¹

Although Vorontsov’s statement to Meyer proved that the Soviets did not include tender limitations in the understanding, Nixon insinuated that they did: “We expect [the Soviets] to abide by the understanding. I believe they will.”²⁷² Clearly, Nixon believed that Kissinger’s backchannel threats to Dobrynin were falling on deaf ears, and he chose to finally make his position on the matter clear and overt.

The interview marked the first time Nixon publicly commented on the Cienfuegos Crisis and officially confirmed that the 1962 understanding was “expanded”—something that the media suspected but could not previously certify.²⁷³ Nixon’s statement may initially seem bizarre, as he had evaded the issue for nearly four months. However, the statement itself was strategically worded and almost certainly written beforehand, as Nixon succinctly stated his view of the understanding but did not admit that the Soviets disagreed with it or were violating it. Satisfied with his statement but unwilling to draw more media attention, Nixon circulated another memorandum within the administration that barred any “further public discussion or comment”²⁷⁴. Henceforth, the January 4th statement became the administration’s official policy.

Soon after the interview, Nixon instructed Kissinger to protest all Soviet submarine and tender voyages to Cuba and demand a prohibition on tenders servicing SSBNs in the region. The

²⁷¹ Nixon did not disclose the existence or the contents of the conversation between Kissinger and Dobrynin, but his warning was nearly the same as Kissinger’s to Dobrynin.

²⁷² Transcript from the Office of the White House Press Secretary, A Conversation with the President on Live Television and Radio with John Chancellor, NBC; Eric Sevareid, CBS; Nancy H. Dickerson, PBS; and Howard K. Smith, ABC, the White House, 9:00 P.M. EST, January 4, 1971, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²⁷³ Max Frankel, “President Terms Cuba Off Limits for Soviet Subs,” *The New York Times*, January 5, 1971, 1.

²⁷⁴ Richard Nixon, Memorandum for the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, and the Director of Central Intelligence, Subject: Public Comment on Soviet Naval Activity in Cuba, January 6, 1971, NSC Files, Alexander M. Haig Special Files, Cuba (Box 1000), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

first opportunity came on January 28th, when the US detected another Soviet fleet that included a tender headed for the Caribbean. Later that day, Kissinger met with Dobrynin and told him that such a voyage “would not be considered a friendly act by the President,” especially “during the preparation for a summit.”²⁷⁵ Evidently, Nixon wanted the Cienfuegos Crisis resolved before he attended any détente-building events. Dobrynin then chose his favorite concluding remarks: he would have to verify Kissinger’s information with Moscow and await further instructions. The meeting then ended.²⁷⁶

The naval group loitered in the Atlantic and the Caribbean before it docked in Cienfuegos harbor on February 16th. This time, a nuclear-powered attack submarine docked next to the tender, which suggested that the tender was servicing the submarine: another escalatory step. Frustrated, Kissinger told Nixon, “[Mr.] President, they’re [the Soviets] really putting it to us... . It's one of their games. They are just a bunch of thugs.” Equally perturbed, Nixon snapped back, “They just are... . I saw that and I said, ‘Well, here we go again.’ What a jerk.” Nixon’s anger stemmed from the Soviets’ intransigence to abide by his January 4th statement, which, in his mind, required a forceful American response to prevent domestic political embarrassment: “Well, we have to do it [respond strongly to the Soviets] because we said so, Henry.”²⁷⁷ In this instance, Nixon felt obligated to keep a political promise.

Later that day, Kissinger met with Dobrynin, who was “in a very jovial mood,” to discuss the situation in Cienfuegos. The Soviet ambassador’s good mood faded, as the meeting quickly

²⁷⁵ As from the opening days of the crisis, Nixon remained transfixed on holding a summit with the Soviets since such a high-level meeting would signal a developing détente between the two nations. Unbeknownst to him, the summit would not occur until May 1972 in Moscow.

²⁷⁶ Henry A. Kissinger, Memorandum for the President’s File, Subject: Meeting of Dr. Kissinger and Ambassador Anatoliy Dobrynin in The Map Room, The White House, 1:00 p.m., January 28, 1971, Document 105, FRUS, Volume XIII, Soviet Union, October 1970-October 1971.

²⁷⁷ Conversation Between President Nixon and the President’s Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger), Washington, February 16, 1971, Document 114, FRUS, Volume XIII, Soviet Union, October 1970-October 1971.

became one of the most contentious of the crisis and “broke up in a rather chilly atmosphere.” Kissinger immediately contrasted the Soviet behavior in Cuba with the concurrent, improving negotiations towards a summit. He then reiterated Nixon’s January 4th statement and added that the president “considered a submarine tender as constituting an essential element of a base,” which the US could not consent to.

Dobrynin said the visit was merely a “port call” and sarcastically asked if the USSR had to ask the US for permission every time they wanted to visit Cuba. Kissinger repeated his previous statement, and when Dobrynin tried to change the subject to Berlin, he declined to discuss another topic until he “had some explanation on the...tender.” Dobrynin fired back and said such a request “would be construed as very arrogant in Moscow,” to which Kissinger “replied that in the United States [the Soviet] behavior was construed as being very provocative.”

Dobrynin ended the conversation with an illuminating statement on the USSR’s political hierarchy. While he diplomatically noted that “it was a pity that matters had reached” such a sour point, he asked Kissinger “to remember that [Soviet] military people also presented certain problems.”²⁷⁸ This statement is notable for two reasons. First, it shows that Dobrynin thought that the US’s infamous military-industrial complex was pushing Nixon and Kissinger towards a hard line over Soviet-Cuban voyages, as demonstrated through his inclusion of the word “also.” Such reasoning was not surprising coming from a representative of a communist nation, but it clearly indicated the contemporary attitude of the Soviet leadership towards the US government.²⁷⁹ More remarkably, the comment insinuated that the Soviet’s version of the US’s

²⁷⁸ Memorandum of Conversation, Dr. Kissinger and Ambassador Dobrynin, Subject: Soviet Submarine in Cienfuegos Harbor, The Map Room, The White House, February 16, 1971, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²⁷⁹ Previously mentioned unofficial and semi-official Soviet press statements that described the crisis as an invention of the Nixon administration to increase defense expenditures also conformed to this idea.

military-industrial complex—the military leaders and steel-eaters Edmonds mentioned—was pushing their political leaders in Moscow towards confrontational policies. While this is only one statement from a seasoned negotiator, it provides a possible insight into the Soviet rationale for the Cienfuegos Crisis.

On February 22nd, the two political sparring partners met again, and Kissinger “behaved in a deliberately aloof but correct manner.” Under this guise, he immediately handed Dobrynin a verbal note from Nixon that read in-part,

The United States Government understands [that] the...Soviet Union will not deploy [to Cuba]...any service ships that can be...employed to support offensive nuclear weapons systems... . The fact that a tender capable of servicing offensive nuclear sea-based systems has been in port or in the vicinity of Cuba for 125 of the last 166 days cannot be considered to meet wither the letter or the intent of your assurances or of our understanding.

Puzzled, Dobrynin asked Kissinger what he expected him to report to Moscow, and Kissinger shot back, “Let's not play any games, Anatoliy. You will report...whatever you choose to report, and what I recommend to you will not have the slightest effect on it.” Consequently, “Dobrynin folded [the note] and put it, without comment, in his pocket,” and Kissinger changed the subject to SALT.²⁸⁰

The ships eventually left Cuba and returned to the USSR, and the issue remained dormant until May 1971. On the 20th of that month, Nixon and the Soviet leadership simultaneously announced a breakthrough on SALT—an understanding to sign an ABM and a missile-reduction

²⁸⁰ Memorandum of Conversation, Participants: Dr. Kissinger and Ambassador Dobrynin, Washington, February 22, 1971, Document 121, FRUS, Volume XIII, Soviet Union, October 1970-October 1971.

treaty before the end of the year—that marked Nixon’s first major accomplishment towards détente.²⁸¹ While this achievement was noteworthy, subsequent events would dampen Nixon’s faith in the Soviets’ commitment to reduced tensions. The next day, TASS released a bulletin that stated, “A submarine and an auxiliary ship...will pay a visit to the Cuban Republic at the end of May.”²⁸² Suddenly, Nixon and Kissinger feared that the Soviets were using the announcement merely as a cover for further Cuban deployments.

That afternoon, one of the most important meetings—again between Kissinger and Dobrynin—of the crisis occurred. Kissinger began the conversation in earnest and commented that releasing the naval announcement one day after the joint-SALT statement “certainly did not help matters and, frankly, infuriated the President.” Dobrynin remarked that the timing was unintentional and began another monologue on the military-industrial complex’s role in the Soviet system. He explained that the Soviet defense department oversaw conventional submarine voyages, and that the Politburo had no control over non-nuclear submarine excursions. He also added that the Soviet “military had been outraged at the understanding at which he [and Kissinger] had arrived.” After this second illuminative comment on the Soviet military’s posture during the crisis, he repeated his usual complaint to Kissinger that he did not understand why Nixon was so concerned over submarines and tenders.

Kissinger expressed his own confusion over why the Soviets continued to irritate Nixon, as he believed that the servicing of a Soviet SSBN “from Cuba...would lead to a show-down” that neither side desired. Dobrynin then announced a breakthrough on-par with the previous

²⁸¹ Editorial Note, Document 225, FRUS, Volume XIII, Soviet Union, October 1970-October 1971.

²⁸² Moscow TASS International Service in English, Soviet Naval Squadron to Visit Cuba, 17:43 GMT, May 21, 1971, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. The statement did not explain what type of submarine was involved, but US analysts predicted that it was another diesel-electric attack submarine without SLBMs.

day's SALT statement. He told Kissinger that "the position was clear – that nuclear submarines...carrying offensive [nuclear] weapons could not be serviced from Cuba and that this was understood." Although he asked Kissinger once again to cease pestering him every time a Soviet submarine or tender sailed to Cuba, the message was clear and positive: the Soviets finally accepted restrictions on servicing SSBNs as part of the understanding.²⁸³

Although this meeting was encouraging, verbal agreements do not always translate into acceptable actions, and Nixon and Kissinger followed subsequent Soviet deployments closely. For example, just one week after the latest Kissinger-Dobrynin meeting, the US discovered that the submarine in Cuba was a nuclear-powered Echo-class cruise missile unit and was docked next to the tender. Although this submarine class carried non-nuclear missiles, Kissinger called Dobrynin and warned him that its presence was "at the best...at the very edge of the understanding."²⁸⁴

Thereafter, Soviet submarines and tenders continued to visit Cuba, although SSBNs and tenders did not operate together. An exception to this rule seemed to come in late April 1972 when immediately before the Nixon's first summit with the Soviets, a Soviet diesel-electric Golf-II-class ballistic missile submarine arrived in Cuban waters with what the CIA thought was a tender. This voyage momentarily threw the administration into an uproar, and Kissinger voiced his frustration to Dobrynin on May 3, 1972. However, Dobrynin told Kissinger that the suspected tender was actually a "training ship" used to drill naval cadets and that both vessels would soon depart. Soon after, the CIA corroborated Dobrynin's statement, and the Golf-II

²⁸³ Memorandum of Conversation, Henry A. Kissinger and Anatoliy F. Dobrynin, The Map Room, The White House, May 21, 1971, 5:30 p.m., NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California.

²⁸⁴ Transcript of a Telephone Conversation Between the President's Assistant for National Security Affairs (Kissinger) and the Soviet Ambassador (Dobrynin), Washington, May 21, 1971, 6:05 p.m., Document 247, FRUS, Volume XIII, Soviet Union, October 1970-October 1971.

submarine departed the Caribbean for the USSR three days later, while the training ship exited the Caribbean on May 12th.²⁸⁵

Despite these moments of tension, the Soviets never regularly serviced their nuclear ballistic missile submarines in or around Cuba. This reality, along with the abandonment of the base in Cienfuegos harbor, proved that the Nixon administration's diplomacy compelled the Soviets to abandon their offensive nuclear ambitions in the Caribbean. As Kennedy had done in 1962, Nixon forced the Soviets to back down and reestablished superior US power in the region. However, unlike Kennedy, he generally avoided confrontational means to end the crisis. Finally, Nixon augmented Kennedy's understanding on Cuba to include submarine bases and tenders as prohibited elements, which the Soviets grudgingly adhered to.

Analysis

Throughout the crisis, Nixon's guiding principal remained détente. This argument initially appears counterintuitive or even contradictory, as the goal of détente was to minimize confrontation. However, this is precisely what Nixon and by extension Kissinger attempted to do, both during the crisis and in anticipation for what they hoped would come afterwards. Their actions during the crisis reflected this idea, as they responded quietly yet firmly to the Soviet deployment, primarily through Kissinger's backchannel meetings with Dobrynin. Meanwhile, Nixon attempted to cover up the crisis's existence from the public, which allowed the Soviets to withdraw without a comparable level of international embarrassment to 1962.

²⁸⁵ [Undated Memorandum Without a Listed Author], US-Soviet Understanding on Submarine Base in Cuba, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California; [Undated Memorandum Without a Listed Author], Chronology of Soviet Naval Deployments to Cuba, NSC Files, HAK Office Files, Country Files-Latin America (Box 128), Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California. Brackets added by the author. The first document covers updates to the US-Soviet understanding on Cuba from August 4, 1970, to May 3, 1972, while the second chronologizes Soviet naval activities in and around Cuba from March 3, 1972, to May 19, 1972.

Through these moves, Nixon demonstrated to the Soviets that he was a tough but fair negotiator, which successfully ended the crisis with benefits for the US, little embarrassment for the USSR, and a willingness on both sides to pursue détente. Although there were tough moments and threatening statements during the crisis—many of which came during Kissinger and Dobrynin's meetings—the Nixon administration clearly stated its position regarding Cuba through official channels and continuously reiterated its desire reduce tensions with the USSR. Specifically, Nixon wanted to end the crisis quickly and quietly to pursue summit meetings and SALT negotiations, which he described as “bigger fish to fry” than the Cienfuegos Crisis. Thus, fostering hard-headed détente became Nixon's primary strategy during the crisis and helped both sides move away from confrontation and towards a limited and mutually beneficial cooperation, even in the final days of the crisis.

That is not to say, however, that Nixon and his principals did not make mistakes or pursue counterintuitive tactics during the crisis. In the opening days—roughly from the discovery of the base to the unanticipated information leak on September 25th, 1970—Nixon, like Kennedy, admirably chose to deliberate with his advisors rather than act rashly; however, unlike Kennedy, Nixon used this period of discussion to avoid the issue and keep it secret, rather than to specifically chart a solution. While it is true that his attention during this period was primarily directed at the Jordanian Civil War, Nixon could have used the deliberation stage of the Cienfuegos Crisis more effectively. Ironically, then, the press conference where Jerry Friedheim mistakenly “spilled his guts” on the Cienfuegos base was, as Kissinger explained, a blessing in disguise, since it forced Nixon to adopt a new strategy that ultimately worked well.

While the failures during the deliberation period were understandable and partially excusable, Nixon should have dealt with his bickering advisors more forcefully. Although most

administration members had competitive or adversarial relationships with each other, the extremely damaging feud between Kissinger and Rogers reached its climax during the crisis. Such high-level dissention threatened to completely unravel the National Security Council apparatus, which could have proven disastrous during a crisis. Thus, while firing either Kissinger or Rogers at this time, as Nixon contemplated, would have exacerbated his problems, it is regrettable that he never engaged directly with the problem.

Many other options were certainly available; most obviously, Nixon could have addressed the issue with Kissinger and Rogers separately, together, or, if both previous options failed, dismissed one of them following the crisis. Although less effective than dealing with the situation himself, Nixon could have used his usual enforcer H.R. Haldeman to clamp down on their petty squabbles. Unfortunately, Nixon stayed true to his personality and avoided this interpersonal conflict altogether, which allowed it to fester and hinder the administration until Rogers was replaced with Kissinger—who concurrently remained the National Security Advisor—in September 1973.

Likewise, Nixon mistakenly believed that military might could replace stalled diplomacy and deliver a quick victory. Operation Silver Fox was a case in point and followed the same logic that Nixon used to justify the incursion into Cambodia earlier in 1970 and the bombing campaigns against the North Vietnamese in 1972. Whereas these other operations were more violent than the Black Sea cruise and had differing degrees of success, Silver Fox was a poor compromise operation that had little chance of success. Overall, the operation only diverted Nixon's attention away from the official and semi-official, backchannel diplomacy with the USSR, which, although slower than he liked, delivered useful results.

Secretive tactics instinctive to both Nixon and Kissinger produced affordances and constraints. In effect, the administration followed two opposite policies during the crisis: publicly, the administration watched Soviet developments but did not see them as constituting a crisis; while in private with Dobrynin, the US vehemently objected to the Soviet actions and understood that they were in a confrontation that they could not back down from. While these strategies accomplished Nixon's goals of ending the crisis and moving towards a more fruitful détente, the overriding secrecy worked so well that it became difficult for Nixon and Kissinger to boast of their performance in the crisis after it had concluded.

As both men could not be sure that the Soviets would never service a SSBN in or around Cuba even with the augmented understanding, Nixon maintained his press censorship regarding the crisis until his resignation on August 8, 1974. This cover up of the crisis and other issues ultimately reduced public trust in the administration and led the administration to conduct further clandestine operations that ultimately led to the Watergate Scandal and Nixon's consequent downfall. Likewise, Kissinger's continued tenure as National Security Advisor and Secretary of State for Nixon's successor, President Gerald R. Ford, was constantly hampered with public distrust arising from his "highly personal and secret methods of diplomacy," which particularly strained his relationship with Congress.²⁸⁶

For most Americans, then, the crisis was either a minor, forgettable issue or one that Nixon invented for political gain. Ironically, these interpretations, the latter of which Nixon's political opponents fostered and maintained, aided Nixon's efforts to conceal the crisis, as public attention waned after influential politicians like Senator Fulbright dismissed the Cienfuegos story

²⁸⁶ Edmonds, *Soviet Foreign Policy*, 143.

as a farce intended to increase defense budgets.²⁸⁷ These interpretations framed the crisis—or non-crisis—until the first semi-official revelations of the crisis came with Nixon and Kissinger’s autobiographies published in 1978 and 1979, respectively. Both championed their roles in the crisis and viewed it as a decisive US victory akin to the 1962 crisis.

The first scholarly investigation of the crisis came in 1983, when Raymond L. Garthoff, who played a minor role in the event, published “Handling the Cienfuegos Crisis.”²⁸⁸ This work, and others that followed it, mainly relied on Nixon and Kissinger’s memoirs, as many of the documents on the crisis remained classified well into the first decade of the 21st century. Through these sources, most of these authors drew similar conclusions to the two primary US participants. The unavailability of primary sources, then, limited interest in the subject for multiple decades.

Since the declassification of the Nixon administration’s documents, which is still ongoing, only two major academic articles have been published on the confrontation.²⁸⁹ Both articles are political science case studies that investigate only particular attributes of the situation in relation to each author’s analytical thesis but are commendable for their quality of writing and research. Nevertheless, the newly declassified primary source documents—most of which are held in the archives of the Richard Nixon Presidential Library in Yorba Linda, California—will help future historians of the Nixon administration and were indispensable for this investigation.

²⁸⁷ Even more ironically, members of Nixon’s Republican Party, especially conservatives like Senator Barry Goldwater, presented the greatest threat to his policy of secrecy. These intractably anti-communist, anti-Soviet, and often anti-détente politicians viewed the crisis as a prime example of offensive international communism and were more likely to call for public measures to resolve it. Thus, Nixon was more afraid of a Republican “clown senator calling for another Cuban blockade” than he was of his Democratic opponents during the crisis.

²⁸⁸ Raymond L. Garthoff, “Handling the Cienfuegos Crisis,” *International Security* Vol. 8, No. 1 (1983): 46-66, <https://www-jstor-org.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/stable/2538485>.

²⁸⁹ Dennis A. Crall and Thomas M. Martin, “Cool Hand Nuke: Lessons From the Quiet Diplomacy of the Cienfuegos Non-Crisis,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* Vol. 9, No. 2 (2013): 189-201, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/stable/24910850>, and Asaf Siniver, “The Nixon Administration and the Cienfuegos Crisis of 1970: Crisis Management of a Non-Crisis?,” *Review of International Studies* Vol. 34, No. 1 (2006): 69-88, <https://www-jstor-org.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/stable/41307940>.

Contemporary political considerations also buried the crisis. Détente began to break down following the 1973 Arab Israeli war, which almost caused a US-USSR nuclear showdown, and further crumbled during Watergate and after Nixon's resignation the following year, as many observers tied US-Soviet détente inextricably to Nixon. Cuban intervention and Soviet activities in the Angolan Civil War in 1975 intensified this disintegration, and by the 1976 presidential election, President Gerald R. Ford banned the term within the White House and from his campaign.²⁹⁰ Although Ford's successor President Jimmy Carter sought to decrease tensions with the USSR, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 destroyed any possibility of reviving détente.²⁹¹ Consequently, President Ronald Reagan, who defeated Carter and became president in 1981, intensified competition with the USSR, which further downgraded the popularity of détente.²⁹²

In the wake of these developments, Nixon's détente was viewed as a temporary and unsustainable Cold War ideal that inevitably fell apart. As the Cienfuegos Crisis constituted an element in this neglected period, it is not surprising that most people, including many academics, have forgotten about, or never learned of, the crisis. This does not mean, however, that Kissinger and Nixon did not try to change the record. In addition to their autobiographies, Nixon included his Cienfuegos experience in his détente-apologist *New York Times* article "Hard-Headed Détente" in 1982, while Kissinger mentioned the crisis in passing during an interview with

²⁹⁰ Jussi M. Hanhimäki, "An Elusive Grand Design," in *Nixon in the World: American Foreign Relations, 1969-1977*, ed. Fredrik Logevall and Andrew Preston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 33.

²⁹¹ Carter himself was no stranger to Cuban Crises, as a severe domestic and international situation developed when a Soviet combat brigade was discovered on the island in 1979. For further reading on the subject, see: Gloria Duffy, "Crisis Mangling and the Cuban Brigade," *International Security* Vol. 8, No. 1 (1983), 67-87, <https://www-jstor-org.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/stable/2538486>.

²⁹² Ironically, however, the second half of Reagan's presidency witnessed a limited return to détente, as the USSR began crumbling from within and its leaders sought relaxed tensions with the West to decrease prohibitively expensive defense budgets.

William F. Buckley Jr. in 1975.²⁹³ In both cases, however, the two were defending détente and their performance in the Cienfuegos Crisis either while the concept was declining or was already dead. Thus, their protests were generally ignored, as was most historical attention to the crisis.

Additionally, the possibility of the Cienfuegos Crisis degrading into a nuclear exchange, while real, was quite low, and was certainly lower than in 1962. Unsurprisingly, the lower stakes further precluded interest in the subject, especially compared with the well-known and painstakingly researched 1962 Missile Crisis. In 1970, both the US and the USSR had a second-strike nuclear capability through the deployment of thousands of ICBMs, SLBMs, and air-dropped weapons. Thus, both sides knew a nuclear exchange was suicidal, unlike in 1962 when the US had a definite advantage and, some argued, a first-strike capability. Consequently, no one within the Nixon administration, including the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recommended violent solutions like airstrikes or an invasion of Cuba to end the crisis, unlike their predecessors in the Kennedy administration.²⁹⁴

For the same reason, the successful completion of the base in Cienfuegos or the servicing of Soviet SSBNs around Cuba would have only increased the Soviet's nuclear capabilities to a

²⁹³ Richard M. Nixon, "Hard-Headed Detente," *The New York Times*, August 18, 1982, A21; Henry A. Kissinger, "The Politics of Henry Kissinger," interviewed by William F. Buckley Jr., On the Television Program *Firing Line with William F. Buckley Jr.* Episode S0198, September 10, 1975, 18:37-18:41, [\(55\) Firing Line with William F. Buckley Jr.: The Politics of Henry Kissinger - YouTube](#). Both Nixon and Kissinger attempted to demonstrate that their brand of détente resisted Soviet foreign adventures and used the Cienfuegos Crisis as an example.

²⁹⁴ The most confrontational response Nixon considered in 1970 was a blockade of Cuba, which was a "middle ground" option in 1962 and the one that Kennedy effectively implemented. While technically an act of war, a blockade did not result in any immediate casualties for either side and forced the Soviets to decide to back down or fight a battle where they could not win. Although the members of the ExCom feared a nuclear exchange, many believed that the Soviets were too weak to credibly launch one as a reaction to a US airstrike or invasion of Cuba. The validity of this point is still a subject of historical debate, but it nevertheless guided US thinking during the crisis.

slight degree.²⁹⁵ Likewise, had the Soviets used Cienfuegos or their tenders to service their SSBNs in the Caribbean, the US, being geographically close and with a more powerful navy, would have quickly neutralized both if a war between the superpowers occurred.²⁹⁶ Despite the obvious similarities between the two crises, the situation in the early 1970s was distinct from, and generally less dangerous than, the one in 1962 and necessitated a different approach to solve. Nixon's policy relied on secrecy, diplomacy, and veiled threats, while Kennedy's led to a high seas showdown that was more dangerous and, for observers after the fact, more interesting. Both, however, are deserving of interest and continued study.

Most importantly, however, Nixon and the Soviet leaders benefitted from the 1962 understanding during the crisis, which decreased the chances of a violent breakdown in negotiations. Although flawed, the understanding provided a framework that the two sides agreed to generally abide by, which included restrictions against the Soviet stationing of offensive nuclear weapons in, and a US invasion of, Cuba. Kennedy and Khrushchev, in comparison, did not have anything like the understanding to restrain their actions during the 1962 crisis and came close to a nuclear exchange. Commendably, they agreed to the understanding to prevent a similar crisis in the future. Obviously, they overestimated the understanding's capacity to prevent crises, but their unratified agreement effectively guided Washington and Moscow towards a peaceful resolution in 1971. It is understandable, therefore, that Nixon and his contemporaries solved the Cienfuegos Crisis through a mere augmentation of the 1962 understanding.

²⁹⁵ The base and to a lesser extent the tenders would have allowed for slightly longer timeframes for Soviet SSBNs to remain on-station within striking distance of the US. This would have increased the numbers of missiles capable of hitting the US in single- or double-digit increments, all while the Soviets possessed thousands of ICBMs.

²⁹⁶ Although, this argument assumes that neither side utilizes nuclear weapons in the initial fighting. If the two superpowers became involved in a major war in 1970-71, it is very likely that nuclear weapons would have been used, and probably in the opening salvos.

Although many of these facts were known at the time, the principals still believed that the crisis was dangerous and could have led to dire consequences. It is imperative to remember that Nixon and many of his advisors believed that the Jordanian Civil War, the election of Allende in Chile, and the Cienfuegos were either part of a world-wide communist offensive or were coordinated concurrently in Moscow. Under this assumption of global linkage, Nixon believed that the communists were testing him and his administration's mettle, which explains his uncompromising position on the base and the tenders. To him, acquiescence on Cienfuegos would have led to further US concessions of increased severity.

Whether or not this interpretation was correct is an interesting and continuing historical question but is not crucial to the crisis; what is critical, however, is that Nixon thought that the communists were testing him and he responded as if they were. Consequently, to avoid future acquiescence, Nixon never wavered from his goal of removing the Soviet base and restricting the tenders. This conception could have led to a more contentious confrontation had the Soviets become intransigent and refused to restrict their operations. Fortunately, the Soviets retreated, and both sides avoided the heightened anxiety and dangers of 1962.

Irrespective of the military dangers during the crisis, the political dangers to Nixon were high in 1970-71. At this stage in his presidency, foreign policy success, especially regarding détente with the Soviets, eluded Nixon. Thus, many political observers believed that his aspirations for détente were merely wishful thinking. These gloomy forecasts were predicted while Nixon was still under fire from his left-wing opponents for the incursion in Cambodia, amongst other criticisms, and while he faced the frustration of his conservative supporters over the "loss of Chile" to the left-wing Allende. The latter issue particularly worried Nixon, as he was very sensitive to Latin American, and especially Cuba, affairs. Thus, Nixon inextricably

linked foreign policy success—mainly towards détente and avoiding confrontations with the communists—with his domestic political standing, which added another impetus to solving the crisis secretly.

All these considerations, limitations, and opportunities extant during the crisis become evident only through a close examination of the corresponding primary source documents and an understanding of the historical context. Unfortunately, the wide availability of primary sources on the Nixon administration's efforts during the crisis is not paralleled in either the Russian or Cuban archives at the time of this investigation's publication.²⁹⁷ An understanding of Soviet behavior during the crisis is, therefore, unclear, although hypotheses are possible to form. First, it is likely that the Soviets intended for the base or the tenders to augment their position before SALT or to circumvent any agreed-upon restrictions thereof.

If the base was completed before negotiations began, it is plausible that the Soviet negotiators would have used it as a bargaining chip to dismantle similar US submarine bases, such as the one in Holy Loch, Scotland. Even if the US base remained, the increase in submarine operation time provided by the Cienfuegos base or the tenders would have increased the Soviet's nuclear strike capability without violating any treaty restrictions. These intentions—either to bluff the US out of base or to slightly undermine the spirit, but not the wording, of an international treaty—would not have provided the Soviets with a significant nuclear advantage. Therefore, it is not surprising that they abandoned their construction effort relatively quickly and once the US discovered it.

²⁹⁷ Erik J. Ehrenfeld, "A Forgotten Exercise in 'Hard-Headed Détente': The Nixon Administration's Response to the Cienfuegos Crisis of 1970" (Essay II, History 3017 "The Sixties," The Ohio State University, 2022), 4.

Likewise, it is also plausible that the Soviets attempted to test the limits of what Nixon considered acceptable international behavior. Although he believed that the Soviets were directly involved in the Jordanian Civil War, the Cienfuegos Crisis was the first time Nixon dealt with a direct Soviet challenge to the international status quo.²⁹⁸ Viewed from across the Iron Curtain, it was also the first time the Soviets could gauge Nixon and his administration one-on-one under confrontational circumstances. The fact that the Soviets quickly ended their base construction and eventually restricted their tender operations might also indicate that they were merely testing the relatively new American administration. Finally, the Soviet enthusiasm for détente in the waning days of the crisis might suggest that they formed an impression of Nixon as a stern but fair negotiator from their experiences during the crisis.

Finally, Dobrynin's statements on Soviet military elites late in the crisis might have reflected the importance of the Soviet military-industrial complex in Moscow's policy formation. Soviet military and industrial leaders would have logically reaped the benefits of their nation's expanded naval presence in the Caribbean, including lucrative contracts to build, and commissions to command, bases, SSBNs, and tenders. Their power in the Kremlin might also explain why the crisis continued into 1971. The decision to cease construction on the base probably angered these admirals and steel-eaters and the switch to tender operations might have been offered to them as a compromise solution. If this was the case, it would at least respond to Kissinger's conditional statement on the flawed logic of deploying tenders without intending to service SSBNs.

The Cuban position during the crisis is even more opaque, as Nixon refused to consult them during the crisis. Although the crisis was therefore a Soviet-American situation, most of the

²⁹⁸ Subsequent investigations have usually concluded that the Soviets were only marginally involved in the war and that their Syrian and Palestinian allies acted largely on their own accord.

important actions occurred on Cuban soil or in Cuban waters, which indicates that the Soviets received some level of Cuban permission to operate there. This permission either came voluntarily or through coercion, both of which were possible given the historical context. Castro famously rebuked the Soviets for removing their missiles in 1962, which damaged Soviet-Cuban relations until the end of the 1960s. Thus, he may have supported, or even requested, the return of offensive systems to his island in 1970. However, if he opposed such a move, his return into the Soviet orbit in the late 1960s—necessary because of the failure of his economic programs—might have precluded him from voicing such opinions or allowed the Soviets to ignore any protests he might have submitted.

Without clarifying documentation, however, Soviet and Cuban thinking during the crisis remains a point of conjecture. Clearly, this hole in the narrative is an ideal place to further the investigation, especially since the Soviets precipitated the crisis when they began their construction in Cienfuegos. Unfortunately, the avenues open to Western researchers in the former USSR, mainly Russia, and Cuba is severely limited at the time of this investigation's publication. The only recourse is to wait until the situation changes or to rely on other researchers in those areas, both of which are hardly perfect solutions.

Returning solely to the US side of the equation, what does the Cienfuegos Crisis indicate about President Nixon, his goals, and his administration? Clearly, Nixon tried to control all the information and thereby retain a primary influence over events during the crisis. In this specific episode, Nixon was ultimately successful, as he and Kissinger generally remained focused on establishing an effective *détente* and crafted a successful resolution to the crisis along these lines and through secretive means. In the minds of the Nixon administration's principals, therefore, the ends justified the means. This thinking inherently casts a devious shadow over even the most

commendable accomplishments of the administration, as administration officials often used secretive and nefarious tactics that eventually undermined the credibility of the whole administration, irrespective of the commendable results they achieved. Nevertheless, the Cienfuegos experience was a US accomplishment that helped to reduce the tensions between the two superpowers and thereby fostered détente.

In sum, Nixon and his advisors behaved sufficiently to solve the crisis in the US's favor. Their response was strong, fair, and, as a result, encouraging for future, limited cooperation with the Soviets. Nevertheless, the secretive and internally adversarial tactics that the administration adopted highlighted the less commendable attributes of the primary participants, which slowly but surely damaged the reputation of the Nixon presidency. By crafting pragmatic policies intended to reduce tensions moving forward, Nixon and his principals mitigated a confrontation and set the US and the USSR on a track towards a mutually beneficial détente, albeit one that reflected the underhanded qualities of the administration's members.

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