

The Cuba Missile Crisis: Kennedy Left a Loophole

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WASHINGTON, Jan. 6 — Records of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, made publicly available today for the first time, suggest that the United States did not give Moscow any ironclad assurance that it would refrain from invading Cuba.

That disclosure comes as a surprise to some historians of the crisis, who believed that the Soviet leader, Nikita S. Khrushchev, had agreed to remove Soviet intermediate-range ballistic missiles from Cuba after receiving such an assurance.

Philip Brenner, a professor of international relations at American University here, and the National Security Archive, a nonprofit research institute, obtained the records after filing a request and a lawsuit under the Freedom of Information Act.

The records include a series of letters exchanged by Mr. Khrushchev and President John F. Kennedy. Mr. Brenner said that 14 letters made available today by the State Department provide significant new insights into the missile crisis. The United States Government had previously released 10 Kennedy-Khrushchev letters bearing on the crisis, he said.

No Ironclad Assurance

"Until 4 P.M. today, I believed that there had been a firm commitment on the part of the United States not to invade Cuba," Professor Brenner said in an interview tonight. "Over the last 29 years, American Presidents have lived up to what we thought was a commitment. In fact, these newly released letters show that the United States did not give Cuba an ironclad assurance that the U.S. would not invade."

"We tend to think the missile crisis

A letter to Khrushchev gave no firm pledge not to invade.

ended on Oct. 28, 1962," said Mr. Brenner, a Cuba scholar. "In fact, the missile crisis went on, because the United States kept its forces at the highest state of alert until Nov. 20, 1962. The source of that U.S. concern was 11-28 bombers given to Cuba by the Soviet Union. Until Nov. 20, Fidel Castro refused to return the bombers to the Soviet Union because he asserted they were needed for the defense of Cuba. On that date, he announced that he would return them."

Mr. Khrushchev had been asking President Kennedy for what the Soviet leader described as written "guarantees for non-invasion of Cuba," going beyond Mr. Kennedy's tenure in the White House if possible.

In a letter to President Kennedy on Dec. 10, 1962, Mr. Khrushchev said he had agreed to remove Soviet missiles from Cuba, "relying on your assurance that the United States and its allies will not invade Cuba."

Good Behavior Required

In the Dec. 10 letter, as translated by the United States Government, Mr. Khrushchev said, "We believe that you will be able to receive a mandate at the next election too, that is, that you will be the U.S. President for six years, which would appeal to us."

Further, Mr. Khrushchev said, "Six

years in world politics is a long period of time, and during that period, we could create good conditions for peaceful coexistence on earth."

But in a reply to the Soviet leader on Dec. 14, 1962, Mr. Kennedy indicated that the United States' pledge to refrain from invading Cuba depended on good behavior by Mr. Castro.

"We have never wanted to be driven by the acts of others into war in Cuba," Mr. Kennedy wrote. "The other side of the coin, however, is that we do need to have adequate assurances that all offensive weapons are removed from Cuba and are not reintroduced, and that Cuba itself commits no aggressive acts against any of the nations of the Western Hemisphere."

Professor Brenner said tonight that Mr. Kennedy's letter contained "a loophole that allowed the United States to define a large number of Cuban actions as aggressive." The definition of "aggressive" was left so vague that there was no ironclad assurance that the United States would not invade Cuba, he said.

Raymond L. Gathoff, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution who worked at the State Department in 1962, said today after reviewing the Kennedy-Khrushchev correspondence that the Soviet Union evidently "gave up on trying to get a written commitment" from Mr. Kennedy promising that the United States would not invade Cuba.

No Secret Deal

The newly disclosed letters show that "Kennedy did not make any secret deal, as sometimes alleged, that would tie American hands if the situation might at some later time require U.S. military action against Cuba," Mr. Gathoff said.

Sheryl L. Walter, general counsel of

the National Security Archive, welcomed disclosure of the Kennedy-Khrushchev letters three days before a major conference on the Cuban missile crisis is to begin in Havana. The conference, organized by Brown University's Center for Foreign Policy Development, will bring together American, Russian and Cuban veterans of the crisis.

"The shroud of secrecy surrounding these historic letters has at last been lifted," Ms. Walter said. "The public release of these letters shows that the spark of glasnost has caught fire at the State Department too. Declassification of this correspondence fills crucial gaps in the historical record."