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Camelot's Slurs: Secret Agreement of the Cuban Missile Crisis. The Libelling of Adlai Stevenson

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How do you bury responsibility for a decision inspired by a pilfered idea? Blame someone else, especially if that person came up with the idea to begin with. This tried method of distraction was used with invidious gusto by US President John F. Kennedy, who recast his role in reaching an agreement with the Soviet Union during the Cuban missile crisis of 1962.

The stationing of Soviet nuclear capable missiles in Cuba, and the response of the Kennedy administration, took the world to the precipice of nuclear conflict. Its avoidance, as things transpired, involved dissimulation, deception and good, old-fashioned defamation.

In a crucial meeting on October 27 between **Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy** and Soviet Ambassador **Anatoly Dobrynin,** the first intimations were made that a quid pro quo arrangement could be reached. **If the Soviets were to pull out their missiles in Cuba, the US would return the favour regarding their missiles in Turkey. That part of the agreement would, however, remain secret.** RFK, as the administration's emissary, informed Dobrynin that his brother "is ready to come to agree on that question with N.S. Khrushchev." For the withdrawal to take place, however, some four to five months had to elapse. "However, the president can't say anything public in this regard about Turkey."

Time was pressing. A U-2 spy plane had been shot down over Cuba that day; the hawks in the administration were baying for blood, demanding US military retaliation. "A real war will begin," warned RFK, "in which millions of Americans and Russians will die. We want to avoid that any way we can, I'm sure that the government of the USSR has the same wish."

In his subsequent account of the meeting with the Soviet ambassador, documented in a report to Secretary of State Dean Rusk, RFK ducks and weaves. Recalling the urgency with which he impressed upon Dobrynin on removing the Soviet missiles, he also offered a slanted reading. When the ambassador had asked about the US missiles in Turkey, "I replied there could be no *quid pro quo* – no deal of this kind could be made." Mention is made to the elapse of four to five months, by which time "these matters could be resolved satisfactorily." (In the draft version, that reference is scrawled out by RFK.)

Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's response on October 28 to President Kennedy did acknowledge, in an uncharacteristically subtle way, "the delicacy involved for you in an open consideration of the issue of eliminating the US missile bases in Turkey." He appreciated the "complexity" involved and thought it right that it should not be discussed publicly. Any mention of the quid pro quo agreement would be kept secret, to be only communicated via RFK. The Soviet Premier then made intimations about "advancing the cause of relaxation of international tensions and the tensions between our two powers".

Within hours of Khrushchev's announcement that he would be ordering the dismantling and withdrawal of the missiles in Cuba, Kennedy made a call to former president Herbert Hoover. The message is distinctly, to use that immortal phrase from the charmingly slippery Alan Clark, economical with the *actualité*. Moscow had supposedly gone back "to their more reasonable position" in accepting a pledge that Cuba would not be invaded in return for the withdrawal of the missiles.

The train of fibbing continued chugging in another call made that same day to former president Harry Truman. To Truman, Kennedy suggests, falsely, that his administration had "rejected" trading the Jupiter missiles in Turkey for the Soviet withdrawal of their missiles in Cuba.

On October 30th, Robert Kennedy returned the quid pro quo letter to Ambassador Dobrynin instead of conveying it to his brother. Brother Jack had not been "prepared to formulate such an understanding [regarding the missiles in Turkey] in the form of letters, even the most confidential letters, between the President and the head of the Soviet government, when it concerns such a highly delicate issue."

Such an attitude could hardly be explained as noble or even reasoned; the Kennedys were concerned that any moves seen as conciliatory towards Moscow could ruin their electoral fortunes and those of the Democratic Party.

Dobrynin's own summary reveals a political animal contemplating his future prospects. RFK was against transmitting "this sort of letter, since who knows where and when such letters can surface or be somehow published". The reasons had little to do with averting nuclear catastrophe or preserving the human species. Such a document, were it to appear, "could cause irreparable harm to my political career in the future. This is why we request that you take this letter back."

With such manoeuvrings achieved, the Kennedys went to work on covering their tracks and scrubbing the fingerprints. On December 6, 1962, Stevenson received a letter from JFK about a story soon to be published by the *Saturday Evening Post* titled "In Time of Crisis". The article, authored by Stewart Alsop and Charles Bartlett, promised an insider's overview of how Kennedy and his circle resolved the Cuban missile crisis. In the true tradition of

insiders, the overview was utterly compromised.

The decorative account came with the baubles and splendour of Camelot, depicting the president as calm and collected in the face of crisis. He only ever "lost his temper on minor matters" but never his nerve. "This," the authors remark, "must be counted a huge intangible plus."

The very tangible plus, for the Kennedys, came in the form of former Democratic presidential candidate and US ambassador to the UN, **Adlai Stevenson**. Stevenson had, according to a "non admiring official" – later identified as National Security Council staffer **Michael Forrestal** – "wanted a Munich." His heretical proposal entailed trading Turkish, Italian and British missile bases for Soviet missiles in Cuba. Forrestal had himself been urged by the Kennedys to feed that version to Bartlett and Alsop, despite their embrace of the idea.

Alsop's brother, Joseph, went so far as to argue in a column that this revealed a president keen on finding some basis to fire Stevenson. Special aide McGeorge Bundy, on being made aware of the article in advance, had talked him out of doing so.

As things transpired, the origins of the "Munich" slur against Stevenson came from the president himself. As historian Gregg Herken noted in his book, *The Georgetown Set: Friends and Rivals in Cold War Washington*, "The president had pencilled in the 'Munich' line when he annotated the typescript of the draft article". Alsop's son, Joseph Wright Alsop VI, also claimed that his father had told him "that it had actually been JFK who added the phrase 'Adlai wanted a Munich' in his own handwriting."

In Alsop's correspondence with his editor at the *Saturday Evening Post*, Clay Blair Jr., there is a pungent warning: the president's role was to remain concealed and had to "remain Top Secret, Eyes Only, Burn After Reading, and so on." If Alsop "so much as hinted that JFK was in any way involved, I'd be run out of town."

In his delightful, if severe dissertation on presidential mendacity, Eric Alterman makes the admirably radical suggestion that the US commander in chief should not lie. Doing so triggers "a series of reactions in the political system that builds on itself and can easily spiral out of control." One lie becomes many; the drop becomes an ocean. And Kennedy showed, not only a willingness to be mendacious, but a certain aptitude for it.

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