

What Did LBJ Know About the Cuban Missile Crisis? And When Did He Know It?

By Max Holland and Tara Marie Egan

Writing in August 2007 about the major candidates' credentials, *Washington Post* columnist Anne Applebaum concluded that it's questionable whether foreign policy experience is essential for anyone aspiring to the presidency. Exhibit A in her argument was Harry Truman, and Exhibit B was Lyndon Johnson.

. . . it's far from obvious that any specific kind of experience has ever helped a president make good calls. . . . Lyndon B. Johnson had held national office for years before becoming president, but he still couldn't cope with Vietnam.[\[1\]](#)

Applebaum's implication was that Johnson did not absorb the right lessons while serving as John F. Kennedy's vice president, even though one of the greatest teaching tools of the Cold War, the Cuban missile crisis, occurred during President Kennedy's watch 45 years ago.

But what if Johnson was not *permitted* to learn the right lessons, which would have had to begin with an accurate understanding of what had happened? What if Johnson was purposely denied important knowledge? What if Johnson *thought* he had drawn the right lessons, but actually was trying to replicate a manufactured illusion?

The most reliable guide to Johnson's innermost thoughts is the secret tape recordings that he made as president. While sketchy on the subject of the missile crisis—there are only a few references on the tapes over a period of years—enough can be gleaned from them to confirm that Johnson was never privy to the true history of the missile crisis. False history led to mistaken lessons, including a belief in the efficacy of calibrated force, which helped prevent Johnson from seriously entertaining the concessions necessary for a negotiated political solution to the Vietnam War, the supreme crisis of his presidency.

The conscious exclusion of Johnson from the truth goes far beyond the superficially parallel situation that occurred when Harry Truman succeeded Franklin D. Roosevelt. In that case, Truman's ignorance of the Manhattan Project, and of the mounting problems with the Soviet Union, was not at all purposeful. Roosevelt's conduct of foreign policy was shambolic by nature, and excluding Truman from important knowledge was not calculated. *Anyone* who had been vice president under FDR would have been excluded.

By contrast—and what is especially striking about Johnson's case—is that not only was LBJ deliberately shut out as vice president, but the tape recordings show that he was

still in the dark years after he became president, when he was presumably entitled, and urgently needed, to understand the knowable truth behind Kennedy's spectacular success.^[2] Top presidential advisers, of course, are generally loath to share the secrets of one administration with another administration, even of the same political party. But in this case, an additional and powerful reason for keeping Johnson ignorant was the shadow cast by Robert F. Kennedy over the entire Johnson presidency. Men who had stayed on to serve LBJ as they had served JFK—Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara, McGeorge Bundy—were already regarded, by the late president's brother, as insufficiently loyal. Had one of them shared JFK's biggest secret with Johnson, the leaker surely would have been fingered and his indiscretion regarded as unpardonable.^[3]

Circles within Circles

Out of the 12 regular members of the fabled ExComm, four were not privy to the secret codicil that helped end the October 1962 missile crisis, namely, the explicit guarantee that America's Jupiter missiles in Turkey would be quietly removed following a Soviet withdrawal of offensive missiles from Cuba. The ExComm members denied this knowledge were General Maxwell Taylor, C. Douglas Dillon, John McCone, and Lyndon Johnson.^[4]

President Kennedy presumably excluded Taylor, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, because the chiefs had expressed unwavering opposition to any linkage between the missiles, surreptitiously emplaced in Cuba, and the Jupiters, openly sited in Turkey. Treasury Secretary Dillon was also denied knowledge of the settlement terms, probably because he was a prominent Republican (Dillon had served as under secretary of state in the Eisenhower administration) who had argued vigorously against a deal involving the Jupiters.

John McCone was a Republican, too. But not even the fact that he was director of central intelligence (DCI) and energetically *supported* withdrawal of the obsolete Jupiters, if it facilitated getting the Soviet missiles out of Cuba, was sufficient for his admittance into the president's inner circle.^[5] McCone's exclusion was the height of irony.^[6] Yet since President Kennedy was intent on keeping every Republican, from Dwight Eisenhower on down, in the dark about the true terms of the missile crisis settlement, he could hardly confide in McCone, who regularly briefed the former president on national security matters.^[7]

Finally, John Kennedy also decided, quite deliberately, to shut out Lyndon Johnson, a Democrat and the second-highest officeholder in the land. There was a tinge of irony in Johnson's exclusion, too. Like any consummate politician, Johnson valued one quality—loyalty—above all else, and since he expected it, he gave it in return. Though bitterly disappointed at the meager responsibilities given him by the Kennedy White House, Johnson had been a team player since January 1961. In word, deed, and appearance, he had been completely loyal, airing all of his private differences over policy (and he had some) with the president alone, and dutifully following the president's lead in any group larger than the two of them.^[8]

Hardened Washington columnists, some of whom had known Johnson for decades, were keenly aware of the indignities and humiliations he suffered as vice president. Johnson was the uncouth Texan who simply didn't fit, ridiculed behind his back as "Uncle Cornpone" for his accent and manner. Yet LBJ amazed these columnists with his self-discipline, for he refused to be a source of political dirt or information about the administration's internal machinations. Still, not even LBJ's repeated demonstrations of fidelity had been sufficient to overcome the Kennedys' distrust of Johnson, and in Robert Kennedy's case, intense and ineradicable dislike.

In the days following the discovery of the Soviet missiles on October 15, Johnson had played an ambiguous, even contradictory, role at the ExComm meetings—that is, when he chose to speak at all, which was not often.^[9] When JFK specifically solicited Johnson's opinion on October 16, the first day of deliberations, the vice president expressed the view that the offensive elements of the Soviet buildup were intolerable for domestic political reasons. The administration simply had to remove the threat, by force if necessary, and regardless of whether America's allies approved.^[10]

As the ExComm's discussions turned to the crucial question of whether to impose a blockade or take more violent action, however, LBJ went missing in action, albeit through no fault of his own. The impending off-year election meant Johnson had been booked to make a long campaign swing. Because the administration did not want to signal Moscow that its missiles had been sighted in Cuba, it was decided to keep LBJ on the political hustings as if nothing were untoward.^[11]

On the evening of Sunday, October 21, when Johnson finally made it back to Washington, the president directed DCI McCone to brief the vice president on everything that had transpired, including the controversial decision to impose a blockade.^[12] Johnson initially expressed disagreement with the policy that had been developed in his absence. As McCone recorded in his memo of their conversation,

The thrust of the vice president's thinking was that he favored an unannounced strike rather than the agreed plan which involved blockade . . . He expressed displeasure at "telegraphing our punch" and also commented the blockade would be ineffective because we in effect are "locking the barn after the horse was gone."^[13]

But McCone had also briefed Dwight Eisenhower that morning, and when the DCI informed Johnson that the former president opposed a surprise attack, and was willing to accept the military handicap that came with imposition of a blockade, Johnson reluctantly changed his position to favor the quarantine. Few people exercised as much influence on Johnson's judgment as Eisenhower did when it came to matters of national security.

Once the crisis became public on October 22, Johnson attended every ExComm session thereafter, though his return hardly seemed to matter. Johnson may have been sticking to his "general policy of never speaking unless the president asked [him]," and behaving as he thought a vice president should—which was to agree in public with

whatever the president decided, or at least mimic his leanings.^[14] Still, when JFK specifically asked Johnson for his opinion, LBJ chose to remain silent and withdrawn. Befitting his shrunken status, and discomfort with all the “Harvards” in JFK’s inner circle, LBJ repeatedly declined to offer a strong opinion during several meetings, particularly when the president was in attendance.^[15] As one ExComm participant later noted, “I attended two of those ExComm meetings when Johnson was there, and, to tell you the truth, I can’t even remember what he said, or if he spoke at all.”^[16]

Johnson only began to assert himself during the critical ExComm meeting on Saturday, October 27, which began at 4 PM and lasted for more than three hours.^[17] Just after the ExComm heard the unsettling news that a U-2 had been downed by a Soviet surface-to-air missile, Johnson insinuated that unless there was a firm response, the public would soon perceive the administration as backing away from the strong position enunciated in President Kennedy’s October 22 speech to the nation. (This observation instantly evoked a testy response from Johnson’s nemesis, Robert Kennedy). Moments later, however, Johnson gently chided those who immediately wanted to take out a SAM site in retaliation, calling them “war hawks.”^[18]

Overall, LBJ seemed to favor a negotiated solution to the crisis, though he also came down on both sides of the key issue of linkage. At one point he criticized Robert McNamara’s stiff opposition to a missile swap, arguing that the Jupiter missiles were “not worth a damn” anyway. Minutes later, LBJ likened an outright trade to appeasement, asserting that it would be tantamount to dismantling the containment edifice Washington had painstakingly built over the past 15 years.^[19]

There was every reason to believe, from the totality of what Johnson said, that he would have genuinely supported Kennedy’s gambit: to make the trade, so long as the Soviets agreed to keep it secret. But when the president convened a rump ExComm session on October 27, after the regular one broke up and just before RFK’s evening meeting with Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, Johnson was purposefully excluded from the trusted inner circle.^[20] Only those present were to know about the explicit assurance and “no one else.”^[21] Thus, Johnson was left unaware of the genuine settlement terms which were offered that Saturday night, and hastily accepted by Nikita Khrushchev the next day.

At the time, of course, keeping Johnson at arm’s length was a trifling consideration, one that mostly reflected the White House’s lack of esteem and trust in LBJ. Perhaps it was feared that because Johnson was still very close to Richard B. Russell, his Senate mentor, he might be incapable of “disinforming” the Georgian, who was highly critical of the administration’s handling of Castro’s Cuba.^[22] The notion that Johnson would have to contend with the legacy of the missile crisis appeared very unlikely, for LBJ seemed like a relic from a by-gone political age. Johnson himself was practically the only person who believed he might be a viable candidate for the 1968 Democratic nomination. In two months’ time, when *The Saturday Evening Post* would publish an “exclusive” account of the missile crisis—one that was widely (and correctly) viewed as the administration’s preferred version—LBJ would not be mentioned in the article at all, the only regular

member of the ExComm to be so slighted.[\[23\]](#) He had ceased being a person it was important to notice.[\[24\]](#)

In little more than a year, though, LBJ became the first president forced to grapple with JFK's storied handling of the missile crisis. Because of the ostensibly authoritative *Saturday Evening Post* article published in December 1962, the crisis had become quickly encrusted with legend and lore, an "eyeball to eyeball" confrontation with Moscow that abruptly ended when Khrushchev blinked. According to this Hollywoodized version, Kennedy's resoluteness, restraint, and controlled escalation of force prompted Moscow to capitulate, and no one demonstrated more wisdom and foresight (aside from the president) than Robert F. Kennedy. Meanwhile, the standard-bearer of liberal Democrats, Adlai Stevenson, was depicted as an appeaser, and Lyndon Johnson, of course, was nowhere to be found. This vigorously propagated image, of "wonderfully coordinated and error-free 'crisis management,'" was generally swallowed by the media.[\[25\]](#) The president's 1963 assassination subsequently added the luster of martyrdom to the narrative, making it all the more difficult, if not almost blasphemous, to try to discern the truth.

Learning the Wrong Lessons

As Stanford Professor Barton Bernstein, a leading missile crisis scholar (and member of *Washington DeCoded's* editorial board), was the first to point out in 1992, the myth of the missile crisis settlement created an enormous burden of expectation for Lyndon Johnson, one that could never be actually met.

What influence, analysts may profitably speculate, did the widespread belief in Kennedy's great victory in the missile crisis play as President Johnson struggled on, even against the counsel of advisers, for his own triumph in Southeast Asia in 1966-1968? Might he have felt psychologically, and even politically, more free to change policy if he had known, along with his fellow Americans, the truth of the October 1962 secret settlement?[\[26\]](#)

This burden, it must be pointed out, was also one that Johnson was peculiarly—almost uniquely—ill-suited to shoulder, given his deep-seated insecurity and the barely concealed attitude of many Kennedy loyalists, most notably the attorney general. Their view was that Johnson was an undeserving successor, even a usurper, who occupied the White House temporarily, and only because of a terrible accident.[\[27\]](#)

Of course, as he succeeded Kennedy in office, Johnson knew that several elements of Kennedy's "finest hour" were sheer puffery, if not downright wrong. Having participated in the ExComm meetings, LBJ well knew (as the Kennedy tape recordings underscore) that the deliberations had not been coolly analytical, closely argued, and rational at all times, but rather, "desultory, spastic, and often inchoate," in Bernstein's words.[\[28\]](#) LBJ also recognized, undoubtedly, that Adlai Stevenson had been unfairly and maliciously depicted as advocating a "Munich," when his only sin was that he had dared to be the

first adviser to suggest a missile swap. Johnson, lastly, was also cognizant of Operation MONGOOSE, and surely realized the instrumental role that provocative covert action had played in precipitating the crisis. (Under Johnson, in fact, CIA-led efforts to subvert Castro would be all but terminated even as Castro's efforts to subvert other countries in the hemisphere were ratcheted up).

Yet unbeknownst to Johnson, other elements that he believed were true were, in fact, false. The most critical fact about the missile crisis settlement—the reality that Kennedy had claimed toughness, but cut a private deal—was not beyond Johnson's ken, because such deal-making was hardly foreign to him. Still, he did not know such subterfuge had been employed here. Instead, LBJ labored under the false impression that American power, when expertly applied, could force a Communist leader bent on “nuclear blackmail” to back down and become pragmatic.^[29]

What made this false narrative doubly crippling for Johnson were some of his own tendencies. LBJ was an overbearing, controlling personality in the first place, prone to micro-managing a war if he had the misfortune of getting involved in one. The ExComm experience, even though LBJ knew it had not been seamless, probably encouraged President Johnson's worst instincts (and here, he was undoubtedly aided by McNamara's technocratic bent). The fact that Johnson kept intact the national security team assembled by Kennedy, so as to prove continuity with JFK's policies, also exacerbated matters. It has long been known that Johnson was unduly awed by Kennedy's brainy advisers. LBJ's unspoken presumption was that the same men who were at Kennedy's side in October 1962 would surely see Johnson through to a similar, unmitigated victory, regardless of the differences. And if they could not, conversely, that suggested something LBJ did not want to countenance: that the only real difference was in the president who led this assemblage of the best and the brightest. In a similar vein, Johnson may have been too reluctant to buck the counsel of the holdovers even when his gut instinct told him to do so. After all, these were the same men who had guided Kennedy to his spectacular victory.

Of course, had Johnson had a more accurate understanding of the missile crisis' true history, he still would have had to contend with the false analogies and “lessons” that were rife in public.^[30] The explicit and implicit comparisons with his predecessor's success in Cuba began with the Gulf of Tonkin incidents in the late summer of 1964, and grew in intensity as Vietnam began to overshadow everything else.^[31] The inevitable juxtaposition was seldom put as crudely, however, as it was in December 1964. With the situation in Vietnam rapidly deteriorating following President Ngo Dinh Diem's violent ouster, *Washington Post* columnist Joseph Alsop, a leading hawk, directly raised the missile crisis analogy. For Lyndon B. Johnson, Alsop wrote,

Vietnam is what the second Cuban crisis was for John F. Kennedy. If Mr. Johnson ducks the challenge, we shall learn by experience about what [it] would have been like if Kennedy had ducked the challenge in October, 1962.^[32]

Alsop's remark sparked outrage in Johnson, whereas if he had been privy to the truth, the column might have been received with a shrug, or a caustic remark about Alsop's ignorance.[\[33\]](#)

In February 1965, when LBJ stood at the first crossroads with respect to Vietnam—whether to send in ground forces or not—at least one aide, Bill Moyers, suggested to the president that he reconstitute ExComm, or something very much like it.[\[34\]](#) Probably no realization about the missile crisis would have been sufficient, at this juncture, to overcome Johnson's sense that like all Cold War presidents, his mettle and resolve were being tested by the Communist powers.[\[35\]](#) Occasionally, Johnson articulated his reluctance to commit U.S. troops to a Southeast Asian sinkhole. But he knew what happened to presidents when a country was “lost” to communism—indeed, he feared the person leading the charge against him would be Robert Kennedy, claiming that LBJ had “betrayed John Kennedy's commitment to South Vietnam.”[\[36\]](#) Moreover, because of the way Washington had connived in Diem's overthrow in November 1963, a decision with which Vice President Johnson had vehemently disagreed, LBJ apparently felt a deep obligation to re-stabilize South Vietnam.[\[37\]](#)

Yet by early 1966, once it was apparent that U.S. power was not having the desired affect, accurate knowledge of the missile crisis end-game might have persuaded Johnson to be more ruthless or cynical in his efforts to achieve a face-saving settlement. The literature on Johnson's peace feelers suggests that he was not really prepared to concede South Vietnam after a decent interval, unlike his successor in the White House—or as LBJ's predecessor might have done, had he lived to deal with the consequences of his policy.[\[38\]](#)

Excerpts from the Four Telephone Conversations

The taped conversations in which President Johnson alluded to the missile crisis are few in number, though many recordings remain to be released.[\[39\]](#) While the references below are brief, they are a sobering reminder about the pitfalls of drawing the wrong lessons from history—or more precisely, the wrong lessons from the wrong history.

1. [With Walter Jenkins, 10 October 1964, Saturday, 10:38 AM](#)

With just weeks to go in the campaign that would elect Johnson president in his own right, LBJ discussed stump strategy with his long-time chief of staff, Walter Jenkins. A key plank in Barry Goldwater's platform was that the Democrats were failing to hold the line against Moscow and its Communist allies. The morning this conversation occurred, Goldwater was quoted in the major newspapers as criticizing Kennedy's handling of Cuba. During a campaign stop in Los Angeles, Goldwater asserted the assassinated president had “stopped short” in 1962, thereby allowing the Communist menace in Cuba to grow.[\[40\]](#) Johnson's powerful rebuttal was to frame his GOP opponent as an unsuitable choice for a nation that had to be poised for war at a moment's notice. Indeed, there was some criticism that Johnson was going overboard in that regard, because of some of the imagery used to suggest that Goldwater was dangerously unstable.

Part and parcel of Johnson's strategy was to remind Americans that he had sat alongside John Kennedy when the danger of nuclear war was palpable in October 1962—indeed, some of the remarks to Jenkins below were identical to LBJ's stump speech.^[41] The implication, of course, was that Johnson was the only candidate with the experience and wisdom to carry on Kennedy's unique blend of restraint and resolve—not the genuine version, but the one deemed suitable for Johnson and public consumption.

JOHNSON: What I want [pollster Louis Harris] to do is to say, well, if you've got three 5-minute speeches and five 15-minute speeches, what would you make 'em on? And then I want [pollster Oliver] Quayle to do the same thing, and submit 'em and have 'em ready for me on Monday.

And I know we oughta have one on foreign policy, and I know we oughta have one on the waste in government, cuttin' taxes, and stuff like that. I know we oughta have 'nother one on *peace*.

When I came in 11 months ago . . . when I started off, and I said to 'em, "God help me," and they would pray for me . . . why, I'd just do the best I could, that's all I could promise. I've *done* the best I could. I've met with 85 leaders of foreign nations, and I've faced up to problems in Guantánamo, and . . . Cuba, Panama, Cyprus, and Vietnam. And they've stayed with me and they've supported me. Ah . . . now if they wanna throw me out after 11 months, they can *do* it. They want a change in government, they can *do* it. But, ah . . . I picked up and tried to carry on for 'em as best I could.

And I . . . I sat there in that [National] Security Council for 37 days and I had 37 meetin's.^[42] And, ah . . . I never left in the mornin' knowin' whether I'd see my family that night or not. The coolest man at the table was [President] Kennedy. He had a eyeball to eyeball with Khrushchev, and [they] had a confrontation and both of 'em decided we couldn't destroy the world. Khrushchev pulled his missiles out. For anybody now to say, at this late date, that there's somethin' wrong with that – one of the greatest, courageous acts any leader ever performed—I say shame on you.^[43] Now we oughta have a 15 minute speech like it—*that's the only thing that really makes 'em pee in their britches*.

We can say, "Now I'm not goin' say anything about my opponent, and I want you to know that he's served as a senator from a *great* state."

And I'm not gonna recommend him [or] not recommend him – you . . . you be your own judge, whose . . . who do *you* want to answer that phone, and who do *you* want to put that thumb on the . . . who'll have that thumb there on the table close to that *button*. That's a question for you to decide, and you decide on your own judgment, and you decide without *emotion*,

and you decide without *fear*. I'm not sayin' there's *anything* wrong with him.^[44]

They build up a straw man . . . try to get me to say that my opponent does this or that – I'm just not gonna do it – that's a matter for you to decide. And that's the way I'm *handlin'* these things, and it goes *over*.

JENKINS: Sure does.

JOHNSON: I handled it in New Orleans last night that way. And the [news]paper doesn't use it, but it sure does go over with the crowd.

2. [With McGeorge Bundy, 3 December 1965, Monday, 1:15 PM](#)

Barely four months after U.S. forces had begun streaming into South Vietnam on a massive scale, there was increasing discomfort in Washington about the marked lack of progress—so stark that it raised basic questions about U.S. assumptions and expectations. Disturbing indicators suggested Communist forces were adapting to the influx of troops, and even taking advantage of U.S. weaknesses and constraints. As Defense Secretary Robert McNamara reported to the president on November 30, after a two-day visit to Saigon, despite the U.S. buildup “the Communists were increasing the scale and intensity of their military operations.” Previously overflowing with confidence, McNamara had returned from Vietnam with “grave doubts,” convinced that it would be “a long war” and that as many as 600,000 American ground troops might be needed.^[45]

This grim reality led to a series of meetings that involved Johnson's top advisers on national security, many of them unchanged from Kennedy's storied ExComm. As the deliberations over escalation began, there was already a consensus among LBJ's advisers that because the United States could not withdraw, a massive infusion of troops was the only choice which might result in an acceptable outcome. Johnson balked at accepting a foregone conclusion. In this conversation with Bundy, Johnson, who was at his Texas ranch while his advisers were meeting daily in Washington, harked back to his first-hand knowledge of how policy had been hammered out during the missile crisis. In effect, Johnson was asking the men who had served Kennedy so well to do the same for him.

JOHNSON: . . . I think the *weakness* of the government at this stage is that you ought to get [Dean] Rusk and [George] Ball . . . and [Robert] McNamara, and maybe [Clark] Clifford . . . [and] yourself in a room and pick *all* the proposals to *pieces*.^[46] I thought your . . . reference in there last night, that you just . . . [JCS chairman General Earle] Wheeler—

BUNDY: Yeah.

JOHNSON: —that you just can't take it through Wheeler's glasses, or McNamara's glasses, or *my* glasses . . . that our strength is gonna be based

on [a] general, overall viewpoint. And we observed, from the past, that . . . our original judgment on [the] Cuban missile crisis was—what we wanted to do the first hour, and what ultimately was done—was quite different. The same thing—

BUNDY: [No plans survive]—

JOHNSON: —the same thing with Vietnam, so . . . I would much prefer, ‘stead of chasin’ Rusk around the room as I did yesterday—

BUNDY: Did you get anywhere?

JOHNSON: Yes, I got his thinking, which I think was very good, but—on a good *many* things.

But what I would *like* to have—if I could, when I come back, before the series of meetings—I would like for you to come to my bedroom and say to me, “We’ve talked this over, and here’s The preponderant weight of the evidence is here as I see it—as *we* see it—and here are the objections to it.”

Then we go into the meeting and you take the agenda, as we used to, and say, “These are the things on it, now let’s everybody speak frankly.” And then summarize it, and say, “Now, here are the pros, and here are the cons. And you can take the red candy or the vanilla, whichever you want, Mr. President. Here *I* would take this if you’re askin’ me.”

And then I think we get down to the nut cuttin’, so to speak

3. [With Hubert Humphrey, 28 January 1966, Friday, 4:26 PM](#)

Faced with General William Westmoreland’s call for still more troops, President Johnson had declared a temporary lull in the bombing of North Vietnam on December 22, hoping the gesture would lure Hanoi to the negotiating table on Washington’s terms before he had no choice but to order an escalation in the U.S. presence. The pause was then extended repeatedly in January, to see if the administration’s “peace offensive” elicited a response.

By January 27, Johnson was resigned to ending the bombing pause, and in a series of intensive sessions not unlike the ExComm meetings, was consulting with his key advisers on how to apply additional force. Shortly after the end of one such session on January 28, Vice President Hubert Humphrey, who was out of town, called the president. Johnson had concluded the session 45 minutes earlier with the observation that, “I am not happy about Vietnam but we cannot run out—we have to resume bombing.”^[47] But in the conversation with Humphrey, Johnson revealed that he was still hoping against hope for

some slight movement on Hanoi's part, anything that might give him a pretext to extend the peace offensive.

According to Johnson, there was a basis for his continuing to have a sliver of hope. Having been left out of the loop with respect to the Cuba-Turkey linkage, Johnson had manufactured his own speculative understanding of what, at that final moment, made Khrushchev retreat. LBJ apparently believed that word of an imminent U.S. attack on Cuba had leaked to Khrushchev in October 1962, and that it was this intelligence that prompted the Soviet premier to accept the U.S. offer with alacrity.

JOHNSON: [To] just be perfectly frank with you, I've been sayin' things [the] last three or four days in conferences, ah . . . in a *hope* that I would get a little feeler, and I think they been gettin' back over *there*. I don't know whether you know it or not—[cause] you haven't been in on 'em, but—

HUMPHREY: No.

JOHNSON: —you can't have a conference with two people here without it gettin' back.

HUMPHREY: Uh-huh.

JOHNSON: The Joint Chiefs of Staff wrote a letter to [President] Kennedy recommending that he bomb . . . ah, the missile bases in Cuba, and that he—he let 'em have it.^[48] And the letter had been signed, and went to [General Maxwell] Taylor's office. And before Taylor could get it over here to Kennedy, why Khrushchev got his [indistinct].

HUMPHREY: Good lord.

JOHNSON: [laughs]

HUMPHREY: God almighty! Well

4. [With McGeorge Bundy, 22 February 1966, Tuesday, 9:04 AM](#)

By early 1966, public criticism of the Johnson administration's conduct of the war was increasingly under attack, exacerbated by his decision to resume bombing North Vietnam on January 31. The early consensus in Congress over the war was breaking down, and, still worse, members of Johnson's own party were leading the charge.

One of the most substantive and controversial challenges was being mounted by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, chaired by J. William Fulbright (D-Arkansas).^[49]

Beginning on January 28, Fulbright had initiated a series of hearings, some of which would be televised “gavel-to-gavel” over the three national networks. These sessions exposed the administration’s leading figures, namely Secretaries Rusk and McNamara, to withering and sustained criticism, mostly from moderate and liberal Democrats. In effect, the Fulbright hearings were making dissent as legitimate and mainstream as support for the war.

The elephant in the room, insofar as Johnson was concerned, was one particular Democrat not even among the “problem senators” on the Foreign Relations committee. That man was Robert F. Kennedy, the former attorney general who was now a New York senator. Dissent from the liberal wing of the Democratic Party was one thing, but if RFK noticeably criticized Johnson’s handling of the war, it augured a challenge from Kennedy for the 1968 Democratic nomination.

Two days before this conversation, and under great pressure from those seeking a restoration of Camelot, Kennedy had issued a statement that cautiously, but unmistakably, distanced himself from the administration’s prosecution of the war.^[50] RFK argued for a third way—a negotiated political settlement, which would invite the Viet Cong to share power—rather than outright withdrawal, or the simple military victory he insinuated Johnson was bent on achieving.^[51] Just as Johnson feared, the statement on the war from New York’s junior senator was not buried in a small paragraph on page 33 of the major newspapers, but was a front page story. Both *The Washington Post* and *New York Times* published verbatim excerpts from the statement, which was a treatment normally reserved for a president or, at least, a secretary of state.

During this conversation with Bundy, the president summarized his position on negotiating with Hanoi, and in the process made several allusions to the missile crisis. He recalled how Fulbright, a dove with respect to the Vietnam War, had been a leading hawk in October 1962. Johnson suggested that bombing North Vietnam was simply a way of pressing Ho Chi Minh to negotiate, just as John Kennedy’s supposedly unyielding stance had forced Khrushchev to bargain.

The parallel Johnson drew between the bombing resumption, and President Kennedy’s resolve, was not apt. It again betrayed a lack of understanding about what had happened in October 1962, specifically, and a lack of appreciation for the lengths JFK did and was prepared to go to avoid a conflict that might spiral out of control.^[52] Johnson also repeated the striking claim made during his February conversation with Humphrey, namely, that a leak about imminent military action had galvanized Khrushchev into action. In other words, a Kennedy twist on Eisenhower’s 1950s policy of brinkmanship had caused the Soviets to beat a hasty retreat.

Bundy did nothing to correct Johnson’s understanding, content to leave the president in his state of his mistaken belief.

JOHNSON: . . . We don’t ask you [North Vietnam] to give up your pride. We don’t ask you to crawl on your stomach. All we ask you to do is just

proudly—if you want to—walk into a *meeting* hall with us, and to reason, and talk, and be prepared to give and *take*, and we'll try to do the same thing.

I don't know . . . you just got to know, that we're not goin' *get out*, and, ah, we . . . we don't think that you goin' take it over, and we think if you're *willin'* to let them decide it, that that oughta be fair to everybody.[\[53\]](#)

BUNDY: [indistinct]—

JOHNSON: I think you've pretty well answered Bobby [Kennedy] that way, and I think you've pretty well—[\[54\]](#)

BUNDY: Your answer is logic [sic], but the *psychology*—you notice three times today, he came back to the casualties and the Chinese.[\[55\]](#) And these, I think, are the places where the needle goes in . . . in terms of people's fears. And this—

JOHNSON: Yes, I think everything we've ever *had* . . . we have . . . we've had that. But *gosh*, he's *real* inconsistent—

BUNDY: No, I know that.

JOHNSON: —followin' Fulbright's theory, and talkin' about how careful [and] measured they were. Fulbright was droppin' *bombs* on Cuba, as I remember it—

BUNDY: Sure.

JOHNSON: —and sayin' *let's do it right now*.[\[56\]](#)

BUNDY: Sure.

JOHNSON: And his [Kennedy's] Joint Chiefs of Staff, as *I* understood it, signed a letter.[\[57\]](#) And [Maxwell] Taylor first agreed with it and then backed off of it [a] little bit that day . . . the day before—isn't that correct?

BUNDY: [I] don't remember Max's position.

JOHNSON: Well, didn't they recommend . . . didn't they recommend takin' 'em out?

BUNDY: They were certainly . . . they certainly were air strike *plus* invasion, really.

JOHNSON: I was told by *my* military aide that *he* was told that they had signed it . . . that Taylor was on board, that *he* signed it. That he [Taylor] was going to take it over . . . that he . . . he *talked* to somebody, and then called them [the Joint Chiefs] back in, and said that he wanted to interpret it a little differently, and he [Taylor] backed away from it . . . *at that very moment*.

BUNDY: Uh-huh.

JOHNSON: And a good many people over *there*—who were gossipers and who are still gossipers—were of the opinion that, ah . . . the Commies *knew* about that, and that's why Khrushchev came in . . . when he did. They . . . they knew that we were gettin' *ready* to do this, and they had their leaks—

BUNDY: Uh-huh.

JOHNSON: —and that it's kind of like [President] Eisenhower's leak that—
[\[58\]](#)

BUNDY: I've always thought that the prospect of invasion had more to do with the solution than any other one thing. I couldn't prove it, but I just think that it looked awful imminent. . . .

Being privy to the truth about the missile crisis settlement might not have altered materially Johnson's decisions about Vietnam. But more knowledge would have indisputably served him better than what he was allowed to know.

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[1] Anne Applebaum, "[What Presidents Don't Know](#)," *Washington Post*, 21 August 2007.

[2] Following the end of the Cold War, information from the Soviet Union surfaced to suggest that Khrushchev was so shaken by the unauthorized downing of a U-2 aircraft on October 27, and Castro's endorsement of a conflict involving nuclear weapons, that the explicit assurance involving the Jupiter missiles was unnecessary and perhaps superfluous. That may have been true, but administration officials in 1962 would have had no way of knowing this was the case, or for decades afterwards. Thus, it was natural to assume the secret trade clinched the settlement.

[3] Following the 1989 disclosure that the trade had been explicit, missile crisis scholar Barton Bernstein, a history professor at Stanford University, specifically asked Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara, George Ball, and McGeorge Bundy in separate interviews whether they had ever filled Johnson in after he became president. “No one said, ‘Yes, we told him,’” Bernstein found. Bundy was even more precise, telling Bernstein that Johnson did not know. Interview with Bernstein, 10 October 2007.

It may also have been the case that apart from being under the watchful eye of President Kennedy’s brother, Johnson’s advisers did not tell him about the secret assurance because they themselves did not want to give LBJ any reason for departing from a hawkish policy. In November 1964, for example, Rusk directly juxtaposed the deteriorating situation in Vietnam with the missile crisis, although he knew better than anyone that it was a misleading comparison. David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 370.

[4] President Kennedy was the chairman of ExComm, and the 12 regular members were Lyndon Johnson, vice president; Dean Rusk, secretary of state; Robert McNamara, secretary of defense; C. Douglas Dillon, secretary of treasury; Robert Kennedy, attorney general; John McCone, director of central intelligence; George Ball, under secretary of state; Roswell Gilpatric, deputy secretary of defense; General Maxwell Taylor, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Llewellyn Thompson, ambassador-at-large; Theodore Sorensen, special counsel; and McGeorge Bundy, special assistant to the president for national security affairs. The ExComm was formally constituted on October 22, but effectively the group existed as of October 16. Document 18, “[Transcript of a Meeting at the White House](#),” 16 October 1962, and Document 42, “[National Security Action Memorandum 196](#),” 22 October 1962, in Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963: Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1996), 49, 157.

[5] The only explanation for the exclusion of Dillon and McCone was party affiliation, since other ExComm members opposed to linkage (like Llewellyn Thompson) were allowed into the inner circle.

[6] It was largely because of McCone, a notorious and stubborn hard-liner, that the ExComm had the luxury of several days to ponder and debate a U.S. response in the first place. McCone had been the only senior adviser who consistently warned the Soviets were bound to include offensive nuclear weapons as part of their military build-up in Cuba. He then pressed the White House into keeping up U-2 surveillance of Cuba at a time when virtually everyone in the administration believed that Khrushchev wouldn’t dare. On October 15, McCone had been proven right and everyone else wrong; but more importantly, since the missiles were still discovered before they were operational (albeit nearly a month late), it gave the administration precious time to collect itself. See Max Holland, “[Politics and Intelligence: The ‘Photo Gap’ that Delayed Discovery of Missiles in Cuba](#),” *Studies in Intelligence*, Vol. 49, No. 4, (Winter 2005).

[7] Sheldon M. Stern, *Averting 'The Final Failure': John F. Kennedy and the Secret Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 388. McCone had served as chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission during Eisenhower's second term, and was close to the former president. Indeed, McCone was considered a likely candidate for secretary of defense had Richard Nixon, Eisenhower's vice president, won the 1960 election.

[8] Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and His Times, 1961-1973* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 19.

[9] In all, Johnson attended 37 of the 42 ExComm meetings, although those sums are somewhat misleading. For one, they do not count the important, October 16-22 meetings of what was essentially the ExComm, because that body was not officially formed until October 22. In addition, they include the sessions that stretched until March 1963, long after critical phase of the missile crisis was over. If one counts only the number of formal ExComm or ExComm-like meetings during the crucial period October 16-28 (the fabled 13 days), Johnson attended 13 out of 20 meetings, missing only those that occurred while he was out politicking in the western states. Egan analysis of Department of State, *Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath*; Stern, *Averting 'The Final Failure'*; Memorandum for the President from Rostow, "Participation in Cuban Missile Crisis Meetings, October 1962," 5 October 1968, NSF, Memos to the President, Box 40, Vol. 98, October 5-9, 1968 [dated], LBJ Library; and Daily Diary, Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, 15-29 October 1962, LBJ Library.

It is worth noting Johnson's attendance is not accurately rendered in the relevant Miller Center of Public Affairs volume of Kennedy tapes. The third volume from that series fails to note that Johnson was indeed present at ExComm meetings on October 22 (3 PM), 23 (6 PM), 24 (10 AM), 25 (5:25 PM), and 27 (9 PM). Philip Zelikow and Ernest May, eds., *The Presidential Recordings, John F. Kennedy: The Great Crises, October 22-28, 1962* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 40, 151, 183, 269-270, 488-489.

[10] Stern, *Averting 'The Final Failure'*, 72. "The country's blood pressure is up, and they are fearful, and they're insecure, and we're gettin' divided," said Johnson.

[11] Leonard Baker, *The Johnson Eclipse: A President's Vice Presidency* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 121. President Kennedy also had political speaking engagements lined up, but they were not as distant from Washington and the president was often able to return to the capital on the same day. Johnson had been scheduled to speak in eight Western states during October 17-20.

[12] According to Baker, Johnson was called back from his campaign tour, but this claim could not be confirmed by us. *Ibid.*, 122.

[13] McCone Memorandum for the File, "Meeting with the Vice President on 21 October 1962," 22 October 1962, in Mary S. McAuliffe, ed., *CIA Documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 1992), 245. Dallek

suggested in his LBJ biography that since Johnson's first impulse was to launch an attack against the sites rather than impose a blockade, that his confidence in his own judgment was subsequently undermined. This ignores the fact that after McCone told Johnson about Eisenhower's reaction, the vice president assented to the blockade. *Ibid.*, and Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 87. Moreover, if the standard were one's initial thoughts, virtually every member of ExComm would have had reason to doubt their own judgment. Johnson was hardly alone in switching positions, and strongly supported a compromise involving the Jupiters on October 27, when it mattered.

[14] Quoted in Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 19.

[15] George Reedy, who served as LBJ's press secretary in the Senate and the White House, once told historian Sheldon Stern that Johnson and Kennedy were the two most charismatic men he had ever known. But while LBJ was vice president, Reedy observed, he seemed to turn off his own charisma in JFK's presence. For an incisive discussion of the LBJ-JFK relationship, see Reedy's *Lyndon B. Johnson: A Memoir* (New York: Andrews & McMeel, 1982).

[16] Baker, *Johnson Eclipse*, 121.

[17] One possible explanation for why Johnson suddenly seemed to find his voice on October 27 was that he feared the administration was about to take a step that would be as disastrous for it as the Bay of Pigs had been. In that case, Johnson's ambition to run in 1968 as the natural successor to a successful president would be severely damaged.

[18] Stern, *Averting 'The Final Failure'*, 358-359, 362.

[19] *Ibid.*, 319-320; 352-354, 360-361, 363-364, 366-367.

[20] The precise details of how four regular ExComm members were disinvited from the gathering in the Oval Office remain murky. Bundy, who was the first to reveal the inner circle meeting, described it in a passive manner, as if it were an organic development. It is just conceivable, given RFK's animus toward Lyndon Johnson, that the attorney general was instrumental in the vice president's exclusion. McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices About the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House, 1988), 432.

[21] *Ibid.*

[T22] When the Congressional leadership was briefed on October 22, Senator Russell was easily the most vocal critic of the president's decision to impose a blockade, almost incredulous that Kennedy had not already ordered up an invasion. Stern, *Averting 'The Final Failure'*, 164-171.

[23] Baker, *Johnson Eclipse*, 123; Stewart Alsop and Charles Bartlett, "In Time of Crisis," *Saturday Evening Post*, 8 December 1962. The article was thought to reflect the

administration's preferred account because Bartlett was JFK's personal friend, dating back to the 1950s, and Alsop was known for having top sources of information. In addition, the article openly claimed to have privileged access to unimpeachable sources.

As Baker points out, in the uproar over the unfair depiction of Stevenson, the fact that Johnson was omitted altogether from the article escaped notice, although LBJ surely realized it. The insult was perpetuated in Robert F. Kennedy's edited memoir, *Thirteen Days*, which suggested that Johnson was an intermittent ExComm attendee, though in fact he had been designated a regular member in the memo officially establishing the ad hoc group, and missed meetings only because the White House desired to project an image of normalcy prior to October 22. Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1969), 30; Document 42, "[National Security Action Memorandum 196](#)," 22 October 1962, in Department of State, *Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath*, 157.

[24] A joke making the rounds in Washington in 1962, which must have gotten back to LBJ himself, briefly but brutally summed up Johnson's status in the Kennedy administration: "Lyndon *who*?" Private Remark, Wilbur Cohen to Sheldon M. Stern, 7 April 1981.

[25] Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, 459.

[26] Barton J. Bernstein, "Reconsidering the Missile Crisis: Dealing with the Problems of the American Jupiters in Turkey," in James A. Nathan, ed., *The Cuban Missile Crisis Revisited* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 106. After Bernstein raised the issue, many scholars have weighed in on the question of how the missile crisis influenced LBJ's decision-making on Vietnam. See Brian VanDeMark, *Into the Quagmire: Lyndon Johnson and the Escalation of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford, 1991), 48; Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 100; Eric Alterman, *When Presidents Lie: A History of Official Deception and Its Consequences* (New York: Viking, 2004), 147-159.

[27] On Johnson as a usurper, see Garry Wills, *The Kennedy Imprisonment: A Meditation on Power* (Boston, MA: Back Bay, 1994), 188-189, and Max Holland, *The Kennedy Assassination Tapes: The White House Conversations of Lyndon B. Johnson Regarding the Assassination, the Warren Commission, and the Aftermath* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 67-68, 297-299, 422-424. Wills actually notes that "The true wound inflicted on Johnson was not that the Kennedys considered him a usurper but that they came, in time, to make him feel like one himself."

[28] Interview with Bernstein, 10 October 2007.

[29] Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971), 470.

[30] By the late 1960s, the "eyeball-to-eyeball" mythology had burgeoned to a point where even Theodore Sorensen, one of the chief myth-makers, began to have reservations

about its impact. In 1969, he criticized the “‘Cuban Missile Crisis Syndrome,’ which calls for a repetition in some other conflict of Jack Kennedy’s tough stand of October 1962 when he told the Russians with their missiles either to pull out or look out!” Theodore C. Sorensen, *The Kennedy Legacy* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 208.

[31] Document 280, “[Notes of the Leadership Meeting](#),” 4 August 1964, in Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964-1968: Vietnam, 1964* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1992), 616, 619.

[32] Joseph Alsop, “Johnson’s Cuba II,” *Washington Post*, 30 December 1964.

[33] “The suggestion that he lacked Kennedy’s guts and strength outraged Johnson.” Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 244.

[34] David M. Barrett, ed., *Lyndon B. Johnson’s Vietnam Papers: A Documentary Collection* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1997), 103.

[35] Writing to author Eric Alterman in June 1998, Theodore Sorensen asserted “Very possibly . . . an earlier disclosure of JFK’s assurance to Khrushchev regarding the missiles in Turkey would have slowed down LBJ’s . . . plunge into Vietnam, but I doubt it.” Of course, Sorensen, as one of the secret-keepers of the explicit deal, would not be inclined to admit to another outcome. Alterman, *When Presidents Lie*, 376.

[36] Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 253.

[37] On Johnson’s views of Diem’s ouster, see Holland, *Kennedy Assassination Tapes*, 235-239.

[38] McNamara, writing in 1995, argued that JFK’s willingness to trade the Jupiters meant it was “highly probable” he would have reversed course in Vietnam. Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995), 96-97.

[39] On 9 October 2007, the Johnson Library released an additional tranche of recordings covering 1967. Only the recordings from January 1968 to January 1969 remain to be processed.

[40] Robert E. Thompson, “Goldwater Hits U.S. ‘Retreat’ Before Reds,” *Los Angeles Times*, 10 October 1964.

[41] Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President 1964* (New York: Atheneum, 1965), 393-394.

[42] See footnote 9.

[43] No doubt LBJ was referring to news reports about Goldwater's October 9 luncheon address in Los Angeles. In earlier campaign remarks, Goldwater had also impugned Kennedy by suggesting he timed the missile crisis for political gain in the 1962 elections. E.W. Kenworthy, "Johnson Exhorts South on Rights," *New York Times*, 10 October 1964.

[44] Johnson was justifiably defensive about the instantly infamous "daisy petal" TV advertisement, which depicted a young girl picking daisies in a field. After she counted up to five daisies, a voice counted down from five, followed by footage of an atomic explosion and a narrator urging voters to support LBJ. When the ad first aired in September, the GOP had vehemently denounced it as perpetrating "a violent political lie" for insinuating that Goldwater was likely to set off a nuclear holocaust on a whim. Susanna McBee, "Chairman Clash Over Fairness Pledge," *Washington Post*, 12 September 1964.

[45] William C. Gibbons, *The U.S. Government and the Vietnam War: Part IV, July 1965-January 1968* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1994), 107-108.

[46] At this juncture, Clifford, the archetypal Washington lawyer and Democratic fixer, had no official position in the government, apart from being chairman of the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board. He would later succeed McNamara as secretary of defense.

[47] Gibbons, *U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, 161.

[48] According to Taylor's memoir, the Joint Chiefs urged Kennedy to order an air strike against the missile sites no later than October 29 "unless clear evidence of dismantling the missiles was received in the interim." Maxwell D. Taylor, *Swords and Ploughshares* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1972), 276.

[49] Gibbons, *U.S. Government and the Vietnam War*, 222-230.

[50] Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "Inside Report: Kennedy and Vietnam," *Washington Post*, 23 February 1966.

[51] Robert E. Thompson, "Bob Kennedy Urges Share for Reds in Saigon Regime," *Los Angeles Times*, 20 February 1966; "Excerpts From R. Kennedy's Statement," *Washington Post*, 20 February 1966.

[52] Johnson, of course, was also in the dark about the "Cordier ploy," a gambit which President Kennedy intended to put into motion if Moscow turned down his initial October 27 offer. On Washington's behalf, Andrew Cordier, a former UN official, was to approach Secretary General U Thant and get him to propose an exchange of the Jupiter missiles in Turkey for the Soviet missiles in Cuba. A public proposal from the secretary general, it was thought, would presumably allow Moscow to save face. In this instance, however, Johnson was not alone in his ignorance. The only other administration official

who knew about the Cordier ploy was Secretary of State Rusk. Eric Pace, "[Rusk Tells a Kennedy Secret: Fallback Plan in Cuba Crisis](#)," *New York Times*, 28 August 1987.

[53] Johnson was referring to abiding by the results of a free election in South Vietnam under international supervision, a position both Hanoi and Washington claimed to espouse.

[54] The day after Kennedy's statement, Bundy had appeared on "Meet the Press," a Sunday interview program on the NBC television network. Bundy had attempted to rebut Senator Kennedy by quoting President Kennedy on the dangers of a coalition government that shared power with Communists. Richard Eder, "Ball and Bundy Score Idea," *New York Times*, 21 February 1966.

[55] In his statement on the war, RFK had specifically mentioned the possibility of a wider war that would involve China. To every American who remembered the price paid after the Chinese intervened in the Korean War, this was a worrisome thought. "Excerpts From R. Kennedy's Statement," *Washington Post*, 20 February 1966.

[56] When the Congressional leadership was briefed on October 22, just before Kennedy's nationwide address, Senator Fulbright (somewhat to everyone's surprise) had denounced the blockade as the "worst alternative" and advocated an immediate invasion. Stern, *Averting 'The Final Failure'*, 171.

[57] See footnote 48.

[58] Here Johnson seemed to be referring to the so-called "madman theory," a tactic first attributed to the Eisenhower administration. The idea was to leak the notion that Washington was willing to use excessive force unless a Communist power cooperated. Supposedly, such coercive brinkmanship had persuaded North Korea to agree to an armistice in 1953.