

Cuban Missile Crisis
Letter From the Representative to the United Nations (Stevenson) to
President Kennedy



25.

Washington, October 17, 1962.

Dear Mr. President:

I have reviewed the planning thus far and have the following comments for you:

As I have said I think your personal emissaries should deliver your messages to C and K. There is no disagreement as to C. As to K an emissary could better supplement the gravity of the situation you have communicated to Gromyko. And talking with K would afford a chance of uncovering his motives and objectives far better than correspondence thru the "usual channels."

As to your announcement, assuming it becomes imperative to say something soon, I think it would be a mistake at this time to disclose that an attack was imminent and that merely reciting the facts, emphasizing the gravity of the situation and that further steps were in process would be enough for the first announcement.

Because an attack would very likely result in Soviet reprisals somewhere--Turkey, Berlin, etc.--it is most important that we have as much of the world with us as possible. To start or risk starting a nuclear war is bound to be divisive at best and the judgments of history seldom coincide with the tempers of the moment.

If war comes, in the long run our case must rest on stopping while there was still time the Soviet drive to world domination, our obligations under the Inter-American system, etc. We must be prepared for the widespread reaction that if we have a missile base in Turkey and other places around the Soviet Union surely they have a right to one in Cuba. If we attack Cuba, an ally of the USSR, isn't an attack on NATO bases equally justified. One could go on and on. While the explanation of our action may be clear to us it won't be clear to many others. Moreover, if war is the consequence, the Latin American republics may well divide and some say that the U.S. is not acting with their approval and consent. Likewise unless the issue is very clear there may be sharp differences with our Western Allies who have lived so long under the same threat of Soviet attack from bases in the satellite countries by the same IRBMs.

But all these considerations and obstacles to clear and universal understanding that we are neither rash, impetuous or indifferent to the fate of others are, I realize, only too familiar to you.

I know your dilemma is to strike before the Cuban sites are operational or to risk waiting until a proper groundwork of justification can be prepared. The national security must come first. But the means adopted have such incalculable consequences that I feel you should have made it clear that the existence of nuclear missile bases anywhere is negotiable⁽¹⁾ before we start anything.

Our position, then, is that we can't negotiate with a gun at our head, a gun that imperils the innocent, helpless Cuban people as much as it does the U.S., and that if they won't remove the missiles and restore the status quo ante we will have to do it ourselves--and then we will be ready to discuss bases in the context of a disarmament treaty or anything else with them. In short it is they, not the U.S., that have upset the balance and created this situation of such peril to the whole world.

I confess I have many misgivings about the proposed course of action, but to discuss them further would add little to what you already have in mind. So I will only repeat that it should be clear as a pikestaff that the U.S. was, is and will be ready to negotiate the elimination of bases and anything else; that it is they who have upset the precarious balance in the world in arrogant disregard of your warnings--by threats against Berlin and now from Cuba--and that we have no choice except to restore that balance, i.e., blackmail and intimidation never, negotiation and sanity always.

Yours,
Adlai S. Stevenson(2)

P.S. I'm returning to New York and can return, of course, at your convenience.

Source: Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Countries Series, Cuba. Secret; Eyes Only. The source text indicates it was written during the morning. A copy of Stevenson's handwritten notes, "Cuba--Memo to Self for Conf--Dept--Oct. 17," which seem to be the basis for this letter, are at Princeton University, Stevenson Papers, Box 846, Selected Correspondence, Cuba.