Robert Frost's Last Adventure

By STEWART L. UDALL

It is now 10 years since the curtains began to open on a nuclear showdown and the two great powers of the East and West confronted each other in the Cuban missile crisis. It was in late spring or early summer of 1962 that the Soviet Union began preparing to install about 60 offensive intermediate-range ballistic missiles in Cuba, well within range of the United States. The peoples of the world then watched, waited and were brought to the very edge of great danger before the crisis was ultimately met and the feared Armageddon averted.

Through some combination of simple coincidence, the compelling forces of history and a young American President's belief in the relationship of poetry and power, I found myself in the company of one of the world's great poets, Robert Frost, and one of its most powerful men, Nikita Khrushchev, as this most crucial and tense of dramas started to unfold. Neither Frost nor I, however, was aware that we were in the presence of one who had made such a fateful decision as Khrushchev had.

It is perhaps not outlandish to suggest that Frost's mission to Moscow helped set the stage for the relaxing of tensions that was to occur between his country and the Soviet Union in the years to come and, indeed, for the forming now of positive agreements toward greater cooperation and interchange between East and West. This was the very purpose of his trip.

The idea grew out of a Washington dinner party. Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin was present and had a lively exchange with Frost, who talked about the "right kind of rivalry" between the two countries, and the need for a high-level *modus vivendi.* I had been one of Frost's closest friends in Washington and had suggested to John F. Kennedy in 1960 that Frost take part in the President's inauguration, a suggestion that Kennedy of course took. So I proposed now that Frost go with me to the Soviet Union in the summer of 1962 as a kind of special ambassador. Dobrynin was enthusiastic. But the evening ended with Frost, who was not well, wondering if he was "up to it." A few weeks later he wrote me to say he would make the trip if the President wanted him to go.

Kennedy and Frost had become good friends, each one a great stylist in his own way and each clearly fond of the other's style. Frost once defined style as "the mind skating circles around itself as it moves forward," a good description perhaps of the naturalness and self-critical detachment of John Kennedy. And Frost, of course, felt tied to Kennedy, felt here at last was a politician who understood and was sympathetic to the world of poetry and art. As the 88-year-old poet had said in his inaugural dedication verse:

Of a power leading from its strength and pride,
Of young ambition eager to be tried ...

A golden age of poetry and power
Of which this noonday's the beginning hour.

President Kennedy endorsed the idea of sending Frost to Moscow, and so the stage was set for the old man's last adventure.

Frost went because he felt he could make a contribution to peace if given the opportunity to talk man to man with Khrushchev. His determination was fierce. Several times during the long flight to Moscow he asked the piercing question, "Will we get to see *him*?" I was dismayed that he had his heart set on "the big conversation," and when I told him the odds were heavily against either of us seeing the Soviet leader, he became downcast. Later his frustration deepened, and in the middle of a listless poetry reading in Moscow, he growled at Franklin Reeve, his American interpreter, "What the hell am I going to do here anyway if I don't get to see Khrushchev?" Frost took pride in his ability to put himself in anther man's shoes, and it was obvious he had not only gone to great lengths to understand Khrushchev's situation, but in the process he had also developed a perspective of cold-war competition that was generous in its estimate of the potential of Soviet society. This was not a difficult exercise for Frost. In 1959, when some students asked him about Boris Pasternak's troubles with the Soviet hierarchy, he replied sharply, "Pasternak is a brave man. He wants to be a Russian and we're going to get him killed if we keep trying to use him against Russia." And at a press conference much later he made this sympathetic observation about chairman Khrushchev: "Think of his fears -- of us in front of him, of what's around him, of the Politburo behind him."

Now, however, it was not fears, but hopes, which Frost wanted to explore. As he surveyed the sweep of history, Frost became convinced that human survival depended on the gradual social and political convergence of the two systems. In the acceptance letter he wrote to President Kennedy about his Russian trip, he said he would be "reporting and prophesying," and he outlined his convergence concept in these words: "I have thought I saw the Russian and American democracies drawing together, theirs easing down from a kind of abstract severity to taking less and less care of the masses; ours creeping up to taking more and more of care of the masses as they grow innumerable."

Frost told me that he was prepared to say this, and more, "straight out" to Khrushchev, that he wanted to tell the Russian leader "to his face" that he considered him a courageous leader and admired his humanizing reforms. He had prepared his appeal with the care and craft he gave to the writing of poetry, and I could see he was ready to speak as an emissary of mankind, not only for the people of the United States. He recalled that Aristotle had summed up the Greek experience by concluding that great nations at the pinnacle of power prevail only when they behave greatly. Frost wanted passionately to discuss with Khrushchev a hundred years of grand rivalry based on an Aristotelian code of conduct he called "mutual magnanimity." Frost loathed Khrushchev's "coexistence" slogan, but it was clear he planned to conceal his distaste for it as he presented his own plan. To him "coexistence" implied a sterile, negative view of the human prospect, as against the kind of

context for excellence that he thought might serve as more equivalent for war and poisonous propaganda.

In the end, history intervened and Frost got his wish. Khrushchev was on vacation at the Black Sea. Unexpectedly, I was invited to fly down to Gagra for a conference on Sept. 6 -- and he scheduled a separate conversation the following day with Robert Frost. At the time, I was puzzled by our invitations. And when the Soviet chairman spent a total of five and one-half hours with us on successive days -- and took pains to give each of us explicit messages for President Kennedy -- the mystery deepened.

Neither of us knew it then, but the Soviet leader had an urgent ulterior motive. The beginnings of the nuclear showdown -- the first in history -- were taking shape. Nikita Khrushchev himself (as he later said in his book, "Khrushchev Remembers") had made a "personal decision" in early July to install the missiles in Cuba -- the first time Soviet missiles had ever been installed outside the borders of the U.S.S.R. Khrushchev's gamble was overwhelming. If it failed (or rather, as he saw it, if President Kennedy misinterpreted his intentions), the crisis could plunge the world into nuclear holocaust. If it succeeded, it would constitute a worldwide strategic breakthrough for the Kremlin. But Kennedy's reaction was crucial -- and we were Kennedy's friends.

Even as we arrived in the U.S.S.R., Soviet technicians were preparing the launching sites in Cuba, and the missiles were being crated for shipment by sea. In Washington, the uncertain state of our intelligence reports at this point put President Kennedy on the defensive. Prominent Republican Senators were openly demanding that the President do something to stop whatever was under way in the Caribbean. To clarify the U.S. position, the day before Frost arrived at the Black Sea, President Kennedy held a press conference at which he bluntly warned that offensive weapons would not be tolerated in Castro's territory. This, then, was the diplomatic backdrop the day to the Frost-Khrushchev conversation.

At the last minute, their meeing was almost aborted. Frost was fatigued and running a 101-degree fever when he arrived. He want to bed and told Reeve he was too ill to make the 20-minute drive to the dacha of his host. Khrushchev, however, wanted the talk to occur, and when he learned the poet was indisposed he sent his personal physician and then went to Frost's room to keep the appointment.. I have a copy of the bedside photo of the two men taken by V.S. Lebedev, the chairman's secretary. It shows a relaxed and self-confident Khrushchev sitting near a disheveled Frost who looks all of his 80 years. Though the poet has a deathbed pallor, there is fierce alertness in his eyes.

The talk began and rapport came easily to these two men, both masters of the art of banter. Khrushchev chided Frost for not taking care of himself and suggested he follow doctor's orders if he was going to live to be 100. Robert said he was "half as old as his country" and didn't trust physicians, but would be around for his nation's 200th anniversary anyway. Frost then described his travels in Russia, and he praised his host for what he had

done or poets and poetry. This was followed by a discussion about the relationship of artists to their society. Having tested each other, the two men began talking in earnest when Khrushchev asked if Frost had "anything special in mind."

The poet went right to the issue he had come to discuss -- a *modus vivendi* for the long haul that would allow both countries to survive, contend and prosper. To establish a tone of magnanimity, Frost began by expressing ungrudging admiration for Khrushchev's brand of leadership. He conceded that the Soviet system was destined to be a vigorous force in the world, and he outlined his belief that constructive rivalry would lead to a gradual convergence of the two systems. Then, speaking from the depths of his concern, he told Khrushchev that this kind of East-West understanding was possible only if the leaders were high-minded and encouraged an open contest for excellence.

"Noble rivalry" was the right theme for "two nations laid out for rivalry in sports, science, art and democracy," Frost said. Maintaining his tone, he reminded his host that the ideas and deeds of poets and political leaders "shape the character of a country." He underscored his point with one of his own aphorisms: "A great nation makes great poetry, and great poetry makes a great nation." Khrushchev studied Frost's face as Frost expounded his argument. He intervened only once to say that the fundamental contest would be in the area of "peaceful economic competition." Otherwise, the Soviet leader took no issue with Frost and at one point he exclaimed, "You have the soul of a poet!"

Frost next discussed the need for a code of conduct, thus, anticipating by 10 years the Nixon-Brezhnev declaration of principles, agreed upon during the recent summit talks in Moscow. Frost said back then that such a code or mutually agreed upon principles of conduct would enable his "noble rivalry" to flourish. Leaders had a moral duty not only to steer clear of senseless wars but also to create a climate hospitable to wide-ranging contact and competition. If there was restraint, if the limits of national power were recognized, both sides would soon realize that "petty squabbles and blackguarding propaganda" had to be avoided. As Frost put it, "Great nations admire each other and don't take pleasure in belittling each other."

There was discussion about Berlin, about the horrors of a nuclear war, the meaning of economic competition, the common cultural traditions of Russia and the United States. Each man expressed confidence in the future, and in the capacity of his country to meet the challenge of what Frost called "a hundred years of grand rivalry." After nearly an hour and a half, Khrushchev asked if he hadn't overstayed his time, and Frost thanked him or their talk. There was a final handshake, the Soviet leader asked Frost to tell President Kennedy about their conversation, and Frost presented him a book of his poems inscribed, "To Premier Khrushchev, from his rival in friendship, Robert Frost."

When his host left, the old poet dropped back on his bed exhausted. He said to Reeve, "Well, we did it, didn't we? He's a great man all right." Frost was elated. He had shot his bolt; he had performed at the peak of his mental powers. Khrushchev the man met his

expectations, and (as he told his press conference in Moscow the next day) "there was nothing common or mean" to mar the conversation. Frost had no way of knowing whether Khrushchev agreed with his main argument, but he chose to believe he would use restraint and "take a stand for greatness" on the fateful issues. He did know that he had had another big inning for poetry and power, and that was part of his elation.

At the time, I wondered why Khrushchev was so solicitous about Frost, and why he spent so much time with me. We realize later that he was us because he was obsessed with President Kennedy's forthcoming response to his nuclear lunge. Would Kennedy order an invasion of Cuba? Would nuclear weapons be used by the United States? The condition of Kennedy's nerve, and his initial interpretation of Khrushchev's intentions would be decisive. The Soviet Premier saw us, then, because he needed us. In a few days, the real purpose of the Cuban installations would be discovered. Khrushchev needed to send tidings of his sanity, to prove that he was still in charge. Our visits would give Kennedy a window into his mind. When I look back now with the benefit of hindsight, Khrushchev's conduct was both conservative and cunning. He was trying, with deceptive twists and turns, to keep Washington guessing, to present a peaceful face one day and a tough stance the next. He mentioned Cuba to me only once, and it involved a typical Khrushchevian anecdote. To show me he was abreast of Washington politics, he noted that "some Senators" were demanding that Kennedy invade Cuba. He said it reminded him of a conversation young Maxim Gorki once had with the elderly Tolstoy. Gorki asked Tolstoy about his sexual prowess, and the older man replied, "I have the same desires -- but my performance doesn't measure up." There was an earthy guffaw, and a sharp challenge: "That's the way your Senators are. They talk big, but they can't perform."

But this was the only truculent outburst during our long talk. Otherwise, Khrushchev acted the role of a reasonable man who was genuinely fond of the new President and was trying hard to understand his political problems in a midterm election year. He went out of his way to boast that he had helped defeat Richard M. Nixon in the 1960 campaign (by refusing, until after the election, to grant President Eisenhower's request for the release of two U.S. airmen, shot down in the Soviet Arctic in 1959). He blandly accepted President Kennedy's explanation that a new U-2 spy-plane intrusion over the Siberian coast five days earlier was an accident. He asked me to deliver a personal gift of Georgian wines to the President, and as I left he said twice for emphasis, "You tell the President I want him to be my guest right here soon -- and I want him to bring Mrs. Kennedy and the little girl, too."

Khrushchev's final maneuver was to make me the courier of a "secret message"; I was to give Kennedy his flat commitment that he would do nothing to "heat up" the Berlin crisis until after the November elections. This was the kind of personal politics that ultimately let to Nikita Khrushchev's downfall. It was a clever, fascinating performance.

Khrushchev's ominous game did not surface for six weeks, but at the very time we were at Gagra he was apparently preparing another bold stroke that would have fascinated Robert Frost. He was preparing -- literally -- to use poetry to consolidate his own political power:

readying a new round of de-Stalinization to exploit the gains in power and prestige that would result from his Cuban coup.

De-Stalinization was Khrushchev's most potent internal political weapon. His secret speech denouncing Stalin five years earlier was the chief source of his strength within the Communist party, but his control of the Presidium was still tenuous. This, too, was a daring gamble, but it is clear now that Khrushchev was determined to alter the mode of party government. Literary men had already been selected to be the spearpoint of the new wave of de-Stalinization. This was not surprising. Russian writers have been in the forefront of movements for political reform since the time of Pushkin. The young poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko and a then-unknown novelist, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, were to fire the first thunderbolts. On Oct. 21, the fateful day John F. Kennedy alerted the world to the Cuban crisis, Yevtushenko's poem "The Heirs of Stalin" appeared in Pravda. It was an emotional plea for vigilance to "stop Stalin from rising again," and it warned:

"some of his heirs tend roses in retirement, thinking in secret
their enforced leisure will not last.
Others,
from platforms, even heap abuse on Stalin,
but,
at night,
yearn for the good old days."

The publication the same week of "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich," Solzhenitsyn's novel, was probably the most startling literary event in Soviet history. Solzhenitsyn, a personal victim of Stalin's paranoia, quickly achieved recognition as one of the great artists of the 20th century. His book was a searching indictment of life in Stalin's slave-labor camps. It, too, appeared in an official Communist journal.

We know now that Nikita Khrushchev personally approved the printing of these works. Robert Frost's escort on his journey to the Black Sea was Aleksey Surkov, secretary of the Writers' Union. En route, Surkov made the cryptic remark to Frank Reeve that he expected to transact "important business" with Khrushchev at Gagra. When the chairman's Cuban gamble went awry, however, he was lucky to survive politically and his new de-Stalinization campaign was quickly sidetracked.

Frost held a news conference at his apartment after returning to Moscow. Handling the inquiries with his usual skill, he reported that he had received a "private message for President Kennedy." The next day a front-page story in The New York Times began, "Robert Frost said today that he and Premier Khrushchev had agreed on the need for rivalry and magnanimity in relations between the two countries." The story accurately reflected the highlights of the Frost-Khrushchev conversation.

Frost's adventure should have concluded on this positive note. There should have been a visit to Washington and a quiet report to the President. Unhappily for Frost, however, this denouement was not to be. We returned to New York on Sept. 9, with a long stopover at the Paris airport. Though Frost was in a mellow mood, he had been awake 18 hours by the time we finally deplaned and was bone-tired. I should have stopped any further press interviews, but the reporters were out in force and anxious to persuade him to expand on his impressions of Khrushchev. As he was beginning to repeat himself near the end of his New York press conference, Frost astonished me by suddenly blurting out, "Khrushchev said he feared for us because of our lot of liberals. He thought that we're too liberal to fight -- he thinks we will sit on one hand and then the other." This was the fresh news the reporters were waiting for, and the next day The Washington Post carried a banner headline: "Frost Says Khrushchev Sees U.S. as 'Too Liberal' to Defend Itself."

Reeve and I both knew the poet had put words in Khrushchev's mouth. The phrase "too liberal to fight" was one Frost had used many times, but once he had attributed it to the chairman the damage was done and there was no way to correct the record. From every standpoint it was an unfortunate slip: With one stroke, the poet had violated his own rules for "magnanimous conduct," had misrepresented Khrushchev's position, and had embarrassed President Kennedy. In a thoughtless moment, he had indulged in the very propagandizing he personally deplored in his conversation at Gagra.

The Cuban situation already had Kennedy on the defensive. He was stung by Frost's statement. When I reached Washington, at the conclusion of our conversation the President asked curtly, "Why did he have to say that?" I had no good answer. The extent of the President's resentment became clear in the following weeks. Frost was not invited to Washington for a debriefing; and Kennedy gave him no opportunity to present his "personal message" from Khrushchev. As the poet brooded over his blunder at home in Boston, I'm certain he realized he had "crossed" Kennedy, had lost a valuable friendship. He began to dictate a letter-report to the President late September, but his heart was not in it and the letter was never completed.

I saw him in Washington the week the Cuban crisis had the world at the brink of nuclear war. He had come to participate in a National Poetry Festival. His talk contained an undertone of bitterness toward the White House, but as the life-and-death missile confrontation evolved, Frost was strangely optimistic about its outcome. He admired the mutual restraint of the two leaders, and he was sure Kennedy and Khrushchev would "work it out peacefully." Frost's personal plight brought to my mind a prophetic conversation he had had with Andre Malraux at a Washington luncheon the previous May. They were discussing poetry and politics when this exchange occurred:

Frost: The Government can use a poet to serve its purpose -- but when he is no longer useful, the Government has a right to cast him off.
Malraux: Yes, but that is not the ultimate truth. Think of Caesar Augustus. The poet Virgil was used by him, was part of his circle of advisers. But today Virgil is the one we

remember.
Frost: But that was a long time coming.
Malraux: But isn't that what we're for?

During the last weeks of his life, Frost made only one indirect attempt to communicate with the President. In late November, when Kennedy officially ended the crisis by lifting the naval quarantine of Cuba, he sent me this wire: "Will you tell the President from me today quote great going unquote. All the situation needed was his decision on our part. You and I saw that Khrushchev was tipping westward with all his heart. His be some of the praise."

Frost was admitted to a Boston hospital in serious condition on Dec. 8, 1962. Front-page stories noted the event, and friends from all walks of life (including Ambassador Dobrynin and Ambassador B.K. Nehru of India) sent messages to his bedside. Yet no wire, no letter from the President. As his condition worsened, he was operated on for the removal of a blood clot. Discreet calls were made -- and Robert and Ethel Kennedy sent flowers -- but the President's staff people, to my amazement, sent no message to the Boston hospital.

In early January, my wife, Lee, and I went to the hospital for a visit. Frost's spirits had been lifted by a wire from Yevtushenko. It read: "I have read your poems again and again today, and I am glad you live on earth."

The poet was weak, but his mind was still vigorous. He especially wanted to talk about the Russian trip, which he called "the time of our lives." He still was proud of his performance -- and he even mentioned going back for a final chat with Khrushchev. He made negative references to "those guys around the President," but there was no mention of Kennedy himself. As we talked about the future, at one point he observed, "The only trouble with dying is not knowing how it will all turn out."

Robert Frost died Jan. 30, 1963, two months before his 89th birthday. The tributes of Kennedy and Khrushchev dominated the news stories as final eulogies were pronounced. He was cremated, and three weeks after his death there was a quiet memorial service at Amherst.

How does one explain the sad ending of such a felicitous friendship? It is not easy. These were complicated men, and one of them bore the awesome burdens of the Presidency. Frost, a stoic who nursed his griefs in private, did not openly discuss the issue with anyone. I think he accepted the initial snub, but he was a man of excruciating sensibilities and it was obvious he was deeply wounded by the President's continuing coldness.

Reserved men are often thoughtless men, and John Kennedy was essentially a very private person. This trait made him a person who usually chose to ignore his critics, and was slow to either praise or blame his associates. Kennedy and I never discussed the final phase of his relationship with Frost. To my knowledge, he only mentioned the subject once. Nine months after Frost's death, at the Robert Frost Library dedication at Amherst, in a quiet

corner he said apologetically to Kay Morrison, Frost's secretary, "We didn't know he was so ill."

John Kennedy was in high spirits that day, 27 days before his assassination at Dallas. He gave what may have been the most noble speech of his career. It was more than a personal tribute to Frost. He used Frost's inaugural theme as his text and delivered a soaring, powerful paean to poetry and power. The peroration included these words:

"In honoring Robert Frost we therefore can pay honor to the deepest sources of our national strength. That strength takes many forms and the most obvious forms are not always the most significant.

"The men who create power make an indispensable contribution to the nation's greatness. But the men who question power make a contribution just as indispensable, especially when that questioning is disinterested.

"For they determine whether we use power or power uses us. Our national strength matters; but the spirit which informs and controls our strength matters just as much. This was the special significance of Robert Frost."
Stewart L. Udall was Secretary of the Interior in the Kennedy Administration and a close friend of Robert Frost.

Source: https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/99/04/25/specials/frost-last.html