

Memorandum of Conversation with Andrei Gromyko

Washington, October 18, 1962, 5 p.m.

SUBJECT

Cuba

PARTICIPANTS

US

The President

The Secretary

Ambassador Thompson

Mr. Hillenbrand

Mr. Akalovsky

USSR

Foreign Minister Gromyko

Mr. Semenov

Ambassador Dobrynin

Mr. Sukhodrev

After a discussion on Germany and Berlin, Mr. Gromyko stated he wished to set forth the Soviet position on Cuba and to voice the views of the Soviet Government with regard to US actions relating to Cuba. Continuing to read from his prepared text, he asserted that the Soviet Government stood for peaceful coexistence and was against interference by one state in the internal affairs of another state, and this also applied to relations between big and small states. This, he said, was the basic core, the credo of Soviet foreign policy, and it was not just a statement.

The President was surely fully familiar with the attitude of the Soviet Government, and of Mr. Khrushchev personally, toward recent developments and toward actions by the United States Government in relation to Cuba. For quite some time there had been an unabated anti-Cuban campaign in the United States, a campaign which was apparently backed by the United States Government. Now the United States Government wished to institute a blockade against trade with Cuba, and there had also been some talk of organized piracy under the aegis of the United States. All this could only lead to great misfortunes for mankind. The United States Government seemed to believe that the Cubans must settle their internal affairs not at their own discretion, but at the discretion of the United States. Yet Cuba belonged to Cubans and not to the United States. If this was so, why then were statements being made in the United States advocating invasion of Cuba? What did the United States want to do with Cuba? What could Cuba do to the United States? If one were to compare the human and material resources of Cuba and the United States, one would see immediately that the United States was a giant and Cuba only a baby. Cuba could not constitute a threat to any country in Latin America. It was strange to believe that small Cuba could encroach upon any Latin American country. Cuban leaders, including Castro personally, had stated for all the world to know and in the most solemn fashion that Cuba did not intend to impose its system and was in favor of peaceful coexistence. However,

those who called for aggression against Cuba said that Cuban statements were insufficient, in spite of the fact that those statements were substantiated by deeds. If one were to approach problems this way, then it would be easy to justify any aggression. All international problems must be resolved by negotiation between the states concerned. After all, the US and USSR were now negotiating and making statements which should be given credence. Was it not sufficient for Cuba to state that it wished negotiations and a solution of existing problems on a mutually acceptable basis? The President was surely familiar with President Dorticos' speech at the General Assembly. What the Cubans wanted was to make their home and country secure. They appealed to reason and conscience and called upon the United States not to resort to encroachments. Thus the question arose of why it was necessary to fan this campaign, to organize hostile actions, and to take actions directed against those countries which were extending their hand of friendship to Cuba? This was a violation of international law, and how could the Soviet Government just sit by and observe this situation idly?

Mr. Gromyko said he knew that the President appreciated frankness. Mr. Khrushchev's conversation with the President at Vienna had been frank and therefore, with the President's permission, he himself wished to be frank, too. The situation today could not be compared to that obtaining in the middle of the 19th century. Modern times were not the same as those when colonies had been divided among colonial powers. Modern times could not be compared to those when it took weeks or months for the voice of the attacked to be heard. Statements had been made that the US was a powerful and great nation; this was true, but what kind of a nation was the USSR? Mr. Khrushchev had been favorably impressed with the President's statement at Vienna regarding the equality of forces of our two nations. Since this was so, i.e., since the USSR was also a great and strong nation, it could not stand by as a mere observer when aggression was planned and when a threat of war was looming. The US Government was surely aware of the Soviet Government's attitude toward the recent call-up of 150,000 Reservists in the United States. The Soviet Government believed that if both sides were for relaxation of international tensions and for solving the outstanding international problems, such demonstrations could be designed only for the purpose of increasing tensions and should therefore be avoided. If worse should come to worse and if war should occur, then surely 150,000 soldiers would be of no significance. As the President was surely aware, today was not 1812, when Napoleon had relied on the number of soldiers, sabres and rifles. Neither could today's situation be compared to 1941, when Hitler had relied on the number of tanks and guns. Today, life itself and military technology had created an entirely different situation, where it was better not to rely on arms. As to Soviet assistance to Cuba, Mr. Gromyko stated that he was instructed to make it clear, as the Soviet Government had already done, that such assistance, pursued solely for the purpose of contributing to the defense capabilities of Cuba and to the development of Cuba, toward the development of its agriculture and land amelioration, and training by Soviet specialists of Cuba nationals in handling defensive armaments were by no means offensive. If it were otherwise, the Soviet Government would have never become involved in rendering such assistance. This applied to any other country as well. Laos was a good and convincing illustration of this point. If the Soviet Government had pursued a different policy, the situation in that country today would be

quite different. It was quite evident that the Soviet Union and its friends had broader opportunities of influencing the situation in that country than had the United States. However, the USSR had sought an understanding on that question, since it could not go back on the basic principle of its foreign policy, which was designed to alleviate tensions, to eliminate outstanding problems and to resolve them on a peaceful basis.

Such was the position of the Soviet Government with regard to Cuba. The Soviet Government and Mr. Khrushchev personally appealed to the President and the United States Government not to allow such steps as would be incompatible with peace, with relaxation of tensions, and with United Nations Charter under which both the US and the USSR had solemnly affixed their signatures. The Soviet Government addressed its appeal to the United States on this question because both our countries were major powers and should direct their efforts only to ensuring peace.

The President said he was glad that Mr. Gromyko had referred to Laos because he believed that the Soviet policy on that problem was as Mr. Gromyko had described it. So far the Soviet Union had apparently met its obligations just as the United States had met them. However, a most serious mistake had been made last summer with respect to Cuba. The US had not pressed the Cuban problem and had attempted to push it aside although of course a number of people in this country opposed the regime now prevailing in Cuba and there were many refugees coming to this country. However, there was no intention to invade Cuba. But then last July the USSR, without any communication from Mr. Khrushchev to the President, had embarked upon the policy of supplying arms to Cuba. The President said he did not know the reasons for that shift in Soviet policy, because there was no threat of invasion and he would have been glad to give appropriate assurances to that effect had Mr. Khrushchev communicated with him. Soviet arms supply had had a profound impact in the United States; Ambassador Dobrynin was surely aware of how the American people and the Congress felt on this matter. The administration had tried to calm this reaction and he, the President, had made a statement that in view of the nature of Soviet assistance to Cuba at this time coolness was required. Yet, the President said, he wished to stress that Soviet actions were extremely serious and he could find no satisfactory explanation for them. The Soviet Union was surely aware of US feelings with regard to Cuba, which was only 90 miles away from the United States. The President continued that the US planned no blockade of Cuba; it was only a question of ships taking arms to Cuba not being able to stop in the United States with their return cargo. Thus a very unfortunate situation had developed. The President said he did not know where it was taking us but it was the most dangerous situation since the end of the war. The US had taken the Soviet statement concerning the nature of armaments supplied to Cuba at its face value. He, the President, had attacked last Sunday in Indianapolis a Senator who was advocating invasion, and he had stated that the Cuban problem must be kept in perspective. The President reiterated that this was a dangerous situation, and said he did not know where the USSR planned to have it end.

Mr. Gromyko said that there had already been an invasion, and it was well known how it ended. It was well known now, both from facts and statements, including the President's own, under what circumstances and by whom that invasion had been organized. Everyone knew that if the United States had merely lifted its little finger, Cuban emigrees and smaller

Caribbean countries which had helped them would not have dared undertake any invasion.

The President interjected that he had discussed with Mr. Khrushchev the April 1, 1961, invasion and had said that it was a mistake. He also pointed out he would have given assurances that there would be no further invasion, either by refugees or by US forces. But last July the Soviet Union took certain actions and the situation changed.

Mr. Gromyko continued that Cubans and the Cuban Government had before them the vital question of whether they should remain unprepared to resist attack or to take steps to defend their country. He said he wished to reiterate that the Soviet Union had responded to appeals for assistance only because that assistance pursued the sole objective of giving bread to Cuba and preventing hunger in that country; also, as far as armaments were concerned, Soviet specialists were training Cubans in handling certain types of armaments which were only defensive--and he wished to stress the word defensive--in character, and thus such training could not constitute a threat to the United States. He reiterated that if it were otherwise the Soviet Union would never have agreed to render such assistance.

The President said that in order to be clear on this Cuban problem he wanted to state the following: The US had no intention of invading Cuba. Introduction last July of intensive armaments had complicated the situation and created grave danger. His own actions had been to prevent, unless US security was endangered, anything from being done that might provoke the danger of war. The President then read a portion of his September 4 statement on Cuba and stated that this had been US position and policy on this question. He noted that the Attorney General had discussed the Cuban situation with Ambassador Dobrynin so that the latter must be aware of what it was. The President again recalled his Indianapolis speech of last Sunday and said that we were basing our present attitude on facts as they had been described by Mr. Gromyko; our presumption was that the armaments supplied by USSR were defensive.

Mr. Gromyko stated the Soviet Union proceeded from the assumption that on the basis of Soviet Government's statements and his own today the US Government and the President had a clear idea of the Soviet policy on this matter and of the Soviet evaluation of US action in relation to Cuba. He said he had nothing to add to what he had already said.

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