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'The Flower of Culture'
By DAISAKU IKEDA, SGI President

A U-2 spy plane photographs Soviet-made missiles and missile installations in Cuba. President Kennedy and a top-secret committee engage in a fierce debate on how to best respond to the deepening Cuban missile crisis.

The U.S.–Cuba conflict was intimately linked to U.S.–Soviet Cold War tensions, and it became a dangerous flash point between the two superpowers. From the end of April 1962, maritime freight traffic between Cuba and the Soviet Union grew increasingly heavy. In July, U.S. intelligence picked up a sudden, dramatic rise in the shipment of military supplies from the Soviet Union and also confirmed a large contingent of Russian youth entering Cuba.

The United States regarded these developments very seriously, and it made efforts to step up its surveillance and collection of information about Cuba — for example, by sending U-2 spy planes over the island. This was, of course, an invasion of Cuban airspace, but the United States was certain it had no other choice.

From Aug. 27, intelligence briefings on Cuba became a part of the Kennedy administration's daily cabinet meetings, though at this point nuclear weapons had yet to be discovered. In September, the U.S. government warned the Soviet ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Dobrynin, that it would regard the installation of offensive missiles in Cuba as a matter of the gravest consequence. While publicly denying the presence of missiles in Cuba, the Soviet Union was then secretly working at breakneck speed to finish constructing the Cuban missile sites.

On Oct. 14, a U-2 spy plane took aerial photographs over Cuba, and thorough analysis of these photos revealed the presence of Soviet-made missiles and missile installations. This information was reported to President Kennedy the morning of Oct. 16. He then brought it up at a specially convened meeting of top government officials. Shock and fear ran through the White House. That moment marked the beginning of a crisis that would last 13 days and severely test them all.

President Kennedy and the 14 or 15 officials became a top-secret committee that met in the Cabinet Room of the White House over the course of several days. The atmosphere was tense — they knew that any misstep on their part might result in nuclear war. Later, this committee became known as Ex Comm (the Executive Committee of the National Security Council). It included the president's brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Director of the CIA John McCone, the president's counsel and top military leaders. At times, Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson also participated.

If medium-range nuclear missile sites became operational, it would mean that the major U.S. cities of the eastern seaboard, such as Washington, D.C., and New York, would be threatened by attack. The U.S. leaders found themselves engaged in a fierce, desperate debate on how to best respond to this frightening new development.

There was no ready answer to the question weighing so heavily on the U.S. leaders' minds: How should they respond to the deployment of missiles in Cuba? Their discussions went on and on without end; it was like trying to find an exit in the dark.

Some of the officials insisted that the United States should launch an air attack on Cuba

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immediately and destroy the bases before they could be made operational. But others countered that this would lead to an escalating cycle of retaliation, culminating in the worst-case scenario: full-scale nuclear war.

Yet others believed that the best route was diplomatic negotiation. And others still, a small minority, felt that a wait-and-see strategy was preferable.

So much depended on the reaction of Cuba and the Soviet Union. There was no easy solution to the problem. Just as the group seemed ready to decide on a strategy, they began reconsidering others they had previously rejected. But gradually the many ideas were distilled into two basic, opposing approaches.

The first was a naval blockade. Rather than attack Cuba, the United States would block the further importation of missiles to the island. Then, while monitoring the Cuban and Soviet reaction, it would gradually increase pressure for removal of the weapons and bases there.

The second plan was a military attack. This stemmed from the belief that a blockade would not result in weapons removal and the fact that there were already missiles in the country. According to this line of argument, immediate military action was the only option.

Especially the top military officials pressed for a surprise attack. Robert Kennedy, the president's brother and attorney-general, is said to have replied to these calls by imploring that the United States not do what Japan had at Pearl Harbor. During these intense, top-secret discussions, on Oct. 18, Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, who was in the United States to address the United Nations, paid an official visit to the White House and met with President Kennedy. The president never mentioned to Gromyko that he knew about the construction of the bases in Cuba or that he knew ships carrying missiles had already left Soviet ports and were on their way to Cuba. Kennedy wanted to keep the U.S. awareness of this situation secret a while longer.

At the meeting, Gromyko simply stated that Soviet assistance to Cuba was restricted to agricultural equipment and a small amount of military aid, solely for self-defense. He asked the United States to stop its persecution of Cuba.

President Kennedy's only response was that the Soviet Union was responsible for the present international tension.

To be continued

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