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'The Flower of Culture'

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As the world lurches insanely toward nuclear war with the Cuban missile crisis, thinkers like Norman Cousins, Linus Pauling and Bertrand Russell are voices of reason. 'I believe that there is a greater power in the world than the evil power of military force, of nuclear bombs,' Pauling says. 'There is the power of good, of morality, of humanitarianism.'

Under these tense circumstances, the opinions of the group of U.S. officials deliberating which course to take clashed and diverged sharply. There were emotional bursts of anger and impatience. In situations of extreme fear and tension, people frequently lose self-control, choosing quick-fix solutions and succumbing to the temptation of war. This only demonstrates how flawed the doctrine of nuclear deterrence is — the idea that a balance of fear will prevent nuclear war.

Robert Kennedy recalled the circumstances in *Thirteen Days*: “Each of us was being asked to make a recommendation which would affect the future of all mankind, a recommendation which, if wrong and if accepted, could mean the destruction of the human race.” In this state of crisis, almost sparking an all-out nuclear war, the final decision rested with one person and one person alone, President John F. Kennedy. On the afternoon of the fifth day of meetings, Oct. 20, he decided on his response: a naval blockade of Cuba.

Before making his decision, President Kennedy had allowed his group of advisers to thoroughly argue every alternative to its logical conclusion. But it is said that he never sided with the option of military attack, an option that easily could have led to nuclear holocaust. He possessed, even in this crisis, an exceptional inner control and self-mastery.

During World War II, the PT boat Kennedy commanded was attacked and destroyed by Japanese forces. Though injured, he led his surviving men to safety. Fortunately, he brought the same coolness under fire to this moment of terrible danger for all humanity.

No matter how far civilization advances, no matter how times change, in the end everything depends on character. The decisions of human beings determine their fate and that of the world. The Cuban missile crisis was another reminder of this essential but oft-forgotten truth.

The evening of Oct. 22, a week after learning of the presence of missiles in Cuba — a week that saw intense discussion and debate and finally led to the president's decision of a naval blockade — President Kennedy made his famous televised speech to the American people. He took great pains with his use of language, avoiding any aggressive wording that might unnecessarily provoke the Soviet Union. He even replaced the word *blockade* with the softer word *quarantine*.

President Kennedy's TV address evoked a tremendous response in the United States and around the world. A sense that confrontation with the Soviet Union was unavoidable spread throughout the States, and some U.S. citizens began stockpiling their bomb shelters with foodstuffs.

Just a year earlier, in 1961, journalist Norman Cousins, in the magazine he edited, the *Saturday Review*, wrote of the uselessness of bomb shelters in the event of nuclear attack. He asserted: “The answer to nuclear war is a genuine peace. The answer to drift is direction. The answer to insanity is sanity. If the energy, money, and resources now going into shelters were to be put to work in the making of a better world, we would do far more

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to safeguard the American future than all the underground holes that could be built in 1,000 years. And if we are serious about shelters, let us make the United Nations into a shelter broad enough and deep enough to sustain an enforced peace under law.”

Sadly, his warning had not been heeded. And now the catastrophic insanity of nuclear war had loomed as a very real threat before the American people.

Conscientiously objecting to nuclear warfare, a number of influential private citizens ardently appealed for a peaceful resolution. Scientist Linus Pauling acted on his deepest personal convictions and sent a telegram to President Kennedy asking him to abandon the government’s decision to blockade Cuba. Pauling feared it likely, depending on the Soviet reaction, to escalate into nuclear war. He wrote, “I believe that there is a greater power in the world than the evil power of military force, of nuclear bombs — there is the power of *good, of morality, of humanitarianism*” (*No More War!*).

The British philosopher Bertrand Russell also sent telegrams to U.S. and Soviet leaders, pleading with them to avoid naval confrontation and exercise restraint.

The afternoon of Oct. 23, the day after his speech, President Kennedy signed the proclamation that put Cuba’s quarantine into effect. He said to one of his aides, “The great danger and risk in all this is a miscalculation — a mistake in judgment.”

The blockade took effect at 10:00 the next morning, Oct. 24. A special American force of Navy and Air Force spread a net throughout the Caribbean Sea to stop and search any ships or submarines trying to reach Cuba. The United States warned that it would fire on any vessel believed to be carrying offensive weapons and that chose to ignore the quarantine and remain on course for Cuba.

Tensions mounted.

To be continued