
JFK and the UNSPEAKABLE

Why He Died and Why It Matters

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CHAPTER ONE

A Cold Warrior Turns

As Albert Einstein said, with the unleashing of the power of the atom, humanity reached a new age. The atomic bombing of Hiroshima marked a crossroads: either we would end war or war would end us. In her reflections on Hiroshima in the September 1945 issue of the *Catholic Worker*, Dorothy Day wrote: “Mr. Truman was jubilant. President Truman. True man; what a strange name, come to think of it. We refer to Jesus Christ as true God and true Man. Truman is a true man of his time in that he was jubilant.”¹

President Truman was aboard the cruiser *Augusta*, returning from the Potsdam conference, when he was informed of the United States’ incineration of Hiroshima by the atomic bomb. Truman was exultant. He declared, “This is the greatest thing in history!” He went from person to person on the ship, officers and crew alike, telling them the great news like a town crier.

Dorothy Day observed: “‘Jubilant’ the newspapers said. *Jubilate Deo*. We have killed 318,000 Japanese.”

Seventeen years later, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, another president, John F. Kennedy, under enormous pressure, almost committed the United States to a nuclear holocaust that would have multiplied the explosive power of the Hiroshima bomb thousands of times. Kennedy’s saving grace was that unlike Truman he recognized the evil of nuclear weapons. Kennedy resisted the Joint Chiefs of Staff and most of his civilian advisers, who pressured him for a preemptive attack on Soviet missile sites in Cuba. Thanks to the sheer grace of God, to Kennedy’s resistance to his advisers, and to Nikita Khrushchev’s willingness to retreat, humanity survived the crisis.

Kennedy, however, survived it for only a little more than a year. As we shall see, because of his continuing turn from nuclear war toward a vision of peace in the thirteen months remaining to him, he was executed by the powers that be.

Two critical questions converge at Kennedy's assassination. The first is: Why did his assassins risk exposure and a shameful downfall by covertly murdering a beloved president? The second is: Why was John Kennedy prepared to give his life for peace, when he saw death coming?

The second question may be key to the first, because there is nothing so threatening to systemic evil as those willing to stand against it regardless of the consequences. So we will try to see this story initially through the life of John Kennedy, to understand why he became so threatening to the most powerful military-economic coalition in history that its wielders of power were willing to risk everything they had in order to kill him.

In assessing the formation of John Kennedy's character, biographers have zeroed in on his upbringing as a rich young man in a dysfunctional marriage. Seen through that lens, Kennedy was a reckless playboy from youth to death, under the abiding influence of a domineering, womanizing father and an emotionally distant, strictly Catholic mother. These half-truths miss the mark. They do not explain the later fact of President Kennedy's steely resistance to the pressures of a military-intelligence elite focused on waging war.

Kennedy's life was formed, first of all, by death—the hovering angel of death reaching down for his life. He suffered long periods of illness. He saw death approach repeatedly—from scarlet fever when he was two and three years old, from a succession of childhood and teen illnesses, from a chronic blood condition in boarding school, from what doctors thought was a combination of colitis and ulcers, from intestinal ailments during his years at Harvard, from osteoporosis and crippling back problems intensified by war injuries that plagued him the rest of his life, from the adrenal insufficiency of Addison's disease² . . . To family and friends, Jack Kennedy always seemed to be sick and dying.

Yet he exuded an ironic joy in life. Both the weaknesses and strengths of his character drew on his deeply held belief that death would come soon. "The point is," he told a friend during a long talk on death, "that you've got to live every day like it's your last day on earth. That's what I'm doing."³ From that perspective, he could indeed be reckless, as he was in sexual escapades that after his death would become a media focus on his life. He could also be courageous to the point of heroism. Death was not to be feared. As president, he often joked about his death's approach. The angel of death was his companion. By smiling at his own death, he was free to resist others' deaths.

John Kennedy's World War II experience was characterized by a willingness to give his life for his friends. Two years before the Hiroshima bombing, Kennedy was a *PT* boat commander in the South Pacific. On the night of August 1-2, 1943, he was at the wheel of his *PT 109*, patrolling Blackett Strait in the Solomon Islands, a corridor of water used by Japanese destroyers. It was a moonless night. A ship suddenly broke through the black,

headed for the *109*. As a man forward shouted, "Ship at two o'clock!" Kennedy spun the wheel. The Japanese destroyer smashed into the *109* and cut a giant strip off its starboard side. "This is how it feels to be killed," Kennedy thought, while being thrown through the cockpit. There was a terrific roar, as the gasoline aboard went up in flames.

The section of the boat Kennedy was on stayed afloat. He discovered four of his twelve crewmembers still on it. Two others were never seen or heard from again. Six more were scattered in the water but alive. Kennedy, who had been on the Harvard swimming team, swam through the dark to shouts, finding his badly burned engineer, McMahan. He coaxed and cajoled others not to give up, then towed McMahan a hundred yards back to the floating hulk identified by a crew member's blinking light. All the survivors in the water reached the tilted deck and collapsed on it. They wondered how long it would take for them to be rescued by *PTs* from their base on Rendova Island, forty miles away.

When daylight and noon came with no rescue, the group abandoned the sinking hulk. They swam to a small, deserted island, in the midst of larger islands with Japanese soldiers. Nine of the crew held onto a two-by-six timber and kicked and paddled their way to the island. Kennedy again towed McMahan, holding a strap from McMahan's life preserver in his teeth.

Kennedy would swim in ten-minute spurts, then pause to rest and check on McMahan. A chronicler of this episode described it from McMahan's point of view:

"Being a sensitive person, McMahan would have found the swim unbearable if he had realized that Kennedy was hauling him through three miles or so of water with a bad back. He was miserable enough without knowing it. Floating on his back with his burned hands trailing at his sides, McMahan could see little but the sky and the flattened cone of [the volcanic island] Kolombangara. He could not see the other men, though while all of them were still together, he could hear them puffing and splashing. He could not see Kennedy but he could feel the tugs forward with each stretch of Kennedy's shoulder muscles and could hear his labored breathing.

"McMahan tried kicking now and then but he was extremely weary. The swim seemed endless, and he doubted that it would lead to salvation. He was hungry and thirsty and fearful that they would be attacked by sharks. The awareness that he could do nothing to save himself from the currents, the sharks or the enemy oppressed him. His fate, he well knew, was at the end of a strap in Kennedy's teeth."⁴

With Kennedy and McMahan leading the way, it took the eleven men four hours to reach the little island. They staggered up the beach and ducked under trees, barely avoiding a Japanese barge that chugged by and failed to see them.

When early evening came with no sign of help, Kennedy told the crew he would swim from the island out into Ferguson Passage, a mile and a half away, where the *PT* boats usually patrolled after dark. He took the *109's*

lantern, wrapped in a life jacket, to signal the boats. Kennedy swam for half an hour, forded a reef, then swam for another hour, reaching his intended point of interception. He treaded water, waiting in the darkness. After a while, he saw the flares of an action beyond the island of Gizo, ten miles away. The *PT* boats had taken a different route.

Kennedy tried to swim back to his men. He was very tired. The swift current carried him past the island, toward open water.

New Yorker writer John Hersey interviewed *PT 109* crewmembers and wrote their story of survival. He described Kennedy's hours of drifting toward almost certain death: "He thought he had never known such deep trouble, but something he did shows that unconsciously he had not given up hope. He dropped his shoes, but he held onto the heavy lantern, his symbol of contact with his fellows. He stopped trying to swim. He seemed to stop caring. His body drifted through the wet hours, and he was very cold. His mind was a jumble. A few hours before he had wanted desperately to get to the base at Rendova. Now he only wanted to get back to the little island he had left that night, but he didn't try to get there; he just wanted to. His mind seemed to float away from his body. Darkness and time took the place of a mind in his skull. For a long time he slept, or was crazy, or floated in a chill trance.

"The currents of the Solomon Islands are queer. The tide shoves and sucks through the islands and makes the currents curl in odd patterns. It was a fateful pattern into which Jack Kennedy drifted. He drifted in it all night. His mind was blank, but his fist was tightly clenched on the kapok around the lantern. The current moved in a huge circle—west past Gizo, then north and east past Kolombangara, then south into Ferguson Passage. Early in the morning the sky turned from black to gray, and so did Kennedy's mind. Light came to both at about six. Kennedy looked around and saw that he was exactly where he had been the night before when he saw the flares beyond Gizo."⁵

Kennedy swam back to the island, stumbled up on the beach, and collapsed in the arms of his crew. He said later of the experience, "I never prayed so much in my life."⁶

As is well known from the story of *PT 109*, eventually Melanesian natives came to the aid of the eleven Americans. The natives carried Kennedy's SOS message, scratched on a coconut shell, to an Australian Navy coastwatcher, Reg Evans, who was working behind enemy lines. Evans radioed the U.S. Navy for assistance.

In the meantime, Kennedy and fellow officer Barney Ross, not realizing the nearness of their rescue, almost died in another failed effort to signal *PTs* at night in Ferguson Passage. They found a dugout canoe, and paddled it into high waves in the darkness. The canoe was swamped. The waves threw the two men against a reef, but they again survived.

Kennedy's crew never forgot his commitment to their lives. They reunited with him periodically after the war. What Kennedy took first from his war

experience was a heightened sense of the precious value of his friends' lives. Among the wartime deaths he mourned besides the *PT* boat casualties were those of his brother Joe Kennedy, Jr., and brother-in-law Billy Hartington. He knew many others who died. He reflected, too, on the repeated nearness of his own death. As we have seen, since childhood chronically poor health had brought him near death many times. Illness, pain, and the process of almost dying came as a lifelong discipline.

After JFK's assassination, Robert Kennedy wrote of his brother: "At least one half of the days that he spent on this earth were days of intense physical pain. He had scarlet fever when he was very young, and serious back trouble when he was older. In between he had almost every other conceivable ailment. When we were growing up together we used to laugh about the great risk a mosquito took in biting Jack Kennedy—with some of his blood the mosquito was almost sure to die. He was in Chelsea Naval Hospital for an extended period of time after the war, had a major and painful operation on his back in 1955, campaigned on crutches in 1958. In 1951 on a trip we took around the world he became ill. We flew to the military hospital in Okinawa and he had a temperature of over 106 degrees. They didn't think he would live.

"But during all this time, I never heard him complain. I never heard him say anything that would indicate that he felt God had dealt with him unjustly. Those who knew him well would know he was suffering only because his face was a little whiter, the lines around his eyes were a little deeper, his words a little sharper. Those who did not know him well detected nothing."⁷

After the *PT 109* crew's rescue, Kennedy wondered at the purpose of a life that had been spared again, this time through the circular pattern of deep-running currents and the compassion of Melanesian natives.⁸

Preventing another war became John Kennedy's main motivation for entering politics after the Second World War. When he announced his candidacy for Congress on April 22, 1946, in Boston, Kennedy sounded more like he was running for president on a peace ticket than for a first term as a Democratic member of Congress from Massachusetts: "What we do now will shape the history of civilization for many years to come. We have a weary world trying to bind the wounds of a fierce struggle. That is dire enough. What is infinitely far worse is that we have a world which has unleashed the terrible powers of atomic energy. We have a world capable of destroying itself. The days which lie ahead are most difficult ones. Above all, day and night, with every ounce of ingenuity and industry we possess, we must work for peace. We must not have another war."⁹

Where had this twenty-eight-year-old candidate for Congress forged such a vision of peace in the nuclear age?

After his bad back and colitis had forced his discharge from the Navy, Kennedy had attended the San Francisco conference that founded the United Nations in April-May 1945, as a journalist for the Hearst press. He later told friends it was his experience at the UN meeting and at the Potsdam con-

ference in July that made him realize that the political arena, “whether you really liked it or not, was the place where you personally could do the most to prevent another war.”¹⁰

However, what he witnessed in San Francisco, even before the war was over, was an intense conflict between wartime allies. On April 30 he warned his readers that “this week at San Francisco” would be “the real test of whether the Russians and the Americans can get along.”¹¹

The power struggle he saw at the UN moved Kennedy to write to a PT boat friend: “When I think of how much this war has cost us, of the deaths of Cy and Peter and Orv and Gil and Demi and Joe and Billy and all of those thousands and millions who have died with them—when I think of all those gallant acts that I have seen or anyone has seen who has been to the war—it would be a very easy thing to feel disappointed and somewhat betrayed . . . You have seen battlefields where sacrifice was the order of the day and to compare that sacrifice to the timidity and selfishness of the nations gathered at San Francisco must inevitably be disillusioning.”¹²

In a notebook, Kennedy identified an ultimate solution to the problem of war and the difficulty in realizing it: “Admittedly world organization with common obedience to law would be solution. Not that easy. If there is not the feeling that war is the ultimate evil, a feeling strong enough to drive them together, then you can’t work out this internationalist plan.”¹³

“Things cannot be forced from the top,” the future president wrote his PT boat friend. He then expressed a prophetic, long-range view: “The international relinquishing of sovereignty would have to spring from the people—it would have to be so strong that the elected delegates would be turned out of office if they failed to do it . . . War will exist until that distant day when the conscientious objector enjoys the same reputation and prestige that the warrior does today.”¹⁴

Kennedy had reason to refer again to that distant day of the conscientious objector while he was traveling through postwar Europe in the summer of 1945. On July 1 in London, he had dinner with William Douglas-Home, a former captain in the British army who had been sentenced to a year in jail for refusing an order to fire on civilians. Douglas-Home became his lifelong friend. Kennedy observed in his diary, “prowess in war is still deeply respected. The day of the conscientious objector is not yet at hand.”¹⁵

In the same diary, he anticipated the impact of world-destructive weapons. In the entry dated July 10, 1945, six days before the first atomic test in Alamogordo, New Mexico, Kennedy envisioned such a terrible weapon and speculated on its meaning in relation to Russia: “The clash [with Russia] may be finally and indefinitely postponed by the eventual discovery of a weapon so horrible that it will truthfully mean the abolishment of all the nations employing it.”¹⁶

During his legislative career in the House and Senate, John Kennedy’s aspirations to be a post–World War II peacemaker were submerged beneath the seas of the Cold War. His more bellicose views in the fifties reflected the book

he had written in 1940, *Why England Slept*, an expansion of his Harvard senior thesis. Kennedy's book found Britain too slow in rearming to resist Nazi Germany. He applied the lesson uncritically to United States–Soviet policies. As a freshman senator in June 1954, he led a Democratic effort to add \$350 million to the defense budget to restore two Army divisions that President Eisenhower had cut and thus guarantee “a clear margin of victory over our enemies.”¹⁷ Kennedy was challenging Secretary of State John Foster Dulles in his reliance on the massive threat of nuclear weapons. Kennedy's amendment failed, but his commitment to a “flexible” Cold War strategy emphasizing conventional forces and “smaller” nuclear weapons would be carried over into his presidency. It was an illusory policy supported by Democrats that could easily have led to the same global destruction threatened by the Dulles doctrine.

In 1958, Senator John Kennedy delivered a major speech attacking the Eisenhower administration for allowing a “missile gap” to open up between allegedly superior Soviet forces and those of the United States. Kennedy repeated the charge of a missile gap in his successful 1960 presidential campaign, developing it into an argument for increased military spending. When he became president, his science adviser, Jerome Wiesner, informed him in February 1961 that “the missile gap was a fiction”—to which Kennedy replied with a single expletive, “delivered,” Wiesner said, “more in anger than in relief.”¹⁸ The United States in fact held an overwhelming strategic advantage over the Soviets' missile force.¹⁹ Whether or not Kennedy already suspected the truth, he had taken a Cold War myth, had campaigned on it, and now partly on its basis, was engaged in a dangerous military buildup as president. Marcus Raskin, an early Kennedy administration analyst who left his access to power to become its critic, summarized the ominous direction in which the new president was headed: “The United States intended under Kennedy to develop a war-fighting capability on all levels of violence from thermonuclear war to counterinsurgency.”²⁰

Yet, as we shall see, Raskin also observed a significant change in Kennedy after the Cuban Missile Crisis, a development of more positive instincts in the president that were already in evidence. Even in his years espousing Cold War principles of defense, Senator Kennedy had occasionally broken ranks with the West on its colonial wars, particularly in Indochina and Algeria. Speaking in the Senate on April 6, 1954, Kennedy critiqued predictions of a U.S.-sponsored French victory in Vietnam over Ho Chi Minh's revolutionary forces. “No amount of American military assistance in Indochina,” Kennedy warned in words he would be forced to recall as president, “can conquer an enemy which is everywhere and at the same time nowhere, ‘an enemy of the people’ which has the sympathy and covert support of the people.”²¹ In an exchange with Senator Everett Dirksen, Kennedy said he envisioned two peace treaties for Vietnam, “one granting the Vietnamese people complete independence,” the other “a tie binding them to the French Union on the basis of full equality.”²²

In 1957 Kennedy came out in support of Algerian independence. That spring he talked with Algerians who were seeking a hearing at the United Nations for their national liberation movement. In July 1957, he gave a major Senate speech in their support, saying, “No amount of mutual politeness, wishful thinking, nostalgia, or regret should blind either France or the United States to the fact that, if France and the West at large are to have a continuing influence in North Africa . . . the essential first step is the independence of Algeria.”²³ The speech created a furor. Kennedy was widely attacked for imperiling the unity of NATO. His biographer, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., wrote of the episode, “Even Democrats drew back. Dean Acheson attacked him scornfully. Adlai Stevenson thought he had gone too far. For the next year or two, respectable people cited Kennedy’s Algerian speech as evidence of his irresponsibility in foreign affairs.”²⁴ However, in Europe the speech provoked positive attention, and in Africa excitement.

When Kennedy then became chair of the African Subcommittee, he told the Senate in 1959: “Call it nationalism, call it anti-colonialism, call it what you will, Africa is going through a revolution . . . The word is out—and spreading like wildfire in nearly a thousand languages and dialects—that it is no longer necessary to remain forever poor or in bondage.” He therefore advocated “sympathy with the independence movement, programs of economic and educational assistance and, as the goal of American policy, ‘a strong Africa.’”²⁵ Historians have scarcely noticed JFK’s continuing support for a free Africa during his 1960 presidential campaign and in the presidency itself, documented in Richard D. Mahoney’s comprehensive study *JFK: Ordeal in Africa*.²⁶

Equally overlooked, and in tension with his campaign claim of a missile gap, was Kennedy’s renewal of his purpose in entering politics: the attainment of peace in the nuclear age. As the 1960 primaries increased his presidential prospects, Kennedy told a journalist visiting his Senate office that the most valuable resource he could bring to the presidency, based on personal experience, was his horror of war. Kennedy said he “had read the books of great military strategists—Carl Von Clausewitz, Alfred Thayer Mahan, and Basil Henry Liddell Hart—and he wondered if their theories of total violence made sense in the nuclear age. He expressed his contempt for the old military minds, exempting the U.S.’s big three, George Marshall, Douglas MacArthur, and Dwight Eisenhower . . . War with all of its modern horror would be his biggest concern if he got to the White House, Kennedy said.”²⁷

The journalist who had listened to Senator Kennedy’s 1960 reflections on war, Hugh Sidey, wrote thirty-five years later in a retrospective essay: “If I had to single out one element in Kennedy’s life that more than anything else influenced his later leadership it would be a horror of war, a total revulsion over the terrible toll that modern war had taken on individuals, nations, and societies, and the even worse prospects in the nuclear age as noted earlier. It ran even deeper than his considerable public rhetoric on the issue.”²⁸

In his inaugural address on January 20, 1961, John Kennedy’s Cold War

convictions were interlaced with statements of hope for people around the world who were unaccustomed to having a U.S. president address their concerns. He both inspired and warned them. For example, emerging nonaligned leaders, some of whom received Kennedy's support in the Senate, heard this pledge:

"To those new states whom we welcome to the ranks of the free, we pledge our word that one form of colonial control shall not have passed away merely to be replaced by a far more iron tyranny. We shall not always expect to find them supporting our view. But we shall always hope to find them strongly supporting their own freedom—and to remember that, in the past, those who foolishly sought power by riding the back of the tiger ended up inside."²⁹

The new president's tiger parable could cut in opposite directions. What to an American audience was a cunning communist tiger was to nonaligned listeners at least as likely to have capitalist as communist stripes. That would prove to be the case in Kennedy's presidency by his support of U.S. counterinsurgent warfare in South Vietnam, where a client government would then wind up inside the U.S. tiger it had been riding.

One of Kennedy's worst decisions as president would be to develop the role of counterinsurgent warfare by enlarging the U.S. Army's Special Forces, then re-baptizing them as the Green Berets. Kennedy promoted the Green Berets as a response to communist guerrillas, failing to recognize that counterinsurgent warfare would turn into a form of terrorism. The idea that the United States could deploy Green Beret forces in client states "to win the hearts and minds of the people" was a contradiction that would become a negative part of Kennedy's legacy.

In his inaugural address, the new president recognized no such conflict. He combined his pledge to the world's poor with a disclaimer of Cold War motives: "To those peoples in the huts and villages of half the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery, we pledge our best efforts to help them help themselves, for whatever period is required—not because the communists may be doing it, not because we seek their votes, but because it is right."

At the heart of his inaugural, Kennedy turned to the enemy and his own deepest preoccupation, peace: "Finally, to those nations who would make themselves our adversary, we offer not a pledge but a request: that both sides begin anew the quest for peace, before the dark powers of destruction unleashed by science engulf all humanity in planned or accidental self-destruction."

Again there was the warning: "We dare not tempt them with weakness. For only when our arms are sufficient beyond doubt can we be certain beyond doubt that they will never be employed."

And the hope: "Let both sides explore what problems unite us instead of belaboring those problems which divide us . . .

"Let both sides unite to heed in all corners of the earth the command of Isaiah—to 'undo the heavy burdens . . . (and) let the oppressed go free.'"

What is noteworthy about John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address is that it reflects accurately the profound tensions of his political philosophy. In the nuclear age, how were his experience of the horror of war and his commitment to peacemaking to be reconciled with his passionate resistance to a totalitarian enemy? From the lives he had seen lost in World War II, Kennedy had envisioned in 1945 "the day of the conscientious objector," with an international relinquishing of sovereignty and the abolition of war by popular demand. However, as he took his oath of office, no such day was at hand. Moreover, John Kennedy remained a Cold Warrior in his understanding of the means needed to resist tyranny—armaments that had now gone beyond all measure of destruction. For the sake of both peace and freedom, he therefore had no way out except to negotiate a just peace with the enemy, within the context of the most dangerous political conflict in world history. He would learn just how dangerous it was, from his own side of that conflict, to push through such negotiations.

As the reader knows from the introduction to this book, my perspective on the assassination of President Kennedy comes from the writings of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton, perhaps an unlikely source. The two men's personal histories were worlds apart. While John Kennedy in 1943 was being carried by the movements of a Pacific current, Thomas Merton was a novice monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani in the hills of Kentucky. Yet one can discern a providential hand saving each of their lives for a further purpose. As readers of Merton's autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, know, the ex-Cambridge and Columbia University man-about-campus came to Gethsemani on currents as unpredictably merciful as those that brought John Kennedy around to his dawn awakening in Blackett Strait and through a series of life-threatening illnesses. What Kennedy half-dreamed that night in the Pacific in relation to the little island his men were on could be said also of Merton's spiritual journey to Gethsemani. He didn't try to get there. He just wanted to, in a heartfelt prayer that had no fixed attachment to its goal. Merton arriving at Gethsemani was like Kennedy stumbling up on the beach and collapsing in the arms of his crew.

In the early sixties, Thomas Merton began responding to the imminent threat of an inconceivable evil, total nuclear war. His writings on the nuclear crisis, which drew him into what he called "the Unspeakable," are an illuminating context in which to view the presidential struggles and Cold War murder of John F. Kennedy. As Merton wrote impassioned articles protesting the nuclear buildup, he became a controversial figure. His alarmed monastic superiors ordered him to stop publishing on peace. Merton was obedient, yet deeply determined to keep articulating a gospel truth, if not in a forbidden format. Even before he experienced the inevitable crackdown on his published work, he had already found another way to follow his conscience—by writing a voluminous series of letters on peace.

For a year at the center of the Kennedy presidency, from October 1961 (shortly after the Berlin crisis) to October 1962 (just after the Cuban Missile Crisis), Merton wrote letters on war and peace to a wide circle of correspondents. They included psychologists Erich Fromm and Karl Stern, poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Archbishop Thomas Roberts, Ethel Kennedy, Dorothy Day, Clare Boothe Luce, nuclear physicist Leo Szilard, novelist Henry Miller, Shinzo Hamai, the mayor of Hiroshima, and Evora Arca de Sardinia, the wife of a Cuban exile leader in the CIA-sponsored Bay of Pigs invasion. Merton collected over a hundred of these letters, had them mimeographed and bound, and sent them out to friends in January 1963. He called this informal volume of reflections “The Cold War Letters.”

In his preface to the letters, Merton identified the forces in the United States that threatened a nuclear holocaust: “In actual fact it would seem that during the Cold War, if not during World War II, this country has become frankly a warfare state built on affluence, a power structure in which the interests of big business, the obsessions of the military, and the phobias of political extremists both dominate and dictate our national policy. It also seems that the people of the country are by and large reduced to passivity, confusion, resentment, frustration, thoughtlessness and ignorance, so that they blindly follow any line that is unraveled for them by the mass media.”³⁰

Merton wrote that the protest in his letters was not only against the danger or horror of war. It was “not merely against physical destruction, still less against physical danger, but against a suicidal moral evil and a total lack of ethics and rationality with which international policies tend to be conducted. True,” he added, “President Kennedy is a shrewd and sometimes adventurous leader. He means well and has the highest motives, and he is, without doubt, in a position sometimes so impossible as to be absurd.”³¹

As we follow “a shrewd and sometimes adventurous leader” on his journey into a deeper darkness than he ever faced in the Pacific, the letters of an observer in a Kentucky monastery will serve as a commentary on a time that placed John Kennedy “in a position sometimes so impossible as to be absurd.”

Merton did not always feel such sympathy for President Kennedy. In a critical, prophetic letter a year earlier to his friend W. H. Ferry, he wrote: “I have little confidence in Kennedy, I think he cannot fully measure up to the magnitude of his task, and lacks creative imagination and the deeper kind of sensitivity that is needed. Too much the *Time* and *Life* mentality, than which I can imagine nothing further, in reality, from, say, Lincoln. What is needed is really not shrewdness or craft, but what the politicians don’t have: depth, humanity and a certain totality of self forgetfulness and compassion, not just for individuals but for man as a whole: a deeper kind of dedication. Maybe,” Merton speculates in an inspired insight, “Kennedy will break through into that someday by miracle. But such people are before long marked out for assassination.”³²

Thomas Merton’s sense of what Kennedy needed to break through to, and the likely consequences if he did so, call to mind a scene early in

Kennedy's presidency. He had just met with Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna. Late at night on the June 5, 1961, flight back to Washington, the weary president asked his secretary Evelyn Lincoln if she would please file the documents he had been working on. As she started to clear the table, Lincoln noticed a little slip of paper that had fallen on the floor. On it were two lines in Kennedy's handwriting, a favorite saying of his from Abraham Lincoln:

"I know there is a God—and I see a storm coming;
If he has a place for me, I believe that I am ready."³³

The summit meeting with Khrushchev had deeply disturbed Kennedy. The revelation of a storm coming had occurred at the end of the meeting, as the two men faced each other across a table. Kennedy's gift to Khrushchev, a model of the USS *Constitution*, lay between them. Kennedy pointed out that the ship's cannons had been able to fire half a mile and kill a few people. But if he and Khrushchev failed to negotiate peace, the two of them could kill seventy million people in the opening exchange of a nuclear war. Kennedy looked at Khrushchev. Khrushchev gave him a blank stare, as if to say, "So what?" Kennedy was shocked at what he felt was his counterpart's lack of response. "There was no area of accommodation with him," he said later.³⁴ Khrushchev may have felt the same way about Kennedy. The result of their unsuccessful meeting would be an ever more threatening conflict. As Evelyn Lincoln thought when she read what the president had written, "'I see a storm coming' was no idle phrase."³⁵

While reflecting that night on such a storm, John Kennedy echoing Lincoln had written first to himself, "I know there is a God." Thomas Merton in his initial sense of Kennedy had doubted if JFK, by falling short of Lincoln's character, was capable of weathering a storm. Kennedy, continuing Lincoln's saying, prayed and hoped that he was: "If [God] has a place for me, I believe that I am ready."

Merton saw that if Kennedy became what he needed to be, he would be "marked out for assassination." How clearly did Kennedy see the dangers to himself of meeting the coming storm as faithfully as he hoped to?

The president's friend Paul Fay, Jr., told of an incident that showed JFK was keenly conscious of the peril of a military coup d'état. One summer weekend in 1962 while out sailing with friends, Kennedy was asked what he thought of *Seven Days in May*, a best-selling novel that described a military takeover in the United States. JFK said he would read the book. He did so that night. The next day Kennedy discussed with his friends the possibility of their seeing such a coup in the United States. Consider that he said these words after the failed Bay of Pigs invasion and before the Cuban Missile Crisis:

"It's possible. It could happen in this country, but the conditions would have to be just right. If, for example, the country had a young President, and he had a Bay of Pigs, there would be a certain uneasiness. Maybe the military would do a little criticizing behind his back, but this would be written off as the usual military dissatisfaction with civilian control. Then if there

were another Bay of Pigs, the reaction of the country would be, 'Is he too young and inexperienced?' The military would almost feel that it was their patriotic obligation to stand ready to preserve the integrity of the nation, and only God knows just what segment of democracy they would be defending if they overthrew the elected establishment."

Pausing a moment, he went on, "Then, if there were a third Bay of Pigs, it could happen." Waiting again until his listeners absorbed his meaning, he concluded with an old Navy phrase, "But it won't happen on my watch."³⁶

On another occasion Kennedy said of the novel's plot about a few military commanders taking over the country, "I know a couple who might wish they could."³⁷ The statement is cited by biographer Theodore Sorensen as a joke. However, John Kennedy used humor in pointed ways, and Sorensen's preceding sentence is not a joke: "Communications between the Chiefs of Staff and their Commander in Chief remained unsatisfactory for a large part of his term."³⁸

Director John Frankenheimer was encouraged by President Kennedy to film *Seven Days in May* "as a warning to the republic."³⁹ Frankenheimer said, "The Pentagon didn't want it done. Kennedy said that when we wanted to shoot at the White House he would conveniently go to Hyannis Port that weekend."⁴⁰

As we know, the young president John Kennedy did have a Bay of Pigs. It was a covert project initiated by his predecessor, President Dwight D. Eisenhower.⁴¹ By late summer 1960, when Kennedy became the Democratic nominee for president, the CIA had already begun training fifteen hundred Cuban exile troops at a secret base in Guatemala for an invasion of Cuba.⁴² As the new president in March 1961, Kennedy rejected the CIA's current Trinidad Plan for "an amphibious/airborne assault" on Cuba, favoring a quiet landing at night in which there would be "no basis for American military intervention."⁴³ When a skeptical Kennedy finally approved the CIA's revised plan for the Bay of Pigs landing in April, he reemphasized that he would not intervene by introducing U.S. troops, even if the exile brigade faced defeat on the beachhead. The CIA's covert-action chief, Richard Bissell, reassured him there would be only a minimum need for air strikes and that Cubans on the island would join the brigade in a successful revolt against Castro.⁴⁴

At dawn on April 15, 1961, eight B-26 bombers of the Cuban Expeditionary Force carried out air strikes to destroy the Cuban Air Force on the ground, achieving only partial success. Premier Castro then ordered his pilots "to sleep under the wings of the planes," ready to take off immediately.⁴⁵ The next night, as the exile brigade prepared for its overnight landing at the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy's National Security Adviser, McGeorge Bundy, phoned CIA deputy director General Charles P. Cabell to say that "the dawn air strikes the following morning should not be launched until planes can con-

duct them from a strip within the beachhead.”⁴⁶ Since no such opportunity came, this order in effect canceled the air strikes. Castro’s army surrounded the invading force in the following days. The exile brigade surrendered on April 19, 1961. More than one thousand members were taken prisoner.⁴⁷

The new president had bitterly disappointed the CIA and the military by his decision to accept defeat at the Bay of Pigs rather than escalate the battle. Kennedy realized after the fact that he had been drawn into a CIA scenario that was a trap. Its authors assumed he would be forced by circumstances to drop his advance restrictions against the use of U.S. combat forces.

How else, he asked his friends Dave Powers and Ken O’Donnell, could the Joint Chiefs have approved such a plan? “They were sure I’d give in to them and send the go-ahead order to the [Navy’s aircraft carrier] *Essex*,” he said. “They couldn’t believe that a new President like me wouldn’t panic and try to save his own face. Well, they had me figured all wrong.”⁴⁸

The major players in deceiving Kennedy were his CIA advisers, especially Director Allen Dulles. As Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., observed, “the Joint Chiefs of Staff had only approved the Bay of Pigs. The CIA had invented it.”⁴⁹

At his death Allen Dulles left the unpublished drafts of an article that scholar Lucien S. Vandenbroucke has titled “The ‘Confessions’ of Allen Dulles.” In these handwritten, coffee-stained notes, Dulles explained how CIA advisers who knew better drew John Kennedy into a plan whose prerequisites for success contradicted the president’s own rules for engagement that precluded any combat action by U.S. military forces. Although Dulles and his associates knew this condition conflicted with the plan they were foisting on Kennedy, they discreetly kept silent in the belief, Dulles wrote, that “the realities of the situation” would force the president to carry through to the end they wished:

“[We] did not want to raise these issues—in an [undecipherable word] discussion—which might only harden the decision against the type of action we required. We felt that when the chips were down—when the crisis arose in reality, any action required for success would be authorized rather than permit the enterprise to fail.”⁵⁰ But again, as Kennedy said, “They had me figured all wrong.”

Four decades after the Bay of Pigs, we have learned that the CIA scenario to trap Kennedy was more concrete than Dulles admitted in his handwritten notes. A conference on the Bay of Pigs was held in Cuba March 23-25, 2001, which included “ex-CIA operatives, retired military commanders, scholars, and journalists.”⁵¹ News analyst Daniel Schorr reported on National Public Radio that “from the many hours of talk and the heaps of declassified secret documents” he had gained one new perception of the Bay of Pigs:

“It was that the CIA overlords of the invasion, director Allen Dulles and deputy Richard Bissell, had their own plan of how to bring the United States into the conflict. It appears that they never really expected an uprising against Castro when the liberators landed as described in their memos to the White

House. What they did expect was that the invaders would establish and secure a beachhead, announce the creation of a counterrevolutionary government and appeal for aid from the United States and the Organization of American States. The assumption was that President Kennedy, who had emphatically banned direct American involvement, would be forced by public opinion to come to the aid of the returning patriots. American forces, probably Marines, would come in to expand the beachhead.

“In effect, President Kennedy was the target of a CIA covert operation that collapsed when the invasion collapsed.”⁵²

Even if President Kennedy had said no at the eleventh hour to the whole Bay of Pigs idea (as he was contemplating doing), the CIA, as it turned out, had a plan to supersede his decision. When the four anti-Castro brigade leaders told their story to writer Haynes Johnson, they revealed how the Agency was prepared to circumvent a presidential veto. The Cubans’ chief CIA military adviser, whom they knew only as “Frank,” told them what to do if he secretly informed them that the entire project had been blocked by the administration: “If this happens you come here and make some kind of show, as if you were putting us, the advisers, in prison, and you go ahead with the program as we have talked about it, and we will give you the whole plan, even if we are your prisoners.”⁵³

The brigade leaders said “Frank” was quite specific in his instructions to them for “capturing” their CIA advisers if the administration should attempt to stop the plan: “they were to place an armed Brigade soldier at each American’s door, cut communications with the outside, and continue the training until he told them when, and how, to leave for Trampoline base [their assembly point in Nicaragua].”⁵⁴ When Robert Kennedy learned of this contingency plan to override the president, he called it “virtually treason.”⁵⁵

John Kennedy reacted to the CIA’s plotting with a vehemence that went unreported until after his death and has been little noted since then. In a 1966 *New York Times* feature article on the CIA, this statement by JFK appeared without further comment: “President Kennedy, as the enormity of the Bay of Pigs disaster came home to him, said to one of the highest officials of his Administration that he wanted ‘to splinter the C.I.A. in a thousand pieces and scatter it to the winds.’”⁵⁶

Presidential adviser Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., said the president told him, while the Bay of Pigs battle was still going on, “It’s a hell of a way to learn things, but I have learned one thing from this business—that is, that we will have to deal with CIA . . . no one has dealt with CIA.”⁵⁷

In his short presidency, Kennedy began to take steps to deal with the CIA. He tried to redefine the CIA’s mandate and to reduce its power in his National Security Action Memoranda (NSAMs) 55 and 57, which took military-type operations out of the hands of the CIA. Kennedy’s NSAM 55 informed the Joint Chiefs of Staff that it was they (not the CIA) who were his principal military advisers in peacetime as well as wartime. Air Force Colonel L. Fletcher Prouty, who at the time was in charge of providing mil-

itary support for the CIA's clandestine operations, described the impact of NSAM 55 addressed to General Lyman Lemnitzer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs:

"I can't overemphasize the shock—not simply the words—that procedure caused in Washington: to the Secretary of State, to the Secretary of Defense, and particularly to the Director of Central Intelligence. Because Allen Dulles, who was still the Director, had just lived through the shambles of the Bay of Pigs and now he finds out that what Kennedy does as a result of all this is to say that, 'you, General Lemnitzer, are to be my Advisor'. In other words, I'm not going to depend on Allen Dulles and the CIA. Historians have glossed over that or don't know about it."⁵⁸

President Kennedy then asked the three principal CIA planners for the Bay of Pigs to resign: Director Allen Dulles, Deputy Director Richard Bissell, Jr., and Deputy Director General Charles Cabell. JFK also "moved quietly," as Schlesinger put it, "to cut the CIA budget in 1962 and again in 1963, aiming at a 20 per cent reduction by 1966."⁵⁹ He never managed to splinter the CIA in a thousand pieces and scatter it to the winds. But Kennedy's firing of Dulles, Bissell, and Cabell, his reduction of the CIA budget, and his clear determination to deal with the Agency placed him in direct conflict with a Cold War institution that had come to hold itself accountable to no one.

After John Kennedy's assassination, Allen Dulles returned to prominence in a curious way. Foreign observers, many more familiar than Americans with Dulles's history in assassination plots and the overthrow of governments, wondered at the former CIA director's possible involvement in the murder of the man who had fired him and then tried to rein in the CIA. However, far from being considered a suspect, one week after the assassination Dulles was appointed by the new president Lyndon Johnson to serve on the Warren Commission. He thus directed an investigation that pointed toward himself.⁶⁰

Allen Dulles's own closely guarded feelings toward John Kennedy were revealed years later in a remark to a prospective ghostwriter. *Harper's* young assistant editor Willie Morris had gone to Dulles's Georgetown mansion in Washington to collaborate with him on a piece in defense of the CIA's role in the Bay of Pigs—a never-to-be-published article whose most revealing, handwritten notes would one day be cited in "The 'Confessions' of Allen Dulles." In one discussion they had about President Kennedy, Dulles stunned Morris with an abrupt comment. "That little Kennedy," Dulles said, "... he thought he was a god." "Even now," Morris wrote over a quarter of a century later, "those words leap out at me, the only strident ones I would hear from my unlikely collaborator."⁶¹

The Bay of Pigs awakened President Kennedy to internal forces he feared he might never control. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas recalled Kennedy saying what the Bay of Pigs taught him about the CIA and the Pen-

tagon: “This episode seared him. He had experienced the extreme power that these groups had, these various insidious influences of the CIA and the Pentagon on civilian policy, and I think it raised in his own mind the specter: Can Jack Kennedy, President of the United States, ever be strong enough to really rule these two powerful agencies?”⁶²

It was while John Kennedy was being steered into combat by the CIA and the Pentagon at the Bay of Pigs that Thomas Merton was being blocked from publishing his thoughts on nuclear war by his monastic superiors. Merton, like Kennedy, decided to find another way. The words pouring out of Merton’s typewriter were spilling over from unpublished manuscripts into his Cold War letters. As he wrote in one such letter to antinuclear archbishop Thomas Roberts, “At present my feeling is that the most urgent thing is to say what has to be said and say it in any possible way. If it cannot be printed, then let it be mimeographed. If it cannot be mimeographed, then let it be written on the backs of envelopes, as long as it gets said.”⁶³

Thomas Merton saw the Bay of Pigs incident especially through the eyes of one of his Cold War correspondents, Evora Arca de Sardinia in Miami. She wrote to Merton saying that her husband, a leader of the anti-Castro forces in the invasion, had been taken prisoner in Cuba. Merton replied to her on the day he received her letter, May 15, 1961, expressing his “deep compassion and concern in this moment of anguish.”⁶⁴

In their subsequent correspondence, Thomas Merton gave spiritual direction to Evora Arca de Sardinia as she became concerned at the divisions and spirit of revenge in the Cuban exile movement. In January 1962 he wrote to her: “The great error of the aggressive Catholics who want to preserve their power and social status at all costs is that they believe this can be done by force, and thus they prepare the way to lose everything they want to save.”⁶⁵

While President Kennedy and his brother Attorney General Robert Kennedy were working to raise a ransom to free the Bay of Pigs prisoners, Merton was warning Evora Arca de Sardinia about the militant context in which she was living, which questioned the process of such a ransom. In the Miami Cuba colony, as she had written to Merton, paying a ransom to an evil force (the communist Fidel Castro), even to free their loved ones, was considered a breach of ethics and loyalty.

Merton wrote back: “One thing I have always felt increases the trouble and the sorrow which rack you is the fact that living and working among the Cuban émigrés in Miami, and surrounded by the noise of hate and propaganda, you are naturally under a great stress and in a sense you are ‘forced’ against your will to take an aggressive and belligerent attitude which your conscience, in its depth, tells you is wrong.”⁶⁶

As Merton knew, his concern about a surrounding stress applied not only to his friend in the midst of Cuban émigrés in Miami but to everyone living

in Cold War America, a nation whose anti-communism and commitment to nuclear supremacy had placed, for example, its newly elected president “in a position sometimes so impossible as to be absurd.”

On December 31, 1961, Merton wrote a letter anticipating the Cuban Missile Crisis ten months later. It was addressed to Clare Boothe Luce, the wife of *Time-Life-Fortune* owner Henry Luce, a Cold War media baron whose editorial policies demonized the communist enemy. Clare Boothe Luce, celebrated speaker, writer, and diplomat, shared Henry Luce’s Cold War theology. In 1975 Clare Boothe Luce would lead investigators into the JFK assassination, working for the House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA), on a time-consuming wild goose chase based on disinformation. HSCA analyst Gaeton Fonzi discovered that Luce at the time was on the board of directors of the CIA-sponsored Association of Former Intelligence Officers.⁶⁷ Even in the early sixties, Merton with his extraordinary sensitivity may have suspected Luce’s intelligence connections. In any case he knew her as one of the wealthiest, most influential women in the world, with a decidedly anti-communist mind-set. He welcomed her, as he did one and all, into his circle of correspondents.

In his New Year’s Eve letter to Clare Boothe Luce, Merton said he thought the next year would be momentous. “Though ‘all manner of things shall be well,’” he wrote, “we cannot help but be aware, on the threshold of 1962, that we have enormous responsibilities and tasks of which we are perhaps no longer capable. Our sudden, unbalanced, top-heavy rush into technological mastery,” Merton saw, had now made us servants of our own weapons of war. “Our weapons dictate what we are to do. They force us into awful corners. They give us our living, they sustain our economy, they bolster up our politicians, they sell our mass media, in short we live by them. But if they continue to rule us we will also most surely die by them.”⁶⁸

Merton was a cloistered monk who watched no television and saw only an occasional newspaper. However, he had far-flung correspondents and spiritual antennae that were always on the alert. He could thus identify in his letter to Clare Boothe Luce the strategic nuclear issue that would bring humanity to the brink in October 1962: “For [our weapons] have now made it plain that they are the friends of the ‘preemptive strike’. They are most advantageous to those who use them first. And consequently nobody wants to be too late in using them second. Hence the weapons keep us in a state of fury and desperation, with our fingers poised over the button and our eyes glued on the radar screen. You know what happens when you keep your eye fixed on something. You begin to see things that aren’t there. It is very possible that in 1962 the weapons will tell someone that there has been long enough waiting, and he will obey, and we will all have had it.”⁶⁹

“We have to be articulate and sane,” Merton concluded, “and speak wisely on every occasion where we can speak, and to those who are willing to listen. That is why for one I speak to you,” he said hopefully to Luce. “We have to try to some extent to preserve the sanity of this nation, and

keep it from going berserk which will be its destruction, and ours, and perhaps also the destruction of Christendom.”⁷⁰

As Merton challenged the Cold War dogmas of Clare Boothe Luce, he was raising similar questions of conscience to another powerfully situated woman, Ethel Kennedy. This was the period in which Merton still had little confidence in John Kennedy. He was nevertheless beginning to catch glimpses of a man who, like himself, was deeply troubled by the prevailing Cold War atmosphere. He began a December 1961 letter to Ethel Kennedy by noting a parallel between JFK’s and his own thinking: “I liked very much the President’s speech at Seattle which encouraged me a bit as I had just written something along those same lines.”⁷¹ Merton was referring to John Kennedy’s rejection, like his own, of the false alternatives “Red or dead” in a speech the president gave at the University of Washington in November 1961. Kennedy had said of this false dilemma and those who chose either side of it: “It is a curious fact that each of these extreme opposites resembles the other. Each believes that we have only two choices: appeasement or war, suicide or surrender, humiliation or holocaust, to be either Red or dead.”⁷²

Merton made an extended analysis of the same Cold War cliché, “Red or dead,” in the book his monastic superiors blocked from publication, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*. There he observed: “We strive to soothe our madness by intoning more and more vacuous cliches. And at such times, far from being as innocuous as they are absurd, empty slogans take on a dreadful power.”⁷³

The slogan he and Kennedy saw exemplifying such emptiness had begun in Germany in the form, “Better Red than dead.” “It was deftly fielded on the first bounce by the Americans,” Merton said, “and came back in reverse, thus acquiring an air of challenge and defiance. ‘Better dead than Red’ was a reply to effete and decadent cynicism. It was a condemnation of ‘appeasement’. (Anything short of a nuclear attack on Russia rates as ‘appeasement’.)”

What the heroic emptiness of “Better dead than Red” ignored was “the real bravery of patient, humble, persevering labor to effect, step by step, through honest negotiation, a gradual understanding that can eventually relieve tensions and bring about some agreement upon which serious disarmament measures can be based”⁷⁴—precisely what he hoped Ethel Kennedy’s brother-in-law would do from the White House. In his letter to her, Merton therefore went on to praise John Kennedy, yet did so while encouraging him to break through Cold War propaganda and speak the truth: “I think that the fact that the President works overtime at trying to get people to face the situation as it really is may be the greatest thing he is doing. Certainly our basic need is for truth, and not for ‘images’ and slogans that ‘engineer consent.’ We are living in a dream world. We do not know ourselves or our adversaries. We are myths to ourselves and they are myths to us. And we are secretly persuaded that we can shoot it out like the sheriffs on TV. This is not reality and the President can do a tremendous amount to get people to see the facts, more than any single person.”⁷⁵

With inclusive language that did not single out JFK, but again with heavy implications for the president, Merton continued: “We cannot go on indefinitely relying on the kind of provisional framework of a balance of terror. If as Christians we were more certain of our duty, it might put us in a very tight spot politically but it would also merit for us special graces from God, and these we need badly.”⁷⁶

Merton was praying that Christians in particular—and a particular Christian, John Kennedy—would become more certain of their duty to take a stand against nuclear terror, which would place JFK especially “in a very tight spot politically.” Besides praying, Merton was doing more than writing words of protest on the backs of envelopes. He was appealing to the president, through Ethel Kennedy, for a courageous stand in conscience. Whether or not JFK ever read Merton’s graceful letter to his sister-in-law, he would soon have to respond, in October 1962, to “special graces from God” if humanity were to survive.

In the terminology of his own reflection on a military coup, John Kennedy did have a second “Bay of Pigs.” The president alienated the CIA and the military a second time by his decisions during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The Cuban Missile Crisis may have been the most dangerous moment in human history. In the thirteen days from October 16 to 28, 1962, as the Soviet Union installed nuclear-armed missiles in Cuba, President Kennedy demanded publicly that Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev dismantle and withdraw the missiles immediately. Kennedy also set up a naval “quarantine” that blockaded Soviet ships proceeding to the island. Ignoring the parallel of the already existing deployment of U.S. missiles in Turkey alongside the Soviet Union, Kennedy declared that the deployment of Soviet missiles in Cuba was “a deliberately provocative and unjustified change in the status quo which cannot be accepted by this country.”⁷⁷ In spite of Kennedy’s militant stand, his and Khrushchev’s eventual resolution of the crisis by mutual concessions was not viewed favorably by Cold War hard-liners.

The missile crisis arose because, as Nikita Khrushchev wrote in his memoirs, “we were quite certain that the [Bay of Pigs] invasion was only the beginning and that the Americans would not let Cuba alone.”⁷⁸ To defend Cuba from the threat of another U.S. invasion, Khrushchev said he “had the idea of installing missiles with nuclear warheads in Cuba without letting the United States find out they were there until it was too late to do anything about them.”⁷⁹ His strategy was twofold: “The main thing was that the installation of our missiles in Cuba would, I thought, restrain the United States from precipitous military action against Castro’s government. In addition to protecting Cuba, our missiles would have equalized what the West likes to call ‘the balance of power.’ The Americans had surrounded our country with military bases and threatened us with nuclear weapons, and now they would learn just what it feels like to have enemy missiles pointing at you.”⁸⁰

Khrushchev's logic overlooked the frenzied mind of Cold War America. As Merton put it in a March 1962 letter, "the first and greatest of all commandments is that America shall not and must not be beaten in the Cold War, and the second is like unto this, that if a hot war is necessary to prevent defeat in the Cold War, then a hot war must be fought even if civilization is to be destroyed."⁸¹ In that context, the discovery of Soviet missiles in Cuba placed President Kennedy in what Merton described as "a position so impossible as to be absurd." In a struggle between good and evil involving world-destructive weapons, the installation of Soviet missiles ninety miles from Florida brought home to Washington the temptation to strike first. Merton's warning to Clare Boothe Luce about a preemptive strike that year was coming true. As the construction of Soviet missile sites in Cuba accelerated, the pressures on President Kennedy for a preemptive U.S. strike became overwhelming. However, Kennedy resisted his advisers' push toward a nuclear war that he told them would obviously be "the final failure."⁸²

He secretly taped the White House meetings during the crisis. The tapes were declassified, transcribed, and published in the late 1990s.⁸³ The transcripts reveal how isolated the president was in choosing to blockade further Soviet missile shipments rather than bomb and invade Cuba. Nowhere does he stand more alone against the pressures for a sudden, massive air strike than in his October 19, 1962, meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In this encounter the Chiefs' disdain for their young commander-in-chief is embodied by Air Force Chief of Staff General Curtis LeMay, who challenges the president:

LEMAY: "This [blockade and political action] is almost as bad as the appeasement at Munich [a 1938 conference in Munich at which Britain, trying to avoid war with Nazi Germany, compelled Czechoslovakia to cede territory to Hitler] . . . I just don't see any other solution except direct military intervention *right now*."

A historian who has studied the missile crisis tapes for over twenty years, Sheldon Stern, has noted a pause in the conversation at this point, during which the Joint Chiefs "must have held their collective breath waiting for a reaction from the President. The general had gone well beyond merely giving advice or even disagreeing with his commander-in-chief. He had taken their generation's ultimate metaphor for shortsightedness and cowardice, the 1938 appeasement of Hitler at Munich, and flung it in the President's face."

"President Kennedy," Stern says, "in a remarkable display of *sang froid* refused to take the bait; he said absolutely nothing."⁸⁴

Ending the awkward silence, the Navy, Army, and Marine Corps Chiefs of Staff argue for the prompt military action of bombing and invading Cuba. General LeMay breaks in, reminding Kennedy of his strong statements about responding to offensive weapons in Cuba. He almost taunts the president:

LEMAY: "I think that a blockade and political talk would be considered by a lot of our friends and neutrals as bein' a pretty weak response to this. And I'm sure a lot of our own citizens would feel that way, too."

"In other words, you're in a pretty bad fix at the present time."

KENNEDY: "What'd you say?"

LEMAY: "I say, you're in a pretty bad fix."

KENNEDY: [laughing] "You're in with me, personally."⁸⁵

The discussion continues, with Kennedy probing the Chiefs for further information and LeMay pushing the president to authorize a massive attack on Soviet missiles, Cuban air defenses, and all communications systems. As the meeting draws to a close, Kennedy rejects the arguments for a quick, massive attack and thanks his military commanders.

KENNEDY: "I appreciate your views. As I said, I'm sure we all understand how rather unsatisfactory our alternatives are."⁸⁶

A few minutes later, the president leaves the room, but the tape keeps on recording. General LeMay, Army Chief of Staff General Earle Wheeler, and Marine Corps Commandant General David Shoup remain. Shoup, who is usually the most supportive of the Joint Chiefs toward Kennedy, praises LeMay's attack on the president:

SHOUP: "You were a . . . You pulled the rug right out from under him."

LEMAY: "Jesus Christ. What the hell do you mean?"

SHOUP: ". . . He's finally getting around to the word 'escalation.' . . . When *he* says 'escalation,' that's it. If somebody could keep 'em from doing the *goddamn thing* piecemeal, *that's* our problem . . ."

LEMAY: "That's right."

SHOUP: "You're screwed, screwed, screwed. He could say, 'either do the son of a bitch and do it right and quit friggin' around.'"

LEMAY: "That was my contention."⁸⁷

The White House tapes show Kennedy questioning and resisting the mounting pressure to bomb Cuba coming from both the Joint Chiefs and the Executive Committee (ExComm) of the National Security Council. One statement by Robert Kennedy that may have strengthened the president's resolve against a preemptive strike is unheard on the tapes. In his memoir of the missile crisis, *Thirteen Days*, RFK wrote that, while listening to the proposals for attack, he passed a note to the president: "I now know how Tojo felt when he was planning Pearl Harbor."⁸⁸

How John and Robert Kennedy felt together is best conveyed by Robert's description of his brother at one of the most terrible moments of the crisis. On Wednesday, October 24, a report came in that a Soviet submarine was about to be intercepted by U.S. helicopters with depth charges, unless by

some miracle the two Soviet ships it was accompanying turned back from the U.S. “quarantine” line. The president feared he had lost all control of the situation and that nuclear war was imminent. Robert looked at his brother:

“His hand went up to his face and covered his mouth. He opened and closed his fist. His face seemed drawn, his eyes pained, almost gray. We stared at each other across the table. For a few fleeting seconds, it was almost as though no one else was there and he was no longer the president.

“Inexplicably, I thought of when he was ill and almost died; when he lost his child; when we learned that our oldest brother had been killed; of personal times of strain and hurt. The voices droned on . . .”⁸⁹

The miracle occurred—through the enemy, Nikita Khrushchev. Khrushchev ordered the Soviet ships to stop dead in the water rather than challenge the U.S. quarantine. At that moment he saved John Kennedy and everyone else.

What moved Khrushchev to his decision? The incident goes unmentioned in his memoirs, as does another, hidden chapter of events that may help to explain it—Nikita Khrushchev’s secret correspondence with John Kennedy.

In July 1993, the U.S. State Department, in response to a Freedom of Information Act request by a Canadian newspaper, declassified twenty-one secret letters between John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev.⁹⁰ These private, confidential letters between the Cold War leaders, begun in September 1961 and continued for two years, will be examined here for the bright light they shed on a relationship critical to the world’s preservation.

Khrushchev had sent his first private letter to Kennedy on September 29, 1961, during the Berlin crisis. Wrapped in a newspaper, it was brought to Kennedy’s press secretary Pierre Salinger at a New York hotel room by a Soviet “magazine editor” and KGB agent, Georgi Bolshakov, whom Khrushchev trusted to maintain silence. The secrecy was at least as much to avoid Soviet attention as American. As presidential aide Theodore Sorensen said three decades later, Khrushchev was “taking his risks, assuming that these letters were, as we believe, being kept secret from the (Soviet) military, from the foreign service, from the top people in the Kremlin. He was taking some risk that if discovered, they would be very unhappy with him.”⁹¹

Khrushchev’s first letter was written from a retreat beside the Black Sea. While the Berlin crisis was still not over, the Soviet premier began the correspondence with his enemy by meditating on the beauty of the sea and the threat of war. “Dear Mr. President,” he wrote, “At present I am on the shore of the Black Sea . . . This is indeed a wonderful place. As a former Naval officer you would surely appreciate the merits of these surroundings, the beauty of the sea and the grandeur of the Caucasian mountains. Under this bright southern sun it is even somehow hard to believe that there still exist problems in the world which, due to lack of solutions, cast a sinister shadow on peaceful life, on the future of millions of people.”⁹²

Kennedy had been stunned in Vienna by what he felt was Khrushchev’s hardness of heart toward a nuclear war and his unwillingness to compro-

mise. Now as the threat of war over Berlin continued, Khrushchev expressed a regret about Vienna. He said he had “given much thought of late to the development of international events since our meeting in Vienna, and I have decided to approach you with this letter. The whole world hopefully expected that our meeting and a frank exchange of views would have a soothing effect, would turn relations between our countries into the correct channel and promote the adoption of decisions which would give the peoples confidence that at last peace on earth will be secured. To my regret—and, I believe, to yours—this did not happen.”⁹³

However, Kennedy’s abiding hopes for peace, beneath the bellicose rhetoric that he and Khrushchev exchanged publicly, had somehow gotten through to his counterpart. Khrushchev continued with deepening respect:

“I listened with great interest to the account which our journalists Adjubei and Kharlamov gave of the meeting they had with you in Washington. They gave me many interesting details and I questioned them most thoroughly. You prepossessed them by your informality, modesty and frankness which are not to be found very often in men who occupy such a high position.”

Again Khrushchev mentioned Vienna, this time as a backdrop to his decision to write such a letter:

“My thoughts have more than once returned to our meetings in Vienna. I remember you emphasized that you did not want to proceed towards war and favored living in peace with our country while competing in the peaceful domain. And though subsequent events did not proceed in the way that could be desired, I thought it might be useful in a purely informal and personal way to approach you and share some of my ideas. If you do not agree with me you can consider that this letter did not exist while naturally I, for my part, will not use this correspondence in my public statements. After all only in confidential correspondence can you say what you think without a backward glance at the press, at the journalists.”

“As you see,” he added apologetically, “I started out by describing the delights of the Black Sea coast, but then I nevertheless turned to politics. But that cannot be helped. They say that you sometimes cast politics out through the door but it climbs back through the window, particularly when the windows are open.”⁹⁴

Khrushchev’s first private letter to Kennedy was twenty-six pages long. It did deal passionately with politics, in particular Berlin (where the two leaders backed away from war but never reached agreement) and the civil war in Laos (where they agreed to recognize a neutral government). Even though in the process Khrushchev forgot his Black Sea calm and argued his points with a vengeance, he was as insistent on the fundamental need for peace as Kennedy had been in Vienna. The communist emphasized their common ground with a biblical analogy. Khrushchev liked, he said, the comparison of their situation “with Noah’s Ark where both the ‘clean’ and the ‘unclean’ found sanctuary. But regardless of who lists himself with the ‘clean’ and who is considered to be ‘unclean,’ they are all equally interested in one thing and that is that the Ark should successfully continue its cruise. And we have no

other alternative: either we should live in peace and cooperation so that the Ark maintains its buoyancy, or else it sinks.”⁹⁵

Kennedy responded privately to Khrushchev on October 16, 1961, from his own place of retreat beside the ocean, Hyannis Port. He began in a similar vein:

“My family has had a home here overlooking the Atlantic for many years. My father and brothers own homes near my own, and my children always have a large group of cousins for company. So this is an ideal place for me to spend my weekends during the summer and fall, to relax, to think, to devote my time to major tasks instead of constant appointments, telephone calls and details. Thus, I know how you must feel about the spot on the Black Sea from which your letter was written, for I value my own opportunities to get a clearer and quieter perspective away from the din of Washington.”

He thanked Khrushchev for initiating the correspondence and agreed to keep it quiet: “Certainly you are correct in emphasizing that this correspondence must be kept wholly private, not to be hinted at in public statements, much less disclosed to the press.” Their private letters should supplement public statements “and give us each a chance to address the other in frank, realistic and fundamental terms. Neither of us is going to convert the other to a new social, economic or political point of view. Neither of us will be induced by a letter to desert or subvert his own cause. So these letters can be free from the polemics of the ‘cold war’ debate.”

Kennedy agreed wholeheartedly with Khrushchev’s biblical image: “I like very much your analogy of Noah’s Ark, with both the ‘clean’ and the ‘unclean’ determined that it stay afloat. Whatever our differences, our collaboration to keep the peace is as urgent—if not more urgent—than our collaboration to win the last world war.”⁹⁶

After a year of private letters that included more than a little “cold war debate,” Kennedy and Khrushchev had by October 1962 not resolved their most dangerous differences. The missile crisis was proof of that. Their mutual respect had given way to mistrust, counter-challenges, and steps toward the war they both abhorred. In the weeks leading up to the crisis, Khrushchev felt betrayed by Kennedy’s contingency plans for another Cuba invasion, whereas Kennedy thought Khrushchev was betraying him by sneaking nuclear missiles into Cuba. Both were again acting out Cold War beliefs that threatened everyone on earth. Nevertheless, as they faced each other and issued potentially world-destructive orders, it was still thanks to the Vienna meeting and their secret letters that each knew the other as a human being he could respect. They also knew they had once agreed warmly that the world was a Noah’s Ark, where both the “clean” and the “unclean” had to keep it afloat. It was in just such a world, where “clean” and “unclean” were together under a nuclear threat, that Khrushchev stopped his ships dead in the water and the Ark remained afloat.

However, the crisis was not over. Work on the missile sites was in fact speeding up. Pentagon and ExComm advisers increased their pressures on the president for a preventive strike.

On Friday night, October 26, Kennedy received a hopeful letter from Khrushchev in which the Soviet premier agreed to withdraw his missiles. In exchange, Kennedy would pledge not to invade Cuba. However, on Saturday morning, Kennedy received a second, more problematic letter from Khrushchev adding to those terms the demand for a U.S. commitment to remove its analogous missiles from Turkey. In exchange, Khrushchev would pledge not to invade Turkey. Tit for tat.

Kennedy was perplexed. Khrushchev's second proposal was reasonable in its symmetry. However, Kennedy felt he could not suddenly surrender a NATO ally's defenses under a threat, failing to recognize for the moment that he was demanding Khrushchev do the equivalent with his ally Castro.

While the Joint Chiefs pressed their demands on the president for an air strike on Monday, an urgent message arrived heightening those pressures. Early that Saturday morning, a Soviet surface-to-air missile (SAM) had shot down a U-2 reconnaissance plane over Cuba, killing the Air Force pilot, Major Rudolf Anderson, Jr. The Joint Chiefs and ExComm had already recommended immediate retaliation in such a case. They now urged an attack early the next morning to destroy the SAM sites. "There was the feeling," said Robert Kennedy, "that the noose was tightening on all of us, on Americans, on mankind, and that the bridges to escape were crumbling."⁹⁷ "But again," he adds, "the President pulled everyone back."⁹⁸ JFK called off the Air Force reprisal for the U-2's downing. He continued the search for a peaceful resolution. The Joint Chiefs were dismayed. Robert Kennedy and Theodore Sorensen then drafted a letter accepting Khrushchev's first proposal, while ignoring the later demand that the United States withdraw its missiles from Turkey.

As the war currents swirled around the White House, John and Robert Kennedy met in the Oval Office. Robert described later the thoughts his brother shared with him.

He talked first about Major Anderson and how the brave died while politicians sat home pontificating about great issues. He talked about miscalculations leading to war, a war Russians didn't want any more than Americans did. He wanted to make sure he had done everything conceivable to prevent a terrible outcome, especially by giving the Russians every opportunity for a peaceful settlement that would neither diminish their security nor humiliate them. But "the thought that disturbed him the most," Robert said, "and that made the prospect of war much more fearful than it would otherwise have been, was the specter of the death of the children of this country and all the world—the young people who had no role, who had no say, who knew nothing even of the confrontation, but whose lives would be snuffed out like everyone else's. They would never have a chance to make a decision, to vote in an election, to run for office, to lead a revolution, to determine their own destinies."

"It was this," wrote Robert in a work published after his own assassination, "that troubled him most, that gave him such pain. And it was then that

he and Secretary Rusk decided that I should visit with Ambassador Dobrynin and personally convey the President's great concern."⁹⁹

Robert Kennedy's climactic meeting with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin became the moving force for Khrushchev's dramatic announcement that he was withdrawing the missiles. Khrushchev wrote in his memoirs what he thought Robert Kennedy told Dobrynin, who had relayed it to Khrushchev:

"The President is in a grave situation,' Robert Kennedy said, 'and he does not know how to get out of it. We are under very severe stress. In fact we are under pressure from our military to use force against Cuba . . . We want to ask you, Mr. Dobrynin, to pass President Kennedy's message to Chairman Khrushchev through unofficial channels . . . Even though the President himself is very much against starting a war over Cuba, an irreversible chain of events could occur against his will. That is why the President is appealing directly to Chairman Khrushchev for his help in liquidating this conflict. If the situation continues much longer, the President is not sure that the military will not overthrow him and seize power."¹⁰⁰

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russian Foreign Ministry declassified Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin's October 27, 1962, cable describing his critical one-on-one meeting with Robert Kennedy. Dobrynin's report offers a less dramatic version than Khrushchev's memoirs of Robert Kennedy's words concerning the military pressures on President Kennedy: "taking time to find a way out [of the situation] is very risky. (Here R. Kennedy mentioned as if in passing that there are many unreasonable heads among the generals, and not only among the generals, who 'are itching for a fight.')

The situation might get out of control, with irreversible consequences."¹⁰¹

In Robert Kennedy's own account of the meeting in *Thirteen Days*, he does not mention telling Dobrynin of the military pressures on the president. However, his friend and biographer Arthur Schlesinger says, whatever the Attorney General said to Dobrynin, RFK was himself of the opinion there were many generals eager for a fight. Robert thought the situation could get totally out of control.¹⁰²

In any case, Khrushchev felt the urgency of the pressures on the president. He responded by withdrawing his missiles.

Is there any evidence U.S. military leaders took advantage of the missile crisis, not to overthrow President Kennedy but to bypass him? Were they trying to trigger a war they felt they could win?

According to political scientist Scott Sagan in his book *The Limits of Safety*, the U.S. Air Force launched an intercontinental ballistic missile from Vandenberg Air Force Base on October 26, 1962, the day before the U-2 was shot down. The ICBM was unarmed, a test missile destined for Kwajalein in the Marshall Islands. The Soviet Union could easily have thought otherwise. Three days before, a test missile at Vandenberg had received a nuclear warhead, changing it to full alert status for the crisis. By October 30, nine Vandenberg "test" missiles were armed for use against the Sovi-

ets.¹⁰³ At the height of the missile crisis, the Air Force's October 26th launch of its missile could have been seen by the Soviets as the beginning of an attack. It was a dangerous provocation. Had the Soviets been suckered into giving any sign of a launch of their own, the entire array of U.S. missiles and bombers were poised to preempt them. They were already at the top rung of their nuclear war status, DefCon (Defense Condition)-2, totally prepared for a massive strike.

Also at the height of the crisis, as writer Richard Rhodes learned from a retired Air Force commander, "SAC [Strategic Air Command] airborne-alert bombers deliberately flew past their customary turnaround points toward the Soviet Union—an unambiguous threat that Soviet radar operators would certainly have recognized and reported."¹⁰⁴ With their far superior number of missiles and bombers, U.S. forces were prepared for a preemptive attack at the slightest sign of a Soviet response to their provocation. Fortunately the Soviets didn't bite.

President Kennedy had reason to feel he was being circumvented by the military so they could win a nuclear showdown. Kennedy may also have recalled that Khrushchev, in his second secret letter to the president, on November 9, 1961, regarding Berlin, had hinted that belligerent pressures in Moscow made compromise difficult from his own side. "You have to understand," he implored Kennedy, "I have no ground to retreat further, there is a precipice behind."¹⁰⁵ Kennedy had not pushed him. Now there was a precipice behind Kennedy, and Khrushchev understood.

Khrushchev recalled the conclusion of Dobrynin's report as Robert Kennedy's words, "I don't know how much longer we can hold out against our generals."¹⁰⁶ Since Khrushchev had also just received an urgent message from Castro that a U.S. attack on Cuba was "almost imminent,"¹⁰⁷ he hastened to respond: "We could see that we had to reorient our position swiftly . . . We sent the Americans a note saying that we agreed to remove our missiles and bombers on the condition that the President give us his assurance that there would be no invasion of Cuba by the forces of the United States or anybody else."¹⁰⁸

Kennedy agreed, and Khrushchev began removing the Soviet missiles. The crisis was over.¹⁰⁹ Neither side revealed that, as part of the agreement, on the analogous issue of U.S. missiles in Turkey Robert Kennedy had in fact promised Anatoly Dobrynin that they, too, would be withdrawn but not immediately.¹¹⁰ It could not be done unilaterally at a moment's notice. The promise was fulfilled. Six months later the United States took its missiles out of Turkey.

Twenty-five years after the missile crisis, Secretary of State Dean Rusk would reveal that President Kennedy was prepared to make a further concession to Khrushchev in order to avoid war. Rusk said that on October 27, after Robert Kennedy left to meet Dobrynin, the president "instructed me to telephone the late Andrew Cordier, then [president] at Columbia University, and dictate to him a statement which would be made by U Thant, the Sec-

retary General of the United Nations [and a friend of Cordier], proposing the removal of the Jupiters [in Turkey] and the missiles in Cuba. Mr. Cordier was to put that statement in the hands of U Thant only after further signal from us.”¹¹¹ Rusk phoned the statement to Cordier. However, when Khrushchev accepted Robert Kennedy’s promise to Dobrynin that the Jupiter missiles would be removed, Kennedy’s further readiness for a public trade mediated by U Thant became unnecessary. The president’s willingness to go that extra mile with Khrushchev, at a heavy political cost to himself, shocked the former ExComm members to whom Rusk revealed it for the first time at the Hawk’s Cay (Florida) Conference on March 7, 1962.

The extent to which Kennedy’s willingness to trade away missiles with Khrushchev was beyond political orthodoxy at the time can be illustrated by my own experience. In May 1963 I wrote an article on Pope John XXIII’s encyclical *Pacem in Terris*. It was published by Dorothy Day in her radically pacifist *Catholic Worker* newspaper. The article said that, in harmony with Pope John’s theme of increasing mutual trust as the basis for peace, the United States should have resolved the Cuban Missile Crisis by negotiating a mutual withdrawal of missile bases with the Soviet Union. Unknown to Dorothy Day and myself, our politically unacceptable view was what President Kennedy had committed himself to doing in the midst of that crisis, at whatever political cost, and had in fact carried through secretly with Nikita Khrushchev.¹¹²

How close did the United States and the Soviet Union come to a nuclear holocaust?

From the Joint Chiefs’ standpoint, not close enough. The only real danger, they thought, came from the President’s lack of will in not attacking the Russians in Cuba.

At the October 19 meeting between the president and the Chiefs, when General LeMay argued for a surprise attack on the Russian missiles as soon as possible, President Kennedy had asked him skeptically, “What do you think their reprisal would be?”

LeMay said there would be no reprisal so long as Kennedy warned Khrushchev that he was ready to fight also in Berlin.

After Admiral George Anderson made the same point, Kennedy said sharply, “They can’t let us just take out, after all their statements, take out their missiles, kill a lot of Russians, and not do . . . not do anything.”¹¹³

After the meeting, the President recounted the conversation to his aide Dave Powers and said, “Can you imagine LeMay saying a thing like that? These brass hats have one great advantage in their favor. If we listen to them, and do what they want us to do, none of us will be alive later to tell them that they were wrong.”¹¹⁴

In a conversation that fall with his friend John Kenneth Galbraith, Kennedy again spoke angrily of the reckless pressures his advisers, both military and civilian, had put on him to bomb the Cuban missile sites. “I never had the slightest intention of doing so,” said the president.¹¹⁵

Thirty years after the crisis, Kennedy's Defense Secretary Robert McNamara was surprised to learn the contents of a November 1992 article in the Russian press. The article revealed that at the height of the crisis Soviet forces in Cuba had possessed a total of 162 nuclear warheads. The more critical strategic fact, unknown to the United States at the time, was that these weapons were ready to be fired. On October 26, 1962, the day before the U-2 was shot down, the nuclear warheads in Cuba had been prepared for launching. Enlightened by this knowledge, McNamara wrote in his memoirs:

"Clearly, there was a high risk that, in the face of a U.S. attack—which, as I have said, many in the U.S. government, military and civilian alike, were prepared to recommend to President Kennedy—the Soviet forces in Cuba would have decided to use their nuclear weapons rather than lose them.

"We need not speculate about what would have happened in that event. We can predict the results with certainty . . . And where would it have ended? In utter disaster."¹¹⁶

In the climactic moments of the Cold War, John Kennedy's resistance to pressures for a first strike, combined with Nikita Khrushchev's quick understanding and retreat, saved the lives of millions of people, perhaps the life of the planet.

In those days, however, when compromise was regarded as treason, U.S. military leaders were not pleased by the Kennedy-Khrushchev resolution of the crisis. The Joint Chiefs of Staff were outraged at Kennedy's refusal to attack Cuba and even his known concessions to Khrushchev. McNamara recalled how strongly the Chiefs expressed their feelings to the president. "After Khrushchev had agreed to remove the missiles, President Kennedy invited the Chiefs to the White House so that he could thank them for their support during the crisis, and there was one hell of a scene. LeMay came out saying, 'We lost! We ought to just go in there today and knock 'em off!'"¹¹⁷

Robert Kennedy was also struck by the Chiefs' anger at the president. "Admiral [George] Anderson's reaction to the news," he said, "was 'We have been had.'"¹¹⁸

"The military are mad," President Kennedy told Arthur Schlesinger, "They wanted to do this."¹¹⁹ Yet as angry as the Chiefs were at Kennedy's handling of the missile crisis, their anger would deepen in the following year. They would witness a Cold War president not only refusing their first-strike mandate but also turning decisively toward peace with the enemy.

On Sunday morning, October 28, after Kennedy and Khrushchev had agreed mutually to withdraw their most threatening missiles, JFK went to Mass in Washington to pray in thanksgiving. As he and Dave Powers were about to get into the White House car, Kennedy looked at Powers and said, "Dave, this morning we have an extra reason to pray."¹²⁰

At the Abbey of Gethsemani, Thomas Merton's response to the Cuban Missile Crisis was also a prayer of thanksgiving. He wrote Daniel Berrigan: "As for Cuba, well thank God we escaped the results of our own folly this time. We excel in getting ourselves into positions where we 'have to' press the

button, or the next thing to it. I realize more and more that this whole war question is nine-tenths our own fabricated illusion . . . I think Kennedy has enough sense to avoid the worst injustices, he acts as if he knew the score. But few others seem to.”¹²¹

Regarding the president’s handling of the crisis, Merton wrote Etta Gullick in England: “Of course things being what they were, Kennedy hardly had any alternative. My objection is to things being as they are, through the stupidity and shortsightedness of politicians who have no politics.”¹²²

To Ethel Kennedy he said further: “The Cuba business was a close call, but in the circumstances I think JFK handled it very well. I say in the circumstances, because only a short-term look at it makes one very happy. It was a crisis and something had to be done and there was only a choice of various evils. He chose the best evil, and it worked. The whole thing continues to be nasty.”¹²³

On Sunday afternoon, October 28, with the crisis over, Robert Kennedy returned to the White House and talked with the president for a long time. When Robert got ready to leave, John said, in reference to the death of Abraham Lincoln, “This is the night I should go to the theater.” His brother replied, “If you go, I want to go with you.”¹²⁴ They would both go soon.

John Kennedy’s third Bay of Pigs was his Commencement Address at American University in Washington. *Saturday Review* editor Norman Cousins summed up the significance of this remarkable speech: “At American University on June 10, 1963, President Kennedy proposed an end to the Cold War.”¹²⁵

The Cold Warrior John F. Kennedy was turning, in the root biblical sense of the word “turning”—*teshuvah* in the Hebrew Scriptures, *metanoia* in the Greek, “repentance” in English. In the Cuban Missile Crisis John Kennedy as president of the United States had begun to turn away from, to repent from, his own complicity with the worst of U.S. imperialism—its willingness to destroy the world in order to “save it” from Communism. Nevertheless, in the process of turning from the brink, Kennedy seemed unable to begin walking in a new direction.

In the aftermath of the missile crisis, he was alternately hopeful and frustrated. The imminence of holocaust had pushed him and Khrushchev toward a new commitment to negotiations. Yet in the months following the crisis, the Cold War opponents seemed unable to seize the moment.

They agreed that a ban on nuclear testing was a critical next step away from the brink. Yet both men had a history of conducting nuclear tests that contaminated the atmosphere and heightened the tensions between them. In response to the Soviet Union’s nuclear tests in the summer of 1961, Kennedy had resumed U.S. atmospheric tests on April 25, 1962. The United States then carried out a series of twenty-four nuclear blasts in the South Pacific from April to November of 1962.¹²⁶

In the context of their precarious resolution of the missile crisis and their tit-for-tat nuclear testing, Kennedy and Khrushchev struggled to agree on a test ban. Khrushchev said the United States was using its condition of on-site inspections as a strategy for spying on the U.S.S.R. For the sake of peace, he had already agreed to the U.S. position of three annual inspections, only to see the Americans suddenly demand more. Kennedy said Khrushchev had mistaken the original U.S. position. Khrushchev replied pointedly through an intermediary:

“You can tell the President I accept his explanation of an honest misunderstanding and suggest that we get moving. But the next move is up to him.”¹²⁷

Kennedy accepted Khrushchev’s challenge. His American University address broke the deadlock by transforming the context. By the empathy he expressed toward the Russian perspective, Kennedy created a bridge to Khrushchev. They would then have five and a half months left to make peace before JFK’s murder. At the same time as Kennedy’s speech reached out to Khrushchev, it opened a still wider chasm between the president and his own military and intelligence advisers. To the Pentagon and CIA, the president’s words of peace at American University seemed to put him on the enemy’s side.

Their resistance to Kennedy’s stand can be understood from the standpoint of the independent power base they had developed during the Cold War. We have already seen how President Truman exulted at the bombing of Hiroshima. From a failure to internalize the suffering beneath the mushroom clouds at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Truman administration began an era of atomic diplomacy based on hubris. Truman, supremely confident because he had unilateral possession of the atomic bomb, tried to dictate postwar terms in Eastern Europe to the Soviet Union. A month after Hiroshima, the Soviets rejected U.S. demands backed by the bomb at the London Council of Foreign Ministers. John Foster Dulles, who attended the London meeting, regarded it as the beginning of the Cold War.¹²⁸ President Truman then announced in September 1945 that he was not interested in seeking international control over nuclear weapons. If other nations wanted to “catch up” with the United States, he said, “they [would] have to do it on their own hook, just as we did.” Truman agreed with a friend’s comment on the implications of this policy: “Then Mister President, what it amounts to is this. That the armaments race is on.”¹²⁹

Truman continued to use the bomb as a threat to force Soviet concessions. He felt he did so successfully in Iran just seven months after Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Russian army was prolonging a wartime occupation in northern Iran, seeking Soviet oil leases like those of the British in the south. Truman later told Senator Henry Jackson that he had summoned Soviet Ambassador Andrei Gromyko to the White House. The president demanded that the Russian troops evacuate Iran within forty-eight hours or the United States would use the atomic weapon that only it possessed. “We’re going to

drop it on you,” he told Gromyko. The troops moved in twenty-four hours.¹³⁰

On a wider front, the United States enforced a Cold War strategy of containing the Soviet Union. The containment policy was formulated by State Department diplomat George Kennan, writing as “X” in the July 1947 *Foreign Affairs*. Although Kennan said the purpose of containment was more diplomatic and political than military, the Pentagon carried it out by encircling the U.S.S.R. with U.S. bases and patrolling forces.

To match the efficiency of a totalitarian enemy, U.S. military leaders urged legislation that would mobilize the nation to a state of constant readiness for war. Thus the National Security Act of 1947 laid the foundations of a national security state: the National Security Council (NSC), the National Security Resources Board (NSRB), the Munitions Board, the Research and Development Board, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).¹³¹ Before the act was passed, Secretary of State George Marshall warned President Truman that it granted the new intelligence agency in particular powers that were “almost unlimited,”¹³² a criticism of the CIA that Truman would echo much too late—soon after the assassination of John Kennedy.

On June 18, 1948, Truman’s National Security Council took a further step into a CIA quicksand and approved top-secret directive NSC 10/2, which sanctioned U.S. intelligence to carry out a broad range of covert operations: “propaganda, economic warfare, preventive direct action including sabotage, anti-sabotage, demolition and evacuation measures; subversion against hostile states including assistance to underground resistance movements, guerrillas, and refugee liberation groups.”¹³³ The CIA was now empowered to be a paramilitary organization. George Kennan, who sponsored NSC 10/2, said later in the light of history that it was “the greatest mistake I ever made.”¹³⁴

Since NSC 10/2 authorized violations of international law, it also established official lying as their indispensable cover. All such activities had to be “so planned and executed that any US government responsibility for them is not evident to unauthorized persons, and that if uncovered the US government can plausibly deny any responsibility for them.”¹³⁵ The national security doctrine of “plausible deniability” combined lying with hypocrisy. It marked the creation of a Frankenstein monster.

Plausible deniability encouraged the autonomy of the CIA and other covert-action (“intelligence”) agencies from the government that created them. In order to protect the visible authorities of the government from protest and censure, the CIA was authorized not only to violate international law but to do so with as little consultation as possible. CIA autonomy went hand in glove with plausible deniability. The less explicit an order from the president, the better it was for “plausible deniability.” And the less consultation there was, the more creative CIA authorities could become in interpreting the mind of the president, especially the mind of a president so

uncooperative that he wanted to splinter the CIA in a thousand pieces and scatter it to the winds.

At the 1975 Senate hearings on U.S. intelligence operations chaired by Senator Frank Church, CIA officials testified reluctantly on their efforts to kill Fidel Castro. In late 1960, without the knowledge of President Dwight Eisenhower, the CIA had contacted underworld figures John Rosselli, Sam Giancana, and Santos Trafficante, offering them \$150,000 for Castro's assassination.¹³⁶ The gangsters were happy to be hired by the U.S. government to murder the man who had shut down their gambling casinos in Cuba. If they were successful, they hoped a U.S.-sponsored successor to Castro would allow them to reopen the casinos.

In the spring of 1961, without the knowledge of the new president John Kennedy, the CIA's Technical Services Division prepared a batch of poison pills for Castro. The pills were sent to Cuba through John Rosselli. The murder plot failed because the CIA's Cuban assets were unable to get close enough to Castro to poison him.¹³⁷ The CIA's purpose was to kill Castro just before the Bay of Pigs invasion. As Bay of Pigs planner Richard Bissell said later, "Assassination was intended to reinforce the [invasion] plan. There was the thought that Castro would be dead before the landing. Very few, however, knew of this aspect of the plan."¹³⁸

After President Kennedy fired Bissell from the CIA for his role in the Bay of Pigs, Richard Helms, his successor as Deputy Director of Plans, took up where Bissell had left off in conspiring to kill Castro. Helms testified to the Church Committee that he never informed either the president or his newly appointed CIA director John McCone of the assassination plots. Nor did he inform any other officials in the Kennedy administration. Helms said he sought no approval for the murder attempts because assassination was not a subject that should be aired with higher authority.¹³⁹ When he was asked if President Kennedy had been informed, Helms said that "nobody wants to embarrass a President of the United States by discussing the assassination of foreign leaders in his presence."¹⁴⁰ He also didn't seek the approval of the Special Group Augmented that oversaw the anti-Castro program because, he said, "I didn't see how one would have expected that a thing like killing or murdering or assassination would become a part of a large group of people sitting around a table in the United States Government."¹⁴¹

John McCone and the other surviving members of the Kennedy Administration testified that "assassination was outside the parameters of the Administration's anti-Castro program."¹⁴² Yet Richard Helms and other CIA insiders kept running assassination plots in conflict with the president's wishes.

In November 1961, seven months after the Bay of Pigs invasion, John Kennedy asked journalist Tad Szulc in a private conversation in the Oval Office, "What would you think if I ordered Castro to be assassinated?" The startled Szulc said he was against political assassination in principle and in any case doubted if it would solve the Cuban problem. The president leaned back

in his rocking chair, smiled, and said he had been testing Szulc and agreed with his answer. Kennedy said “he was under great pressure from advisors in the Intelligence Community (whom he did not name) to have Castro killed, but that he himself violently opposed it on the grounds that for moral reasons the United States should never be party to political assassinations.”

“I’m glad you feel the same way,” Kennedy told Szulc.¹⁴³

Richard Helms, however, did not feel the same way. Helms was known as “the man who kept the secrets,” the title of his biography.¹⁴⁴ He was a master of the possibilities beneath plausible deniability, exemplified by his command and control of the CIA’s plots to kill Castro. As Helms demonstrated in his Church Committee testimony, he and other CIA Cold War veterans thought they knew the president’s mind better than the president did himself. This assumed responsibility became a problem for the CIA and its Pentagon allies when President Kennedy acted with a mind of his own and decided to end the Cold War.

In the weeks leading up to his American University address, Kennedy prepared the ground carefully for the leap of peace he planned to take. He first joined British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan in proposing to Khrushchev new high-level talks on a test ban treaty. They suggested that Moscow be the site for the talks, itself an act of trust. Khrushchev accepted.

To reinforce the seriousness of the negotiations, Kennedy decided to suspend U.S. tests in the atmosphere unilaterally. Surrounded by Cold War advisers, he reached his decision independently—without their recommendations or consultation. He knew few would support him as he went out on that limb; others might cut it down before he could get there. He announced his unilateral initiative at American University, as a way of jump-starting the test-ban negotiations.

In both speech and action, Kennedy was trying to reverse eighteen years of U.S.–Soviet polarization. He had seen U.S. belligerence toward the Russians build to the point of Pentagon pressures for preemptive strikes on the Cuban missile sites. In his decision in the spring of 1963 to turn from a demonizing Cold War theology, Kennedy knew he had few allies within his own ruling circles.

He outlined his thoughts for what he called “the peace speech” to speechwriter Sorensen, and told him to go to work. Only a handful of advisers knew anything about the project. Arthur Schlesinger, who was one of them, said, “We were asked to send our best thoughts to Ted Sorensen and to say nothing about this to anybody.”¹⁴⁵ On the eve of the speech, Soviet officials and White House correspondents were alerted in general terms. The speech, they were informed, would be of major importance.¹⁴⁶

On June 10, 1963, President Kennedy introduced his subject to the graduating class at American University as “the most important topic on earth: world peace.”

“What kind of peace do I mean?” he asked, “What kind of peace do we seek?”

“Not a Pax Americana enforced on the world by American weapons of war. Not the peace of the grave or the security of the slave. I am talking about genuine peace, the kind of peace that makes life on earth worth living, the kind that enables men and nations to grow and to hope and to build a better life for their children—not merely peace for Americans but peace for all men and women—not merely peace in our time but peace for all time.”¹⁴⁷

Kennedy’s rejection of “a Pax Americana enforced on the world by American weapons of war” was an act of resistance to what President Eisenhower had identified in his Farewell Address as the military-industrial complex. “This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry,” Eisenhower had warned three days before Kennedy’s inauguration, “is new in the American experience. The total influence—economic, political, even spiritual—is felt in every city, every State house, every office of the Federal government . . .”

“In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.”¹⁴⁸

What Eisenhower in the final hours of his presidency revealed as the greatest threat to our democracy Kennedy in the midst of his presidency chose to resist. The military-industrial complex was totally dependent on “a Pax Americana enforced on the world by American weapons of war.” That Pax Americana policed by the Pentagon was considered the system’s indispensable, hugely profitable means of containing and defeating Communism. At great risk Kennedy was rejecting the foundation of the Cold War system.

In his introduction at American University, President Kennedy noted the standard objection to the view he was opening up: What about the Russians?

“Some say that it is useless to speak of world peace or world law or world government—and that it will be useless until the leaders of the Soviet Union adopt a more enlightened attitude. I hope they do. I believe we can help them do it.”

He then countered our own prejudice with what Schlesinger called “a sentence capable of revolutionizing the whole American view of the cold war”: “But I also believe that we must reexamine our own attitude—as individuals and as a Nation—for our attitude is as essential as theirs.”

Kennedy’s turn here corresponds to the Gospel insight: “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?” (Luke 6:41).

The nonviolent theme of the American University Address is that self-examination is the beginning of peace. Kennedy was proposing to the American University graduates (and the national audience behind them) that they unite this inner journey of peace with an outer journey that could transform the Cold War landscape.

“Every graduate of this school, every thoughtful citizen who despairs of war and wishes to bring peace, should begin by looking inward—by exam-

ining his own attitude toward the possibilities of peace, toward the Soviet Union, toward the course of the cold war and toward freedom and peace here at home.”

Thus ended Kennedy’s groundbreaking preamble, an exhortation to personal and national self-examination as the spiritually liberating way to overcome Cold War divisions and achieve “not merely peace in our time but peace for all time.” In his American University address, John Kennedy was proclaiming a way out of the Cold War and into a new human possibility.

One pawn in the Cold War who needed a way out before it was too late was a young ex-Marine, Lee Harvey Oswald.

In following Kennedy’s path through a series of critical conflicts, we have been moving more deeply into the question: Why was John F. Kennedy murdered? Now as we begin to trace Oswald’s path, which will converge with Kennedy’s, we can see the emergence of a strangely complementary question: Why was Lee Harvey Oswald so tolerated and supported by the government he betrayed?

On October 31, 1959, Lee Harvey Oswald, who had been discharged two months earlier from the U.S. Marine Corps in California, presented himself at the American Embassy in Moscow to Consul Richard E. Snyder. Oswald said his purpose in coming was to renounce his U.S. citizenship. He handed Snyder a note he had written, in which he requested that his citizenship be revoked and affirmed that “my allegiance is to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.”¹⁴⁹ According to the Warren Report, “Oswald stated to Snyder that he had voluntarily told Soviet officials that he would make known to them all information concerning the Marine Corps and his specialty therein, radar operation, as he possessed.”¹⁵⁰ To the Soviet officials who received his offer, Oswald said he “intimated that he might know something of special interest.”¹⁵¹

The Soviets had reason to think Oswald knew “something of special interest.” From September 1957 to November 1958 Oswald had been a Marine Corps radar operator at Atsugi Air Force Base in Japan. Atsugi, located about thirty-five miles southwest of Tokyo, served as the CIA’s main operational base in the Far East. It was one of two bases from which the CIA’s top-secret U-2 spy planes took off on their flights over the Soviet Union and China. The U-2 was the creation of the CIA’s Richard Bissell, also the main author of the Bay of Pigs scenario. Bissell worked closely on the U-2’s Soviet overflights with CIA director Allen Dulles. Radar operator Oswald was a small cog in the machine, but he was learning how it worked. From his radar control room at Atsugi, where he had a “crypto” clearance (higher than “top secret”), Oswald listened regularly to the U-2’s radio communications.¹⁵²

After Atsugi, Oswald was reassigned as a radar operator to Marine Air Control Squadron No. 9 in Santa Ana, California, which was attached to the larger Marine Air Station in El Toro. Oswald continued to have access

to secret information that would have been of interest to a Cold War enemy. Former Marine Corps Lieutenant John E. Donovan, who was Oswald's officer in the Santa Ana radar unit, testified to the Warren Commission that Oswald "had the access to the location of all bases in the west coast area, all radio frequencies for all squadrons, all tactical call signs, and the relative strength of all squadrons, number and type of aircraft in a squadron, who was the commanding officer, the authentication code of entering and exiting the ADIZ, which stands for Air Defense Identification Zone. He knew the range of our radar. He knew the range of our radio. And he knew the range of the surrounding units' radio and radar."¹⁵³

However, Donovan's knowledge of Oswald's connection to the top-secret U-2 was clearly off limits for his Warren Commission questioners. Their avoidance of the U-2 puzzled Donovan. Wasn't Oswald's possible access to top-secret U-2 information a critical issue to probe in relation to his defection? Donovan told author John Newman years later that, at the end of his testimony, he asked a Warren Commission lawyer, "Don't you want to know anything about the U-2?" The lawyer said, "We asked you exactly what we wanted to know from you and we asked you everything we wanted for now and that is all. And if there is anything else we want to ask you, we will." Donovan asked a fellow witness who also knew Oswald's U-2 connection, "Did they ask you about the U-2?" He said, "No, not a thing."¹⁵⁴

On May 1, 1960, six months after Oswald defected to the Soviet Union, a U-2 was shot down by the Soviets for the first time. The downing of the U-2, piloted by Francis Gary Powers, wrecked the Paris summit meeting between President Eisenhower and Premier Khrushchev. Gary Powers later raised the question whether his plane may not have been shot down as a result of information Oswald handed over to the Soviets.¹⁵⁵ Powers's question was at least reasonable. It reinforces the case that Oswald's volunteering all the information he had as a Marine radar specialist to the Soviets was an apparently criminal act.

Yet when Oswald returned to the U.S. Embassy in Moscow after working for over a year at a Soviet factory in Minsk, he was welcomed back by American officials with open arms. Not only did the United States make no move to prosecute him, but the embassy gave him a loan to return to the country he had betrayed.¹⁵⁶ The toleration of Oswald's apparent treason extended to his later obtaining a new passport overnight. On June 25, 1963, Oswald was miraculously issued a passport in New Orleans twenty-four hours after his application.¹⁵⁷ He identified his destination as the Soviet Union.¹⁵⁸

After analyzing this strange history in her classic work on the Warren Commission, *Accessories after the Fact*, Sylvia Meagher concluded: "Decision after decision, the [State] Department removed every obstacle before Oswald—a defector and would-be expatriate, self-declared enemy of his native country, self-proclaimed discloser of classified military information, and later self-appointed propagandist for Fidel Castro—on his path from Minsk to Dallas."¹⁵⁹

The process would, of course, be reversed in Dallas. There Oswald would be arrested and killed quickly, before he could say what he knew of the president's murder. In Dallas whatever light Oswald might cast on the assassination would be switched at once into darkness.

The Warren Commission dealt with the U.S. government's odd toleration of the apparently treasonous Oswald, first of all, by a selective reading of his history. When the authors of the *Warren Report* mentioned Oswald's work in the Marine Corps as a radar operator, they neglected to point out that the future defector had a "Crypto" clearance, which was higher than "Top Secret," and that his work immersed him in information about the CIA's super-secret U-2 flights.¹⁶⁰ By omitting such facts, the government's story was able to sidestep questions arising from Oswald's offer of U-2 information to the Soviet Union, his defection to that Cold War enemy, and his wondrous acceptance back into the good graces of the U.S. government.

According to the *Warren Report*, Lee Harvey Oswald had been a lone assassin in the making for years, "moved by an overriding hostility to his environment."¹⁶¹ In the government's story, Oswald became a defector to Russia, a Fair Play For Cuba Committee demonstrator in New Orleans, and a presidential assassin for psychological reasons: "He does not appear to have been able to establish meaningful relationships with other people. He was perpetually disconnected with the world around him. Long before the assassination he expressed his hatred for American society and acted in protest against it."¹⁶² The *Warren Report* portrayed Oswald as a young man alienated from society who then became an angry Marxist, abandoned his country, and killed its president. In the *Report's* conclusion on Oswald's motivation, the commission attributed his assassin's impulse to a megalomania tinged with Marxism: "He sought for himself a place in history—a role as the 'great man' who would be recognized as having been in advance of his times. His commitment to Marxism and communism appears to have been another important factor in his motivation."¹⁶³

If we turn from *Warren Report* psychology to Cold War history, why was the ex-Marine Lee Harvey Oswald not arrested and charged a year and a half before the assassination when he came back to the United States from the Soviet Union, where he had announced at the American Embassy in Moscow that he would hand over military secrets (about U-2 flights) to the Soviets? Whereas in Dallas Oswald would be arrested and murdered before we knew it, on his preceding odyssey as a traitor in and out of Russia and back to the United States he overcame government barriers with an almost supernatural ease. What was the secret of Oswald's immunity to prosecution for having criminally betrayed the United States at the height of the Cold War? How did this unrepentant enemy of his country merit treatment as a prodigal son, embraced by his government with financial help and preferential passport rulings while he continued to proclaim allegiance to the USSR and Cuba?

A solution to the mystery was suggested by former CIA agent Victor Mar-

chetti, who resigned from the Agency in disillusionment after being executive assistant to the Deputy Director. The CIA fought a legal battle to suppress Marchetti's book *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence*. In regard to Oswald, Marchetti told author Anthony Summers of a CIA-connected Naval intelligence program in 1959, the same year Oswald defected to the USSR: "At the time, in 1959, the United States was having real difficulty in acquiring information out of the Soviet Union; the technical systems had, of course, not developed to the point that they are at today, and we were resorting to all sorts of activities. One of these activities was an ONI [Office of Naval Intelligence] program which involved three dozen, maybe forty, young men who were made to appear disenchanting, poor American youths who had become turned off and wanted to see what communism was all about. Some of these people lasted only a few weeks. They were sent into the Soviet Union, or into eastern Europe, with the specific intention the Soviets would pick them up and 'double' them if they suspected them of being U.S. agents, or recruit them as KGB agents. They were trained at various naval installations both here and abroad, but the operation was being run out of Nag's Head, North Carolina."¹⁶⁴

The counterintelligence program described by Marchetti dovetails with the Oswald story. It provides an explanation for the U.S. government's indulgence of his behavior. That Oswald was in fact a participant in such a program was the belief of James Botelho, his former roommate in Santa Ana. Botelho, who later became a California judge, stated in an interview with Mark Lane that Oswald's Communism was a pose. Botelho said: "I'm very conservative now [in 1978] and I was at least as conservative at that time. Oswald was not a Communist or a Marxist. If he was I would have taken violent action against him and so would many of the other Marines in the unit."¹⁶⁵

Judge Botelho said Oswald's "defection" was nothing but a U.S. intelligence ploy: "I knew Oswald was not a Communist and was, in fact, anti-Soviet. Then, when no real investigation occurred at the base [after Oswald's presence in the Soviet Union was made public], I was sure that Oswald was on an intelligence assignment in Russia . . . Two civilians dropped in [at Santa Ana], asked a few questions, took no written statements, and recorded no interviews with witnesses. It was the most casual of investigations. It was a cover-investigation so that it could be said there had been an investigation . . . Oswald, it was said, was the only Marine ever to defect from his country to another country, a Communist country, during peacetime. That was a major event. When the Marine Corps and American intelligence decided not to probe the reasons for the 'defection,' I knew then what I know now: Oswald was on an assignment in Russia for American intelligence."¹⁶⁶

As we continue to reflect on John Kennedy's vision at American University, which sought a way of peace, we can foresee the falling stars of lives that would be brought down with the death of that vision. Among them would be Lee Harvey Oswald, a young man on assignment in Russia for American

intelligence. Oswald's trajectory, which would end up meeting Kennedy's in Dallas, was guided not by the heavens or fate or even, as the *Warren Report* would have it, by a disturbed psyche. Oswald was guided by intelligence handlers. Lee Harvey Oswald was a pawn in the game. He was a minor piece in the deadly game Kennedy wanted to end. Oswald was being moved square by square across a giant board stretching from Atsugi to Moscow to Minsk to Dallas. For the sake of victory in the Cold War, the hands moving Oswald were prepared to sacrifice him and any other piece on the board. However, there was one player, John Kennedy, who no longer believed in the game and was threatening to turn over the board.

Self-examination, Kennedy said at American University, was the foundation of peace. In that speech he asked Americans to examine four basic attitudes in ourselves that were critical obstacles to peace.

"First: Let us examine our attitude toward peace itself. Too many of us think it is impossible. Too many think it unreal. But that is a dangerous, defeatist belief. It leads to the conclusion that war is inevitable—that mankind is doomed—that we are gripped by forces we cannot control."

I remember well the United States' warring spirit when President Kennedy said those words. Our deeply rooted prejudice, cultivated by years of propaganda, was that peace with Communists was impossible. The dogmas in our Cold War catechism ruled out peace with the enemy: You can't trust the Russians. Communism could undermine the very nature of freedom. One had to fight fire with fire against such an enemy. In the nuclear age, that meant being prepared to destroy the world to save it from Communism. Sophisticated analysts called it "the nuclear dilemma."

With the acceptance of such attitudes, despair of peace was a given. Thomas Merton wrote of this Cold War mentality: "The great danger is that under the pressures of anxiety and fear, the alternation of crisis and relaxation and new crisis, the people of the world will come to accept gradually the idea of war, the idea of submission to total power, and the abdication of reason, spirit and individual conscience. The great peril of the cold war is the progressive deadening of conscience."¹⁶⁷ As Kennedy observed, in such an atmosphere peace seemed impossible, as in fact it was, unless underlying attitudes changed. But how to change them?

Kennedy suggested a step-by-step way out of our despair. It corresponded in the world of diplomacy to what Gandhi had called "experiments in truth." Kennedy said we could overcome despair by focusing "on a series of concrete actions and effective agreements which are in the interest of all concerned." In spite of our warring ideologies, peace could become visible again by our acting in response to particular, concrete problems that stood in its way.

As JFK was learning himself from his intense dialogue with Khrushchev, the practice of seeking peace through definable goals drew one irresistibly deeper. Violent ideologies then fell away in the process of realizing peace.

“Peace need not be impracticable, and war need not be inevitable,” he said in reference to his own experience. “By defining our goal more clearly, by making it seem more manageable and less remote, we can help all peoples to see it, to draw hope from it, and to move irresistibly toward it.”

The second point in Kennedy’s theme was that self-examination was needed with respect to our opponent: “Let us examine our attitude toward the Soviet Union.” We needed to examine the root cause of our despair, namely, our attitude toward our enemy.

Kennedy cited anti-American propaganda from a Soviet military text and observed, “It is sad to read these Soviet statements—to realize the extent of the gulf between us.”

Then with his listeners’ defenses down, he brought the theme of self-examination home again: “But it is also a warning—a warning to the American people not to fall into the same trap as the Soviets, not to see only a distorted and desperate view of the other side, not to see conflict as inevitable, accommodation as impossible, and communication as nothing more than an exchange of threats.”

It was a summary of our own Cold War perspective. The key question was not: What about the Russians? It was rather: What about our own attitude that can’t get beyond “What about the Russians”? The point was again not the speck in our neighbor’s eye but the log in our own.

Kennedy’s next sentence was a nonviolent distinction between a system and its people: “No government or social system is so evil that its people must be considered as lacking in virtue.” With these words President John Kennedy was echoing a theme of Pope John XXIII’s papal encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (“Peace on Earth”), published two months earlier on April 11, 1963.

In response to the threat of nuclear war, Pope John had issued his hopeful letter to the world just before he took leave of it. He died of cancer one week before Kennedy’s speech. In *Pacem in Terris* Pope John drew a careful distinction between “false philosophical teachings regarding the nature, origin and destiny of the universe and of humanity” and “historical movements that have economic, social, cultural or political ends, . . . even when these movements have originated from those teachings and have drawn and still draw inspiration therefrom.” Pope John said that while such teachings remained the same, the movements arising from them underwent changes “of a profound nature.”¹⁶⁸

The pope then struck down what seemed at the time to be insurmountable barriers to dialogue and collaboration with a militantly atheist opponent: “Who can deny that those movements, insofar as they conform to the dictates of right reason and are interpreters of the lawful aspirations of the human person, contain elements that are positive and deserving of approval?

“It can happen, then, that meetings for the attainment of some practical end, which formerly were deemed inopportune or unproductive, might now or in the future be considered opportune and useful.”¹⁶⁹

The pope’s actions were ahead of his words. He was already in friendly

communication with Nikita Khrushchev, sending him appeals for peace and religious freedom. His unofficial emissary to the Soviet premier, Norman Cousins, had delivered a Russian translation of *Pacem in Terris* personally to Khrushchev, even before the encyclical was issued to the rest of the world.¹⁷⁰ Khrushchev displayed proudly to Communist Party co-workers the papal medallion that Pope John had sent him.¹⁷¹

John Kennedy took heart from the elder John's faith that peace was made possible through such trust and communication with an enemy. Kennedy knew from Cousins the details of his meetings with Khrushchev on behalf of Pope John. Kennedy sent along with Cousins backdoor messages of his own to the Soviet premier, as Cousins describes in his book *The Improbable Triumvirate: John F. Kennedy, Pope John, Nikita Khrushchev*. Something was going on here behind the scenes of Christian-Communist conflict that was breathtaking in the then-dominant context of Armageddon theologies.

So it was natural for John Kennedy to speak at American University with empathy about the suffering of the Soviet Union. "No nation in the history of battle ever suffered more than the Soviet Union suffered in the course of the Second World War," he said. "At least 20 million lost their lives. Countless millions of homes and farms were burned or sacked. A third of the nation's territory, including nearly two thirds of its industrial base, was turned into a wasteland—a loss equivalent to the devastation of this country east of Chicago."

The suffering that the Russian people had already experienced was Kennedy's backdrop for addressing the evil of nuclear war, as it would affect simultaneously the U.S., the U.S.S.R., and the rest of the world: "All we have built, all we have worked for, would be destroyed in the first 24 hours."

"In short," he said, "both the United States and its allies, and the Soviet Union and its allies, have a mutually deep interest in a just and genuine peace and in halting the arms race." He added, in an ironic play on Woodrow Wilson's slogan for entering World War I: "If we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity."

John Kennedy, portrayed by unsympathetic writers as a man with few feelings, had broken through to the feelings of our Cold War enemy, not only the ruler Nikita Khrushchev but an entire people decimated in World War II. What *about* the Russians? Kennedy's answer was that when we felt the enemy's pain, peace was not only possible. It was necessary. It was as necessary as the life of one's own family, seen truly for the first time. The vision that John F. Kennedy had been given was radically simple: Our side and their side were the same side.

"For, in the final analysis," Kennedy said, summing up his vision of interdependence, "our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal."

If we could accept such compassion for the enemy, Kennedy's third, most crucial appeal for self-examination could become more possible for his Amer-

ican audience. “Third: Let us reexamine our attitude toward the cold war, remembering that we are not engaged in a debate, seeking to pile up debating points.”

When the missile crisis was resolved, the president stringently avoided, and ordered his staff to avoid, any talk of victory or defeat concerning Khrushchev. The only victory was avoiding war. Yet for Khrushchev’s critics in the Communist world who could tolerate no retreat from the capitalist enemy, the Soviet premier had suffered a humiliating defeat. For that reason alone, Kennedy believed, there must never be another missile crisis, for it would only repeat pressures for terrible choices that had very nearly resulted in total war.

“Above all, while defending our own vital interests, nuclear powers must avert those confrontations which bring an adversary to a choice of either a humiliating retreat or a nuclear war. To adopt that kind of course in the nuclear age would be evidence only of the bankruptcy of our policy—or of a collective death-wish for the world.”

Kennedy moved on to concrete steps, already in progress, toward realizing his vision of world peace. He announced first the decision made by Macmillan, Khrushchev, and himself to hold discussions in Moscow on a test ban treaty. He then proclaimed his unilateral initiative, a suspension of atmospheric tests, with the explicit hope that it would foster trust with the enemy:

“To make clear our good faith and solemn convictions on the matter [of a comprehensive test ban treaty], I now declare that the United States does not propose to conduct nuclear tests in the atmosphere so long as other states do not do so. We will not be the first to resume.”

For those who knew the strength of will behind Kennedy’s vision, there was something either inspiring or threatening in his next statement of “our primary long-range interest”: “general and complete disarmament—designed to take place by stages, permitting parallel political developments to build the new institutions of peace which would take the place of arms.” As we shall see, Kennedy meant what he said, and U.S. intelligence agencies knew it. So did the corporate power brokers who had clashed with him the year before in the steel crisis, an overlooked chapter in the Kennedy presidency that we will explore. The military-industrial complex did not receive his swords-into-plowshares vision as good news.

In the fourth and final section of his plea for self-examination, JFK appealed to his American audience to examine the quality of life within our own borders: “Let us examine our attitude toward peace and freedom here at home . . . In too many of our cities today, the peace is not secure because freedom is incomplete.”

He would say more on this subject the following night in his groundbreaking civil rights speech. On the day after President Kennedy spoke at American University, Alabama governor George Wallace let the president’s will prevail and backed away from blocking a door at the University of Alabama, allowing two black students to register. That night in a televised

address to the nation, Kennedy described the suffering of black Americans under racism with a strength of feeling that recalled his compassion the day before for the Russian people in World War II:

“The Negro baby born in America today, regardless of the section of the Nation in which he is born, has about one-half as much chance of completing a high school as a white baby born in the same place on the same day, one-third as much chance of completing college, one-third as much chance of becoming a professional man, twice as much chance of becoming unemployed, about one-seventh as much chance of earning \$10,000 a year, a life expectancy which is 7 years shorter, and the prospects of earning only half as much.

“We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution.”¹⁷²

In his American University address, after Kennedy identified “peace and freedom here at home” as a critical dimension of world peace, he went on to identify peace itself as a fundamental human right: “And is not peace, in the last analysis, basically a matter of human rights—the right to live out our lives without fear of devastation—the right to breathe air as nature provided it—the right of future generations to a healthy existence?”

Kennedy concluded his “peace speech” with a promise whose beginning fulfillment in the next five months would confirm his own death sentence: “Confident and unafraid, we labor on—not toward a strategy of annihilation but toward a strategy of peace.”

John Kennedy’s greatest statement of his turn toward peace was his American University address. In an ironic turn of events, the Soviet Union became its principal venue. JFK’s identification with the Russian people’s suffering penetrated their government’s defenses far more effectively than any missile could have. Sorensen described the speech’s impact on the other side of the Cold War:

“The full text of the speech was published in the Soviet press. Still more striking was the fact that it was heard as well as read throughout the U.S.S.R. After fifteen years of almost uninterrupted jamming of Western broadcasts, by means of a network of over three thousand transmitters and at an annual cost of several hundred million dollars, the Soviets jammed only one paragraph of the speech when relayed by the Voice of America in Russian (that dealing with their ‘baseless’ claims of U.S. aims)—then did not jam any of it upon rebroadcast—and then suddenly stopped jamming all Western broadcasts, including even Russian-language newscasts on foreign affairs. Equally suddenly they agreed in Vienna to the principle of inspection by the International Atomic Energy Agency to make certain that Agency’s reactors were used for peaceful purposes. And equally suddenly the outlook for some kind of test-ban agreement turned from hopeless to hopeful.”¹⁷³

Nikita Khrushchev was deeply moved. He told test-ban negotiator Averell Harriman that Kennedy had given “the greatest speech by any American President since Roosevelt.”¹⁷⁴ Khrushchev responded by proposing to

Kennedy that they now consider a limited test ban encompassing the atmosphere, outer space, and water, so that the disputed question of inspections would no longer arise. He also suggested a nonaggression pact between NATO and the Warsaw Pact to create a “fresh international climate.”¹⁷⁵

Kennedy’s speech was received less favorably in his own country. The *New York Times* reported his government’s skepticism: “Generally there was not much optimism in official Washington that the President’s conciliation address at American University would produce agreement on a test ban treaty or anything else.”¹⁷⁶ In contrast to the Soviet media, which were electrified by the speech, the U.S. media ignored or downplayed it. For the first time Americans had less opportunity to read and hear their president’s words than did the Russian people. A turnabout was occurring in the world on different levels. Whereas nuclear disarmament had suddenly become feasible, Kennedy’s position in his own government had become precarious. Kennedy was turning faster than was safe for a Cold War leader.

After the American University address, John Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev began to act like competitors in peace. They were both turning. However, Kennedy’s rejection of Cold War politics was considered treasonous by forces in his own government. In that context, which Kennedy knew well, the American University address was a profile in courage with lethal consequences. President Kennedy’s June 10, 1963, call for an end to the Cold War, five and one-half months before his assassination, anticipates Dr. King’s courage in his April 4, 1967, Riverside Church address calling for an end to the Vietnam War, exactly one year before his assassination. Each of those transforming speeches was a prophetic statement provoking the reward a prophet traditionally receives. John Kennedy’s American University address was to his death in Dallas as Martin Luther King’s Riverside Church address was to his death in Memphis.

On June 13, 1962, Lee Harvey Oswald returned to the United States after his defection to the Soviet Union. He was not met by arrest and prosecution. Nor was he confronted in any way by the government he had betrayed. Instead Oswald was welcomed by order of the U.S. government, as he and his Russian wife Marina disembarked with their infant daughter June from the ocean liner *Maasdam* in Hoboken, New Jersey. The *Warren Report* tells us that, on the recommendation of the State Department, the Oswalds were greeted at the dock by Spas T. Raikin, a representative of the Traveler’s Aid Society.¹⁷⁷ The *Warren Report* does not mention, however, that Raikin was at the same time secretary-general of the American Friends of the Anti-Bolshevik Nations, an anti-communist organization with extensive intelligence connections¹⁷⁸—like the American government, an unlikely source of support for a traitor. The *Warren Report* does say that, with Spas T. Raikin’s help, the Oswald family passed smoothly through immigration and customs.

In the summer of 1962 the Oswalds settled in Fort Worth, Texas. They

were welcomed by a local White Russian community characterized by its pronounced anti-communist view of the world. Lee was befriended by George de Mohrenschildt, the son of a czarist official. “The Baron,” as he liked to be called, traveled around the world as a geologist, consulting for Texas oil companies and doubling as an intelligence asset. In 1957 the CIA’s Richard Helms wrote a memo saying that de Mohrenschildt, after making a trip as a consultant in Yugoslavia, provided the CIA with “foreign intelligence which was promptly disseminated to other federal agencies in 10 separate reports.”¹⁷⁹ De Mohrenschildt would admit in a 1977 interview that he had been given a go-ahead to meet Oswald by J. Walton Moore, the Dallas CIA Domestic Contacts Service chief.¹⁸⁰

In that March 29, 1977, interview, the last he would ever give, George de Mohrenschildt told author Edward Jay Epstein he had “on occasion done favors” since the early 1950s for government officials connected with the CIA. It was a mutually beneficial relationship. The CIA contacts then helped de Mohrenschildt arrange profitable business connections overseas.

De Mohrenschildt said that in late 1961 he had met in Dallas with the CIA’s J. Walton Moore, who began to tell him about “an ex-American Marine who had worked in an electronics factory in Minsk for the past year and in whom there was ‘interest.’”¹⁸¹ The Baron had grown up in Minsk, as Moore seemed to know before being told. The ex-Marine, Moore said, would be returning to the Dallas area. De Mohrenschildt felt he was being primed.

In the summer of 1962, de Mohrenschildt said, he was handed Lee Harvey Oswald’s address in Fort Worth by “one of Moore’s associates,” who suggested that de Mohrenschildt meet Oswald. De Mohrenschildt then phoned Moore to confirm such a mission and set up another mutually beneficial relationship. He told Moore he would appreciate help from the U.S. embassy in Haiti in arranging approval by Haitian dictator “Papa Doc” Duvalier for an oil exploration deal. Moore then gave de Mohrenschildt the go-ahead to befriend the Oswalds, which de Mohrenschildt promptly did—with the firm understanding that he was carrying out the CIA’s wishes. “I would never have contacted Oswald in a million years if Moore had not sanctioned it,” de Mohrenschildt said in his final interview. “Too much was at stake.”¹⁸²

On October 7, 1962, nine days before the Cuban Missile Crisis began, de Mohrenschildt urged his new friend Lee Harvey Oswald to move to Dallas, where more of the Russian immigrants lived. Oswald took him so seriously that the next day he quit his job at a Fort Worth welding company and made the move.¹⁸³ De Mohrenschildt then became Oswald’s mentor in Dallas. The Baron’s wife and daughter said it was he who organized Oswald’s securing a new job, four days after his move, with a Dallas graphic arts company, Jaggars-Chiles-Stovall.¹⁸⁴ The official record is that Louise Latham of the Texas Employment Commission sent Oswald to the firm. Author Henry Hurt interviewed Ms. Latham, who denied that de Mohrenschildt got the job for Oswald.¹⁸⁵

Whoever was responsible for Oswald's immediate hiring, it was a remarkable achievement. Jaggars-Chiles-Stovall, described by the Warren Commission simply as "a commercial advertising photography firm,"¹⁸⁶ had contracts with the U.S. Army Map Service. Its classified work connected with Oswald's history as an apparent traitor. From interviews with Jaggars-Chiles-Stovall employees, Hurt concluded, "Part of the work appears to have been related to the top secret U-2 missions, some of which were then making flights over Cuba."¹⁸⁷ Four days before President Kennedy was shown U-2 photos that confirmed Soviet missiles in Cuba, Lee Harvey Oswald reported to work at a defense contractor that was apparently involved in logistics support for the U-2 mission. According to Oswald's co-workers, some of them were setting type for Cuban place names to go on maps¹⁸⁸—probably for the same spy planes whose radar secrets the ex-Marine had already offered to the Soviet Union. Oswald was once again, through the intervention of undercover angels, defying the normal laws of government security barriers.

As it turned out, in mid-March 1963 George de Mohrenschildt did receive a Haitian government contract for \$285,000.¹⁸⁹ In April he left Dallas, and in May he met in Washington, D.C., with CIA and U.S. Army intelligence contacts to further his Haitian connections.¹⁹⁰ De Mohrenschildt then departed for Haiti. He never saw Oswald again.

None of George de Mohrenschildt's extensive U.S. intelligence connections are mentioned in the *Warren Report*, which describes him vaguely as "a highly individualistic person of varied interests" who befriended Oswald.¹⁹¹ Relying on U.S. intelligence for its questions and answers, the *Report* concludes concerning George and his wife, Jeanne de Mohrenschildt: "Neither the FBI, CIA, nor any witness contacted by the Commission has provided any information linking the de Mohrenschildts to subversive or extremist organizations."¹⁹²

New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison in his investigation of the Kennedy assassination asked a different kind of question about George de Mohrenschildt. Garrison identified de Mohrenschildt as one of Oswald's CIA "baby-sitters," "assigned to protect or otherwise see to the general welfare of a particular individual."¹⁹³ Garrison concluded from his conversations with George and Jeanne de Mohrenschildt that the Baron was in some sense an unwitting baby-sitter, without foreknowledge of what was in store for the "baby" in his custody. Both de Mohrenschildts, Garrison said, were vigorous in their insistence to him that Oswald had been the assassination scapegoat.¹⁹⁴

On March 29, 1977, three hours after his revelation of the CIA's sanctioning his contact with Oswald, George de Mohrenschildt was found shot to death in the house where he was staying in Manalapan, Florida. His death also occurred on the day Gaeton Fonzi, an investigator for the House Select Committee on Assassinations, left his card with de Mohrenschildt's daughter and told her he would be calling her father that evening for an appointment to question him. Soon after de Mohrenschildt took the card and put it

in his pocket, he went upstairs, then apparently put the barrel of a .20-gauge shotgun in his mouth and pulled the trigger.¹⁹⁵

Though he had been Oswald's CIA-approved shepherd in Dallas, George de Mohrenschildt had no "need to know," and thus probably no understanding in advance of the scapegoat role that lay ahead for his young friend. In the years after John Kennedy and Lee Oswald were gunned down, the de Mohrenschildts seemed to grow in remorse for the evil in which they had become enmeshed. Jim Garrison said, "I was particularly affected by the depth of their unhappiness at what had been done not only to John Kennedy but to Lee Oswald as well."¹⁹⁶ George de Mohrenschildt was another casualty of Dallas. Like Oswald, he, too, was a pawn in the game.

President Kennedy's fourth Bay of Pigs toward the coup d'état he saw as possible was the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty that he and Nikita Khrushchev signed.

In the months before his American University address, Kennedy had become increasingly pessimistic about achieving a test ban. Domestic opposition was rising. Liberal Republican governor Nelson Rockefeller of New York denounced the idea of a test ban. Senate Republican leader Everett Dirksen said of Kennedy's efforts to gain one, "This has become an exercise not in negotiation but in give-away." The Joint Chiefs of Staff declared themselves "opposed to a comprehensive ban under almost any terms."¹⁹⁷

In Geneva the U.S.–Soviet negotiations were at a deadlock over the question of on-site inspections. Meanwhile, the Atomic Energy Commission was pushing Kennedy to schedule another series of atmospheric tests. The U.S. Congress had similar views. Kennedy supporter Senator John O. Pastore of Rhode Island, chairman of the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, wrote the president that even if the current U.S. test ban proposal were accepted by the Soviets, "on the basis of informal discussions with other Senate leaders I am afraid that ratification of such a treaty could only be obtained with the greatest difficulty." Moreover, Pastore added, "I personally have reservations as to whether such a treaty would be in the best interests of the United States at this time."¹⁹⁸

At his March 21, 1963, news conference, the president was asked if he still had hopes of arriving at a test-ban agreement. He replied doggedly, "Well, my hopes are dimmed, but nevertheless, I still hope."¹⁹⁹ Only three weeks before the American University address, he answered another test-ban question with even less optimism, "No, I'm not hopeful, I'm not hopeful . . . We have tried to get an agreement [with the Soviets] on all the rest of it and then come to the question of the number of inspections, but we were unable to get that. So I would say I am not hopeful at all."²⁰⁰

He felt, nevertheless, the time to push for a treaty was right then: "I have said from the beginning that [it] seemed to me that the pace of events was such in the world that unless we could get an agreement now, I would think

the chance of getting it would be comparatively slight. We are therefore going to continue to push very hard in May and June in every forum to see if we can get an agreement.”²⁰¹

So while not hopeful, Kennedy was more determined than ever to turn the corner on a test ban treaty. It was then, on June 10, that he launched the peace initiative of his American University address, which broke through Soviet defenses. In response, Khrushchev made preparations to welcome the U.S. test-ban negotiators to Moscow. Kennedy saw the moment was ripe for at least a partial test ban, bypassing the negotiators' impasse on inspections. At this point Glenn T. Seaborg, chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, noted in his journal that whereas JFK had been dedicated to a test ban since the beginning of his presidency, “Now, he decided to *really go for it!*”²⁰²

He did so at a personal cost. As we have seen, the response to the American University address was much warmer on the Soviet side than the American. The Joint Chiefs and CIA were adamantly opposed to Kennedy's turn toward peace. Cold War influences so dominated the U.S. Congress that the president felt getting Senate ratification of a test ban agreement would be “almost in the nature of a miracle,” as he described the task to advisers.²⁰³ That process, miraculous or not, was engineered humanly by a president committed at all costs to seeing it accomplished.

Kennedy named Averell Harriman, former ambassador to the U.S.S.R., his top negotiator in the Moscow talks. Known as a tough bargainer, Harriman was liked and respected by the Russians. They saw his appointment as a sign of the president's seriousness in wanting a test-ban agreement.

Kennedy personally prepared the negotiators. He emphasized the importance of their mission—perhaps a last chance to stop the spread of testing and radioactive fallout. If they were successful, it would mean a concrete step toward mutual trust with the Russians. In both literal and symbolic senses, they stood to achieve a more peaceful atmosphere in the world.²⁰⁴ Their head negotiator would be, in effect, not Harriman but the president himself. He would stay in regular communication with them from Washington. He underlined confidentiality. No one outside a tight circle of officials personally approved by him was to know any of the details.²⁰⁵

During the negotiations, Kennedy spent hours in the cramped White House Situation Room, editing the U.S. position as if he were at the Moscow table himself. Soviet ambassador Anatoli Dobrynin was astounded at the president's command of every stage of the process. “Harriman would just get on the phone with Kennedy,” he said, “and things would be decided. It was amazing.”²⁰⁶

On July 25, 1963, when the final text was ready, Harriman phoned Kennedy and read it to him twice. The president said, “Okay, great!” Harriman returned to the conference room and initialed the Limited Test Ban Treaty, outlawing nuclear tests “in the atmosphere, beyond its limits, including outer space, or under water, including territorial waters or high seas.”²⁰⁷

The next night President Kennedy made a television appeal to the nation

for support of the test ban treaty. Against the advice of Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Kennedy had decided to take the issue of ratification immediately to the people. He wanted to do everything he could to turn public opinion around as quickly as possible. “We’ve got to hit the country while the country’s hot,” he told Rusk, “That’s the only thing that makes any impression to these god-damned Senators . . . They’ll move as the country moves.”²⁰⁸

In his speech Kennedy said, “This treaty is not the millennium . . . But it is an important first step—a step toward peace—a step toward reason—a step away from war.”²⁰⁹

As in the American University address, he opened up a vision beyond the Cold War, that of an era of mutual peacemaking. “Nuclear test ban negotiations have long been a symbol of East-West disagreement.” Perhaps “this treaty can also be a symbol—if it can symbolize the end of one era and the beginning of another—if both sides can by this treaty gain confidence and experience in peaceful collaboration.”

He reiterated the consequences of a nuclear war: “A full-scale nuclear exchange, lasting less than 60 minutes, with the weapons now in existence, could wipe out more than 300 million Americans, Europeans, and Russians, as well as untold numbers elsewhere.” He quoted Chairman Khrushchev: “The survivors would envy the dead.”

Besides helping to prevent war, he said, the test ban treaty “can be a step towards freeing the world from the fears and dangers of radioactive fallout.” He called to mind “the number of children and grandchildren with cancer in their bones, with leukemia in their blood, or with poison in their lungs . . . this is not a natural health hazard—and it is not a statistical issue. The loss of even one human life, or the malformation of even one baby—who may be born long after we are gone—should be of concern to us all. Our children and grandchildren are not merely statistics toward which we can be indifferent.”

Kennedy’s sense of the vulnerability of children was again the force behind some of his most deeply felt words: “[This treaty] is particularly for our children and our grandchildren, and they have no lobby here in Washington.”

After reminding his listeners of “the familiar places of danger and conflict”—Cuba, Southeast Asia, Berlin, and all around the globe—he concluded with the expression of a deep hope, less than four months before his assassination:

“But now, for the first time in many years, the path of peace may be open. No one can be certain what the future will bring. No one can say whether the time has come for an easing of the struggle. But history and our own conscience will judge us harsher if we do not now make every effort to test our hopes by action, and this is the place to begin. According to the ancient Chinese proverb, ‘A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step.’

“My fellow Americans, let us take that first step. Let us, if we can, step back from the shadows of war and seek out the way of peace. And if that

journey is a thousand miles, or even more, let history record that we, in this land, at this time, took the first step.”

Kennedy was fiercely determined but not optimistic that the test ban treaty would be ratified by the defense-conscious Senate. It was on August 7, 1963, that he made his comment to advisers that a near-miracle was needed. He said that if a Senate vote were held right then it would fall far short of the necessary two-thirds.²¹⁰ Larry O'Brien, his liaison aide with the Congress, confirmed the accuracy of the president's estimate. Congressional mail was running about fifteen to one against a test ban.²¹¹

Kennedy initiated a whirlwind public education campaign on the treaty, coordinated by Norman Cousins. The president told an August 7 meeting of key organizers that they were taking on a very tough job and had his total support. Led by Cousins and calling themselves the Citizens Committee, the group mounted a national campaign for Senate ratification. The National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, which had been formed in 1958 to dramatize the dangers of nuclear testing, played a key role in the campaign. Kennedy and Cousins also successfully sought help from the National Council of Churches, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, Catholic Archbishop John Wright of Pittsburgh and Cardinal Richard Cushing of Boston, union leaders, sympathetic business executives, leading scientists and academics, Nobel Laureates, and, at a special meeting with the president, the editors of the nation's leading women's magazines, who gave their enthusiastic support. As the campaign grew, public opinion began to shift. By the end of August, the tide of congressional mail had gone from fifteen to one against a test ban to three to two against. The president and his committee of activists hoped that in a month public opinion would be on their side.

In the meantime, they were bucking the military-industrial complex, which had become alarmed at the president's sudden turn toward peace and his alliance with peace activists in support of the test ban. The August 5, 1963, *U.S. News and World Report* carried a major article headlined, “Is U.S. Giving up in the Arms Race?” The article cited “many authorities in the military establishment, who now are silenced,” as thinking that the Kennedy administration's “new strategy adds up to a type of intentional and one-sided disarmament.”²¹²

The alarm was sounded even more loudly in the August 12 *U.S. News* with an article headlined, “If Peace Does Come—What Happens to Business?” The article began:

“This question once again is being raised: If peace does come, what happens to business? Will the bottom drop out if defense spending is cut?

“There is a lull in the cold war. Before the U.S. Senate is a treaty calling for an end to testing of nuclear weapons in the air or under water. A nonaggression agreement is being proposed by Russia's Khrushchev.

“Talk of peace is catching on. Before shouting, however, it is important to bear some other things in mind.”

U.S. News went on to reassure its readers that defense spending would be

sustained by such Cold War factors as Cuba remaining “a Russian base, occupied by Russian troops” and “the guerrilla war in South Vietnam” where “the Red Chinese, in an ugly mood, are capable of starting a big war in Asia at any time.”²¹³

However, an insider could have asked, what would it mean to defense contractors if Kennedy extended his peacemaking to Cuba and Vietnam?

The president’s peacemaking had moved beyond any effective military control or even monitoring. In the test-ban talks, the military weren’t in the loop. Kennedy had made a quick end run around them to negotiate the treaty. As JFK biographer Richard Reeves observed, “By moving so swiftly on the Moscow negotiations, Kennedy politically outflanked his own military on the most important military question of the time.”²¹⁴

Kennedy pointed out to Cousins that he and Khrushchev had come to have more in common with each other than either had with his own military establishment: “One of the ironic things about this entire situation is that Mr. Khrushchev and I occupy approximately the same political positions inside our governments. He would like to prevent a nuclear war but is under severe pressure from his hard-line crowd, which interprets every move in that direction as appeasement. I’ve got similar problems.”²¹⁵

Almost four decades later, Nikita Khrushchev’s son Sergei would provide a wistful footnote to John Kennedy’s political empathy with his father. On February 4, 2001, Sergei Khrushchev, by then a senior fellow in international studies at Brown University, in the course of commenting on the film *Thirteen Days* (a dramatization of the Cuban Missile Crisis), wrote in *The New York Times*:

“A great deal changed after the [missile] crisis: A direct communication link between Moscow and Washington was established, nuclear testing (except for underground tests) was banned, and the confrontation over Berlin was ended.

“But there was much that President Kennedy and my father did not succeed in seeing through to the end. I am convinced that if history had allowed them another six years, they would have brought the cold war to a close before the end of the 1960’s. I say this with good reason, because in 1963 my father made an official announcement to a session of the U.S.S.R. Defense Council that he intended to sharply reduce Soviet armed forces from 2.5 million men to half a million and to stop the production of tanks and other offensive weapons.

“He thought that 200 to 300 intercontinental nuclear missiles made an attack on the Soviet Union impossible, while the money freed up by reducing the size of the army would be put to better use in agriculture and housing construction.

“But fate decreed otherwise, and the window of opportunity, barely cracked open, closed at once. In 1963 President Kennedy was killed, and a year later, in October 1964, my father was removed from power. The cold war continued for another quarter of a century . . .”²¹⁶

Kennedy finally obtained the support of the Joint Chiefs for the test ban treaty, although Air Force chief LeMay said he would have opposed it had it not already been signed.²¹⁷ Strategic Air Command general Thomas Power denounced the treaty.²¹⁸ Other military leaders testified against the test ban. Admiral Lewis Strauss said, “I am not sure that the reduction of tensions is necessarily a good thing.” Admiral Arthur Radford, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs, said, “I join with many of my former colleagues in expressing deep concern for our future security . . . The decision of the Senate of the United States in connection with this treaty will change the course of world history.”²¹⁹

The Citizens Committee continued its campaign in support of the test ban. In September public opinion polls showed a turnaround—80 percent in favor of the treaty. The Senate vote on ratification was held on September 24, 1963. The Senate approved the test ban treaty by a vote of 80 to 19—14 more than the required two-thirds. Sorensen noted that no other single accomplishment in the White House gave the president greater satisfaction.²²⁰

Before he initiated his all-out campaign for approval of the test ban, Kennedy told his staff that the treaty was the most serious congressional issue he had faced. He was, he said, determined to win if it cost him the 1964 election.²²¹ He did win. But did it cost him his life?