

**Theodore C. Sorensen Oral History Interview – JFK #2, 4/6/1964**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Theodore C. Sorensen  
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**Biographical Note**

Sorensen was staff assistant, speech writer to Senator John F. Kennedy (1953-1961) and Special Counsel to the President (1961-1964). This interview focuses on the Bay of Pigs Invasion, staffing changes, the Vienna meeting with Khrushchev, the Berlin Wall, National Security Council members, and the Cuban Missile Crisis, among other issues.

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page 7, lines 9-14  
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page 41, lines 7-18  
page 57, lines 8-26  
page 99, lines 6-33  
page 100, lines 1-21  
page 110, lines 26-30

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page 2, lines 8-19  
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Theodore C. Sorensen

Theodore Sorensen

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Theodore C. Sorensen  
JFK #2

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Second Oral History Interview

with

THEODORE C. SORENSEN

April 6, 1964

By Carl Kaysen

For the John F. Kennedy Library

SORENSEN: In the only conversation I had with the President [John F. Kennedy] concerning the Bay of Pigs operation shortly before its occurrence, I expressed concern about the rumors I had heard of American participation. I was not then attending NSC [National Security Council] meetings. "I know," he replied with some irritation, "that everyone is worrying about getting hurt (he used a more vulgar term)." Then he went on to indicate that he felt it was impossible now to release the army which had been built up and have them spreading word of his action or inaction through the country. The next I knew about it was after the invasion had taken place and failed, and the President decided to make Cuba the subject of his remarks to the American Society of Newspaper Editors.

KAYSEN: Before we get to that, which I do want to ask you about, you were not involved in the night watch that went on the night after this operation, in fact for more than twenty-four hours during the course of this operation?

SORENSEN: I was not.

KAYSEN: Now, did you draft the remarks that the President made to the Society of Newspaper Editors?

SORENSEN: Yes, I had basic responsibility. There were many assistants.

KAYSEN: Did you get some initial instructions or suggestions from the President about what it was he wanted to convey? How did this work?

SORESEN: The President was having a very difficult day, seeing a great many people, trying to shore up the damage, trying to maintain national unity, and trying to find out what went wrong. I talked with him briefly. I talked with the Attorney General [Robert F. Kennedy]. We talked in turn with Mr. Dulles [Allen W. Dulles] and with the Joint Chiefs as to what the actual situation was on the island. That night, which I believe was the night of April 20, assuming the speech was on the 21<sup>st</sup>, I worked on initial draft material. The Secretary of State and Ambassador Bohlen [Charles E. Bohlen] and possibly others came over to assist in that process. And the President, who had been at a dinner – for the Prime Minister of Greece, I believe – came in, and we all sat around and worked on the draft. Then, when the group left, I worked on their changes and additions and amendments. I called over to the President to see if he had gone to sleep yet, to ask him about a particular point, and found that he had not gone over to the mansion but was in his office. We discussed it further in his office at the time, and then the speech was written pretty much during that night.

KAYSEN: From what you know, at what point in this process, the process of the invasion not the process of talking about the speech, did the President make the crucial decision that if it wasn't going to work as planned, he was not going to get American military force directly involved?

SORENSEN: I don't know.

KAYSEN: Did you ever discuss that point with him afterwards?

SORESEN: No. I know that he made the comment on more than one occasion that there was never any air cover planned, but I do not know at what point he made particular decisions.

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KAYSEN: Was there ever any occasion in the two years after this in which you discussed with the President or heard him reflect on the question of the alternatives before him as soon as it became clear that the invasion was not going to succeed?

SORENSEN: No, in the day or two or three following, he would from time to time make some reference to what he felt had been the manner in which he had been misled. He indicated that he had been told it was all to be small, quiet, clandestine operation and then found it was highly publicized in our own press and by all of the refugee groups involved. He had been given the impression, he said, that if the invasion

did not lead to an uprising among the Cuban people, the invading force would be able to go into the mountains and operate there as a continuing guerrilla force to harass the Castro regime, and that proved to be logistically impossible. But that's not really the same as far as alternatives of American participation, and I don't recall that he ever indicated that any such alternatives were presented to him.

KAYSEN: My own impression, derived mainly from reading the press, is that the country, in a broad sense, viewed a set of alternatives which were, one, doing what we diddo, two, participating directly through providing air cover, naval fire and other means in seeing that the invasion was a success. To your knowledge, the second of these alternatives never was really considered as an alternative by the President?

SORENSEN: Since it obviously was an alternative, I don't doubt that it was considered. I simply don't know the timing or the circumstances under which it was considered.

KAYSEN: And you don't know whether the President ever attached any serious weight to it as an alternative or whether he dismissed it as obviously something he didn't want to do?

SORENSEN: I think in a sense that that decision was made prior to the invasion by the flat statement made at the press conference, which I had helped to draft,

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which I thought at the time was a correct statement of policy and for that reason was glad to have stated it as strongly and flatly as I could.

KAYSEN: You would interpret the statements that the President made on a number of occasions after this operation, that is was a mistake, in which he said very strongly and clearly that it was a mistake, and "I'm the one who was responsible for it," as meaning that it was a mistake to have started, not that it was mistake to have continued in the way that we, in fact, did and not to have seized the alternative of direct U.S. military action?

SORENSEN: I do not believe he ever regretted his refusal to intervene militarily with direct United States action. He did regard the whole affair as a fiasco, as a black mark against him and his administration and his country. On the other hand, I think he had mixed feelings about the philosophy of the undertaking as a whole. He felt, on the one hand, that it was a bad way to proceed and a wrong way to go about setting things right in Cuba. On the other hand, he also felt that, had the invasion succeeded without direct United States military intervention, it would have been hailed as a great move, both in this country and throughout Latin America. So, in that sense, what was a great mistake was in failing to do it successfully.

KAYSEN: Did the President ever express the view or did he ever express any view on the proposition that he had created by this operation a political problem for himself which would not otherwise have existed, that the Cuban problem that was a problem until, certainly until the 1962 missile crisis, and perhaps became a different kind of a problem after that, was a problem which he had created for himself?

SORENSEN: I don't recall him discussing it in those terms. Certainly he was very much aware of the fact that Cuba was a political problem for him and that the failure at the Bay of Pigs would always be used by his opponents to exploit that problem.

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KAYSEN: What's your own judgment on that? If by good fortune, or whatever other means, we had never undertaken the operation, it had been squashed instead of executed, do you think yourself that Cuba would have died down as a political problem?

SORENSEN: No. But I don't believe that it would have been raised to quite the same intensity.

KAYSEN: But would it be your feeling that it was there and, therefore, the opposition would find it useful?

SORENSEN: I think the opposition would have talked about Cuba regardless, just as they did after the President's victory in the missile crisis, and just as he did prior to his taking office.

KAYSEN: Of course, the Bay of Pigs operation did mean in political terms that from being an Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] liability, it became a Kennedy liability?

SORENSEN: Much more so, that's correct.

KAYSEN: While I want to return to this a little later, to what extent did the President view the October 22<sup>nd</sup> crisis as a natural consequence of the Bay of Pigs operation?

SORENSEN: How do you mean?

KAYSEN: Well, let me put it this way. An argument which has been made in the European press quite widely is that the Bay of Pigs events led Castro [Fidel A. Castro Ruz] to Khrushchev [Nikita S. Khrushchev] very strongly for means of defense, and it was Castro's pressure on Khrushchev which, at least initially, led

to the sequence of decisions which had their issue in October 1962.

SORENSEN: Well, I now see the connection, but it jumps a series of steps to which the Bay of Pigs contributed, but for which the Bay of Pigs was not solely responsible. The Bay of Pigs, as I indicated, helped intensify Cuba as a political issue in this country. Cuba, as a political

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issue in this country, helped lead to a great deal of war hawk talk in the Congress and elsewhere. The war hawk talk in the Congress and elsewhere may well have helped influence Castro's plea to the Soviet Union for some bold means of defense, and that request may, in turn, have been one of the reasons that the missiles were sent to Cuba. But I think it stretches the point too far to say that the missile crisis, therefore, was the logical result of the Bay of Pigs crisis, and I never heard the President express that point of view.

KAYSEN: Well, perhaps that's the important point. Whether it was an argument which is reasonable or not, it was not an argument which figured in President Kennedy's mind to your knowledge?

SORENSEN: That's correct.

KAYSEN: Before we leave the Bay of Pigs, let's discuss a little of the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs. To what extent would you say that the President's attitudes toward both his military advisors and the intelligence people for the rest of his administration were shaped by this event?

SORENSEN: Very much so. And he said to me on at least two different occasions that had it not been for the Bay of Pigs, we would have been deeply involved in a war in Southeast Asia. And he was, therefore, glad for the experience and lesson which it had taught him.

KAYSEN: Do you want to elaborate on this for a little. Does this mean that he would have followed recommendations from the military which he thinks would have led to a war but.... Is that the line?

SORENSEN: I think, basically, yes. I'm just reading into that a little bit without quoting him. I think that after the Bay of Pigs, he conducted national security operations in a different way. He was more skeptical of the recommendations which came to him from the experts. He challenged their assumptions, their premises, even their facts. He made certain that everyone went on a written record of exactly where they stood so that they would be thoughtful in their

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recommendations. He inquired not only as to the results of their recommendations but the consequences which we could expect from those results, counter-consequences from those consequences, and so on. So that in every way, after the Bay of Pigs he approached this kind of situation in a more precise and knowledgeable fashion and kept the control of the decision making more tightly within his own hands.

KAYSEN: Was the decision to appoint General Taylor [Maxwell D. Taylor] as an advisor directly responsible to him and a liaison officer with the military who would be answerable to him a consequence of the Bay of Pigs?

SORENSEN: Yes.

KAYSEN: When, how soon did this idea take shape?

SORENSEN: Immediately after the Bay of Pigs he asked for a special inquiry into what had gone wrong, as you will recall. The Attorney General and General Taylor were, in effect, the outside members of that panel.

KAYSEN: So this was before General Taylor, in fact, came into the government.

SORENSEN: That's correct. At the same time, both he and the Attorney General inquired into how the decision making process should be reshaped in the White House, what roles each individual and institution should have. A combination of both studies and the Attorney General's and President's excellent impression of General Taylor resulted in his appointment to a White House staff position.

KAYSEN: Just to follow up on this a little...

SORENSEN: In addition, of course, the President did not have confidence in the Joint Chiefs of Staff at that time.

KAYSEN: Just to follow up a little, on General Taylor, had the President known General Taylor when he chose him for this first responsibility, or how had he been called to his attention?

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SORENSEN: I don't believe he knew him. He knew of him, was aware of his views and role when General Taylor had been in the Pentagon during the Eisenhower years, and had had, I believe, as a Senator quoted General Taylor both in opposing the reductions in the Army budget in 1954 and in his speech about the gap in our military preparedness in 1958. In addition, probably having read General Taylor's book, he had been interested in obtaining General Taylor for a position in the administration for some time.

KAYSEN: On the Chiefs, you say this shook his confidence quite strongly in the Chiefs and made him very skeptical of their recommendations. Did he express at that time any determination to change the composition of the Chiefs, and if so, did he direct his observations to any particular member of this group?

SORENSEN: He did not say so to me.

KAYSEN: And to follow this up a little, were you ever involved in any of the conversations which the President had with the Secretary of Defense or others about the appointments of officers to the position of the Chiefs of Staff of their respective services?

SORENSEN: The only one I can now recall was the President's comment at the time that Congressman Vinson [Carl Vinson] introduced a bill to make a four year term mandatory for all the members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The President indicated that, based on his own experience, he was strongly opposed to such a bill, would veto it if passed, and believed that any President should have as wide a flexibility as possible in the selection of his military advisors.

KAYSEN: Again, to follow this up a bit, would you say that in the event, what the President did for the rest of his term was more to rely on these checks to the decision making process that you've described rather than to try, by using his appointive power, to remedy the situation directly?

SORENSEN: Of course, in time, his appointive power effected quite a change in the personnel of those involved in the Bay of Pigs operation, both in the Joint

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Chief of Staff and in the CIA.

KAYSEN: Yes, that's true. And if we look at the end of the President's term, only one of the initial set of Chiefs of Staff remained as Chief of Staff.

SORENSEN: Shoup [David M. Shoup], whom he liked.

KAYSEN: Did Shoup make any individual comment on the operation? You don't know?

SORENSEN: I have no idea.

KAYSEN: Was the change in the high command of the CIA directly a consequence of the Bay of Pigs?

SORENSEN: I don't know. I would assume that in the case of Dick Bissell [Richard M.

Bissell, Jr.], it was directly the consequence. The President liked Bissell and respected his ability, but felt that it was impossible to keep him in that position after such a major fiasco. He liked Dulles also. But he felt that the Bay of Pigs was additional proof of the fact that the time had come for a change.

KAYSEN: Are you aware of any individual attention paid to General Cabell [Charles P. Cabell] who was Dulles's deputy?

SORENSEN: No. There was no attention paid to General Cabell at any time. One additional thing about Dulles. The President told me of Dulles' saying to him, "Mr. President, I know you're doubtful about this, but I stood at this very desk and said to President Eisenhower about a similar operation in Guatemala, 'I believe it will work.' And I say to you now, Mr. President, that the prospects for this plan are even better than our prospects were in Guatemala."

KAYSEN: That's an interesting observation, Ted. Remembering the President, I think that's the best argument anybody could have made. Would you agree?

SORENSEN: Argument could have made for the....

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KAYSEN: For the plan. "I made one just like it and it worked."

SORENSEN: That's right.

KAYSEN: Did you ever hear the President refer to this situation after the event? Was it after the event that you heard this comment?

SORENSEN: Yes. [Laughter]

KAYSEN: What else did the President say?

SORENSEN: I don't think he needed to say anything else. I think this was a very few days afterwards that he told me that.

KAYSEN: I see, no editorial comment was needed. When's the last time that you heard the President refer to the Bay of Pigs.

SORENSEN: I don't recall that it came up in any substantive sort of way. From time to time, there would be a new flap in the press about it. The Attorney General made a statement in a *U.S. News and World Report* interview which aroused press and congressional ire. Then another time there was a story about whether four Alabama national guardsmen had been flying in the Bay of Pigs operation, and that aroused another storm. That kind of thing would come up from time to time, and we usually would

discuss it in the meetings that we had prior to the presidential press conferences. But those were really fringe matters, and I don't recall any central discussion of the issue at all in recent years.

KAYSEN: In accepting the whole responsibility for the failure of the operation, which the President did in the public statement very shortly afterward, what were the considerations that he had in mind in making that statement at the time?

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SORENSEN: He didn't spell them out to me, but I believe that there were several. One was his concept of the President taking responsibility for failures as well as successes and preventing the blame from falling on the shoulders of his subordinates. Secondly, he took the responsibility to put an end to constant squabbling within the administration as to who took what position. Third, he took responsibility, I believe, because he was anxious to maintain national unity in the wake of such a fiasco, which otherwise could have led to the most bitter kind of partisan debate and attack. It is more difficult to attack a man who manfully says, "It was my fault." This desire for national unity, as you will recall, also led him to consult with General Eisenhower, Mr. Nixon [Richard M. Nixon], Mr. Hoover [Herbert C. Hoover], General MacArthur [Douglas A. MacArthur], Mr. Truman [Harry S. Truman], and other national leaders.

One other story that is important in this respect: The President suggested to me a few days after the invasion had failed that I hold a background press conference to get some of the facts on what had taken place in perspective. I would say, in retrospect, that that was a mistake because I had not known enough about the facts and the original plans, and did not have enough firsthand knowledge to hold that kind of press conference. Nevertheless, I went ahead and did it. And one of the stories which came out of that, attributed through a misunderstanding to a White House source, was, in effect, that the basic idea of the plan had originated in the previous administration. While this was largely true, the President felt this would set off a partisan debate if the Republicans felt that the White House was trying to pin the blame on them. Added to that was the fact that the story came out at the time that he was meeting with President Eisenhower at Camp David. So he was very upset about that, and we did what we could to retract the statement. He was then angry, you may recall, at Secretary Udall [Stewart L. Udall] for making the same statement on television a short time later.

KAYSEN: There are perhaps a few other questions one might ask about this for tidiness. It's clear, and you talked about the President's response to the kind of advice he got from the military and from the CIA. Did you get any reflections of his judgment of other advice from other

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advisors involved in this matter? The State Department, his own staff people, and the like?

SORENSEN: I do not recall him making any statement on that.

KAYSEN: And finally, at any time in the postmortem discussion was there any reference to the possibility that the Soviets might have intervened if we had exerted military force directly, or that the Soviets might have reacted, if not there, elsewhere, if we had exerted military force directly?

SORENSEN: I have a vague impression that there are public statements by the President which make a general reference to that fact, the importance of considering Cuba in the context of all our world responsibility, but I do not recall any special statement made on that.

KAYSEN: Maybe, we ought to check on this, Ted, but my own impression is that those statements which were frequent...

[BEGIN SIDE II, TAPE II]

KAYSEN: Well, I think perhaps that covers the Bay of Pigs pretty well from your point of view. Let's move on to the next great foreign policy crisis in our relations with the Soviet Union, and that's the Vienna meeting with Khrushchev. You were along at that meeting, weren't you?

SORENSEN: I was on the trip, yes.

KAYSEN: Had there been a great deal of preparatory work in the White House and at the State Department prior to the trip in which you took part?

SORENSEN: There had been a great deal of preparatory work. My own participation was marginal. I talked briefly with those whom I thought might have some helpful suggestions, including a friend of mine who had served as

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Khrushchev's interpreter on his trip to this country. I looked at a good many of the papers which had been prepared and requested by the President in preparation for the trip. I read the minutes of the Camp David meeting between Eisenhower and Khrushchev. In Paris, where the President spoke to de Gaulle [Charles A. de Gaulle] before traveling to Vienna to see Khrushchev, the final afternoon was spent in a long discussion with Rusk [Dean Rusk], Thompson [Llewellyn E. Thompson, Jr.], Bohlen, Kohler [Foy D. Kohler], Bundy [McGeorge Bundy], and other experts in preparation for the meeting. Other papers were prepared which the President studied on the plane going from Paris to Vienna the next day. So I was in on some of these, but I was not a key participant.

KAYSEN: What was the general mood in which the President and his advisors went to this meeting? What did they expect?

SORENSEN: I don't believe the President had very much more in mind than opening, or strengthening, the channels of communication between himself and Khrushchev.

He had no ambitious plans on what the meeting would accomplish, or any objectives to be secured, or any concessions he would wring out of Khrushchev. It simply was a fact that they were toe to toe in a great many specific areas and likely to be on a good many other, yet they had never met. They controlled, in a very real sense, the future of the world between them, and it was logical that they should meet instead of the President relying on what others told him about Khrushchev.

KAYSEN: Had the President had any direct communication with Khrushchev before this meeting?

SORENSEN: I do not know.

KAYSEN: None that you are aware of?

SORENSEN: None that I'm aware of.

KAYSEN: And in particular you are not aware of the existence of any letters directly from one to the other, such as you are aware of at a later stage.

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SORENSEN: That's correct. I think probably I would have been aware had there been any.

KAYSEN: Had the President seen Ambassador Thompson at any time before the period of preparation for this meeting? Between February or late January and June had Ambassador Thompson been in Washington? Had he had any reports from him or discussions with him about this event to your knowledge?

SORENSEN: I just can't remember. I have a vague impression that Thompson was there at one time.

KAYSEN: Now, did you see the President each day during the course of this couple of days of meetings in Vienna?

SORENSEN: I saw very little of him, if I saw him at all, while the meetings were actually going on. I'm sure I saw him a little, but not really to talk to him. I saw him before, and I saw him after.

KAYSEN: When you first heard any explicit expression of his reaction, did he express surprise or pain or disappointment in the toughness of

Khrushchev's stance? Did he, on the contrary, suggest that this was what he had expected, or give any reaction in that connection?

SORENSEN: He expressed concern over two things: first, over the likelihood of the crisis deepening, particularly over Berlin; and secondly, over Khrushchev's apparent inability to understand the United States and what it really was like, what it really wanted.

KAYSEN: Expand on that second point because that's an interesting point. In what sense did the President feel Khrushchev couldn't understand what the United States wanted?

SORENSEN: I think he felt that Khrushchev, to a surprising degree for a man who was obviously well read in American periodicals and official statements, believed much of the communist folklore about Wall Street running

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the government, the Americans trying to achieve espionage under the guise of disarmament, and so on. And as the President said in his speech reporting on the Vienna meeting to the American people, he found that Khrushchev and he simply had different meanings of war and peace and freedom.

KAYSEN: Now the immediate consequence of Vienna meetings was a set of decisions about increasing our ready military power, especially in the Army. Was there a great deal of discussion before these decisions were reached, or did they seem to the President just obviously necessary?

SORENSEN: There was a great deal of discussion. Khrushchev had given the President an aide-memoire on Berlin which indicated his intention to sign a peace treaty with East Germany. I believe it was a later speech of Khrushchev's in which he indicated that he intended to do this by the end of the year. Consequently, the President knew we would be faced with a difficult situation in Berlin, and there was a great deal of planning as to what should be done: first of all, as to how the aide-memoire should be answered; secondly, as to what negotiating position should be developed; third, as to what our response should be in military and related efforts.

KAYSEN: The military decision actually was made within a relatively short time, the decision to call up reserves.

SORENSEN: No. I suppose it depends on what you mean by relatively short. The President returned from this trip to Europe in the first week of June, and he reported to the nation his decisions on the military and other steps in the last week of July. Even then he asked for, in effect, a standby authority to call up reserve and national guard divisions, and then did not actually exercise the authority until September,

as I recall.

KAYSEN: But the crucial step was really to ask for this authority...

SORENSEN: Yes, that was the crucial step, but that was...

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KAYSEN: Less than two months.

SORENSEN: Less than two months.

KAYSEN: Yes. I'd like to pursue the two questions. Let me pursue this a little more. In the light of the contingencies you suggested, this seemed a kind of inevitable measure, that we might be faced with a situation in which we needed more armed force on the ground. Was this view more in terms of its effect in showing our determination or more in terms of the creation of usable military force?

SORENSEN: I don't think the two are distinguishable in this situation. The reasoning was, I believe, that a usable military force of some size would have a deterrent effect because whatever was going to happen to us in Berlin would initially happen through the use of conventional forces on the part of the Communists. We did not want to be faced with a fait accompli, we did not want to be faced with an action which East Germans alone would be able to execute, we did not want to be faced with a route so devastating that our bargaining position would be impossible. At the same time, by putting more conventional forces in for all of those useful purposes, we would be making an investment of men and honor so great that we would be required to take whatever means were necessary to protect them so that the Communists would know we meant business.

KAYSEN: Was the decision to increase our conventional forces one in which there was much debate and divided counsel, or is it one in which recommendations were fairly uniform?

SORENSEN: I'm sure the documents would show the answer to this. My best recollection is that within the councils of the United States government, there was general agreement that our conventional forces should be increased. The allies were always suspicious of our emphasis on conventional forces.

KAYSEN: And showed themselves so at this time even though it was in relation to a Berlin crisis...

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SORENSEN: For different reasons. The French and Germans because they felt it meant a de-emphasis of nuclear forces, the British because they were afraid it

meant a worsening of the crisis in Berlin which they were not as anxious to fight about. Within the United States government, as I recall, the biggest debate was over whether to declare a national emergency.

KAYSEN: But how much of this debate was, so to speak, technical and turned on the question of what you could and couldn't do in declaring a national emergency, and how much of it was political and turned on the question of the psychological value of declaring of a national emergency?

SORENSEN: I think it started out on the former and ended up on the latter.

KAYSEN: And the...

SORENSEN: Some of those who initially advocated a national emergency felt that that was the only way by which enough troops could be quickly raised. But I think it ended up...

KAYSEN: What was the lineup on this kind of argument?

SORENSEN: Dean Acheson had been called in as a special consultant. He had written a very logical and tightly reasoned paper on the Berlin crisis and what our response should be. He advocated the national emergency declaration among a great many other things. He was initially supported, as I recall, by almost everyone inside the government. I do remember that Secretary McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] in the initial stages supported him. As I say, one of the reasons at that time was the necessity of using that kind of proclamation as a means of raising enough troops. The argument then went more onto the psychological grounds – between those who felt that this was the right psychology for the country, the allies, the Soviets, and those who felt that it was the wrong psychology.

When it was finally decided by the President, in a small private meeting, that we would ask Congress for the special authority to call up troops without declaring a nation emergency

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with all that involved, Mr. McNamara had come over to that point of view; and in the formal National Security Council meeting, where the recommendation was presented and was somewhat strongly and acidly questioned by Mr. Acheson, Secretary McNamara was the best advocate of the view which he had only recently adopted himself.

KAYSEN: And in the earlier discussion, the President himself, did he express himself only toward the end, or did he express himself early on?

SORENSEN: On the national emergency question?

KAYSEN: On the national emergency question and on the psychological-political question?

SORENSEN: I don't recall him expressing himself in the early stage of the national emergency question. If I had to guess, I would guess that he probably leaned toward it in the early stage but was uncertain and skeptical and wanted to have the best formulation of policy possible. And that was hammered together in a series of meetings almost daily until the policy which finally emerged was very much his. It certainly had a large psychological and political element in it, including his address to the country, his work with the allies and the Congress, the increase in troops and so on. It did not include a declaration of national emergency.

KAYSEN: Before the President made the decision, who were the people, and what kind of views did they offer against declaring a national emergency. I mean, what was the other side of the story?

SORENSEN: Basically, as I recall – and unfortunately my memory is dim on all of this – it was felt that this was an alarm bell which could only be rung once. Yet everything we needed in terms of military and related measures, and allied cooperation, could be obtained without ringing this bell, and ringing it may only convince the Soviets, as well as our own citizens, of our panic, for it was what we actually did that would convince them of our determination, not what we said.

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KAYSEN: Was that your own view?

SORENSEN: Yes, very much so. Obviously that is coloring my recollection of what others were saying.

KAYSEN: Did the Secretary of State have a view on this?

SORENSEN: No. I recall the President saying he did not know what the Secretary of State's view was.

KAYSEN: Now, I want to turn back for a minute to the other part of the problem, which was not so much what we did, but what the allies did, and what the consequences of the signing by the Soviets of a treaty with the East Germans would be, because this was after all the initial contingency toward which our thoughts were pointed. Would it be fair to say that the meeting in Vienna was the first occasion for the President to undertake a serious review of the situation in Berlin and our position in Berlin?

SORENSEN: I believe that's right.

KAYSEN: Was the question of the consequences of the so-called treaty discussed in advance of the Vienna meeting? This must have been included in the contingency papers, but was there much discussion of this point?

SORENSEN: There may have been. I don't recall that as much as I recall the emphasis on what our basic rights were in Berlin that could not be yielded under any circumstances, presumably including a treaty.

KAYSEN: And in this respect, on the basic rights, are you aware of any change in our position over the whole of the administration on that issue?

SORENSEN: No.

KAYSEN: After Berlin, or after Vienna I mean, and during the course of the discussions which followed, did this question of the review of Berlin contingency planning, so called, come very much to the fore, what we would do under this or that hypothetical circumstance?

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SORENSEN: Yes.

KAYSEN: And in that discussion to what extent did the issue come before the President of papers, passes, formal authority, and at what point we would consider our rights to be violated?

SORENSEN: I don't know. I did not take part in the discussion of the military side of the Berlin question. I do know that the President was deeply involved in those discussions, and that he felt the contingency plans were inadequate, incomplete, out-of-date, and inconsistent with allied forces which were available and equipped. But I do not know any specifics.

KAYSEN: Did you ever at this time – let me say, at this time, before the Berlin wall was put up, did you ever hear any expression on the President's part of his view about the proposition of whether we were going to fight about pieces of paper or not? A shorthand phrase, which I think you'll recognize, describing the more elaborate situation of the question of whether we would accept the East Germans as agents of the Soviets, what we'd be willing to let the East Germans do and so on.

SORENSEN: I don't remember.

KAYSEN: Did you ever hear at the same period any expression of view by the President on German, French – well, really German and French – views on this whole range of matters?

SORENSEN: Not on the military side of it. He did express concern over the length of time it took to get any German or French approval of a diplomatic position.

KAYSEN: But I was really raising the question of what, at least in the first instance, was a diplomatic question. The question of what actions, if any, short of blocking access, we would view as violating our rights in Berlin.

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SORENSEN: Well, I agree that's diplomatic. I meant diplomatic in the broad sense of possible negotiating positions for a change in the situation. And I'm certain that his concern over the delays, the intransigence of the Germans and French, and the leaks to the press which often seemed to come from German and French sources, also covered the kind of contingencies which you've been discussing, as well as the diplomatic negotiating position.

KAYSEN: If you had to choose, and this is kind of an artificial choice, between two extreme positions of reaction from Vienna – one of which would be, this shows we can't expect to have any useful negotiations about Berlin; and the other of which would be, it's clear from this that we'd better reexamine our negotiating positions and see whether there is a negotiation we can have – which do you think more nearly describes the President's reaction?

SORENSEN: The latter.

KAYSEN: What specifically did the President feel should be done in the way of reexamining negotiating positions?

SORENSEN: What do you mean, what should be done?

KAYSEN: Well, let me ask a very leading question. Would it be fair to say that this experience convinced the President that our negotiating position and our military strength were out of line? And that we had to move on both sides?

SORENSEN: Yes.

KAYSEN: Did you ever hear the President discuss Acheson's views in respect to these matters? I think it's fair to characterize Acheson's views as: we should increase our military strength and not change our negotiating position.

SORENSEN: That's correct.

KAYSEN: Did the President ever specifically discuss Acheson's views with you?

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SORENSEN: I do not now recall such discussions. It was clear from the President's own action that he did not share them. He was looking for a new negotiating position.

KAYSEN: Did he express, or indicate by action, any lack of confidence in the ability or willingness of the State Department to produce a new negotiating position?

SORENSEN: Yes.

KAYSEN: What? Elaborate on that. [Laughter]

SORENSEN: I recall him expressing considerable dismay at the State Department's draft of the reply to the original Soviet aide-memoire. He felt that that reply, by confining itself to all of the old clichés, would not convince the Soviets, would not strengthen our posture in the eyes of the rest of the world, and would not lessen the crisis by developing any new areas of negotiation. He also expressed dismay, as I've indicated, at the inability to get the French and Germans to agree with any new approaches. When new approaches were developed, oftentimes on White House initiative, he was sometime doubtful whether the State Department would be sufficiently vigorous in analyzing and pursuing those proposals, in developing them, and then in taking them up either with our allies or with the Soviet Union.

KAYSEN: Just trying to get the time sequence a little. All this was reasonably clear in the period after the Vienna meeting, and that first summer.

SORENSEN: That's right.

KAYSEN: I think perhaps the next important event we ought to go to is the Wall [Berlin Wall]. That was August 13<sup>th</sup>. Did the President feel there was again an intelligence failure in connection with it?

SORENSEN: I don't know. Unfortunately, I was out of town that week so I can't tell you much about the Wall.

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KAYSEN: Did the President ever express the view to your knowledge that the Wall really simplified the dealing with the German problem?

SORENSEN: Not to my knowledge.

KAYSEN: Did you ever hear him comment on several columns that Walter Lippmann wrote to this effect, that having the Wall was a necessary prerequisite of that degree of stabilization which would permit discussion?

SORENSEN: I can't recall.

KAYSEN: Do you have any impression at all that the building of the Wall and wide public anger which was a response to it made the President feel differently about the German situation than he had felt in the six weeks between, two months, Vienna and this event?

SORENSEN: No.

KAYSEN: In general, how seriously did he take the criticism of the opposition, that this represented a defeat for the United States?

SORENSEN: It depends what you mean by seriously. He may have regarded it as a possible political issue, but I don't believe he ever regretted not having taken the Wall down by military action at the time it was erected. His press conference statements on one or two occasions to that effect repeated what he had said privately.

KAYSEN: Namely?

SORENSEN: Namely, that it was simply another in a long series of violations taking place on East German and East Berlin territory, and that it did not interfere with our three basic rights which we had been emphasizing during those weeks as being the rights we would take military action to defend. Had we torn it down, and the Germans had then built another one 100 yards back, or 500 yards back, or a mile back, we sooner or later would have been involved militarily in East Germany...

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[BEGIN TAPE III, SIDE I]

KAYSEN: We've just been talking about the problems of developing a negotiating position on Berlin and the President's response to these problems. To what extent would you say that over the whole two year period, the President felt he was repeating the experiences of the first months, just immediately before and after the Vienna meeting, in dealing with his government, his allies, and the Soviets, on Berlin?

SORENSEN: I can't answer for the President. My own judgment is that he was doing exactly that. Meetings would take place between Kennedy and Khrushchev, between Kennedy and Gromyko [Andrei A. Gromyko], between Rusk and Gromyko, between Rusk and Dobrynin [Anatoly F. Dobrynin], between

Thompson and Khrushchev, between Thompson and Gromyko. They went up and down, back and forth. There were letters. There were positions. There were threats. But nothing really changed. The same is true of our relations with our allies and our relations with the State Department.

KAYSEN: But you say you didn't ever hear the President himself express it in just such direct terms? When the President appointed General Clay [Lucius D. Clay], had he already familiarized himself with the kinds of problems he might expect in Clay as a man on the scene?

SORENSEN: Apparently not.

KAYSEN: So he was somewhat surprised at the first series of alarms and alarming messages he got from his representative in Berlin?

SORENSEN: As far as I know, that's correct. Of course, these two questions are related: the maintenance of the status quo in Berlin and the appointment of General Clay. Because most of the predictions were that the status quo would not be maintained, the morale of Berliners would sink, industry would be frightened out of the city, laborers would refuse to live there, and thus the Wall and Khrushchev's threat

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would really have done indirectly what a peace treaty would have done directly. So, in effect, the President, merely to maintain the status quo, had to keep moving on a rather active basis. One of the steps which he took to do that was the appointment of General Clay, in whom the people of West Berlin did have great confidence

KAYSEN: But did the President himself worry as to whether General Clay was too aggressive and might step over the boundary line of maintaining the status quo?

SORENSEN: I have a general impression that he did without being able to cite any specifics. I think he felt that General Clay was inclined to see things only from the local Berlin point of view and not from the global or Washington point of view, that he was inclined to be somewhat of an alarmist, and that he was inclined to be more militant. I couldn't cite any specific examples. I was not on the other end of the many messages received from General Clay expressing his various feelings.

KAYSEN: Did you ever hear the President directly, or did you know of this indirectly, expressing himself on the question of why the West Germans were not willing to recognize the division of Germany? Especially in this period, or any time before he went to Berlin, went to Germany?

SORENSEN: Again, it depends on what you mean by recognize. I think he felt they

ought to be more realistic in accepting a fact which could not and would not be changed by force, and was unlikely to be changed very soon by any other means. On the other hand, I think he had a genuine sympathy for their feeling that the division of their country was unnatural and unjust and should not be assumed to be permanent.

KAYSEN: Well perhaps this gets into a degree of detail which is sort of not your own, wasn't your own concern, Ted. To what extent did you ever hear the President express himself on such particular issues as the Oder-Neisse line, or the willingness of the Germans to hold discussions of particular types with representatives of East Germany – the various

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diplomatic technicalities that were involved in the so-called Berlin issue?

SORENSEN: I don't believe the President had any strong moral conviction about those issues. He was trying to find a negotiating position which would protect the freedom of West Berlin, maintain our rights there, and not be regarded by the Germans as something which had sold them out. He spoke of these issues which you mentioned, such as the Oder-Neisse line, in that context rather than in any context of where the line ought to be from the point of view of justice or geography.

KAYSEN: So that the constraint he was most mindful of in this connection was what will the Germans accept?

SORENSEN: Yes.

KAYSEN: Just to leap ahead in time, to what extent did the President, on his own trip to Germany, to Berlin, change his emphasis or feelings about this situation?

SORENSEN: We never really discussed it in those terms after he came back from Berlin because the Berlin issue was not a particularly hot one in the year after the Cuban crisis. There were incidents on the Autobahn, but there was no general pressure against the city or in favor of a peace treaty. Again, speaking more for myself than imputing it to the President, I'd say that a visit to West Berlin does change one's concept of the problem. You think of it no longer in terms of a small, isolated city; instead it is a major, large, populated industrial area which can't simply be moved or abandoned with the ease that some people have suggested.

KAYSEN: This does raise another question in my mind. Had the President, in the summer immediately after Vienna, listened to many people, to your knowledge, outside the government who had ideas about what to do about Berlin?

SORENSEN: Well, of course, as was already mentioned, he consulted Acheson. At one stage, he talked, I know, to John McCloy. There was a sense in which he was consulting with Clay.

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KAYSEN: But you might say all these people were representative of the traditional party line that we'd had maintained. Did he make any effort to seek out advice from people who had a different view and who were trying actively to press for change in the allies' position, looking for terms which we could accept which might be more acceptable to the Soviets?

SORENSEN: Such as whom? He didn't call Fred Warner Neal or James P. Warburg to the White House.

KAYSEN: Well, did he talk to any of his European friends on this kind of issue, Jean Monet?

SORENSEN: I don't know. I haven't reviewed my own records as yet, but there were all kinds of plans raised up and knocked down during the course of these two years, particularly in the course of the first year. There were a variety of views expressed on all of them by people outside the government.

KAYSEN: Yes, I'm aware of some of the views I myself expressed, and you may be, too.

SORENSEN: No I don't think so.

KAYSEN: Yes, I wrote a twenty page.... Do you recall anything of what Mr. McCloy had to say in this area?

SORENSEN: No, I don't. I recall the President wanting McCloy to consider a negotiating position which had been raised which, I believe, we were considering asking McCloy to help sell the Germans on.

KAYSEN: Was this the ten-point plan, so called?

SORENSEN: Possibly, but I don't believe it was. This was prior to that, one of those which eventually led into the ten-point plan. And McCloy's response was really very good.

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KAYSEN: Just to move ahead on this same issue. The ten-point plan got into active

consideration the following spring, and at one point, the Secretary of State discussed it in Vienna – no, in Geneva – with Gromyko. Do you remember any of the reaction of the President to this discussion or the later German reaction to the discussion between Rusk and Gromyko? You may remember there was first some discussion between the President and the Prime Minister of the U.K. of the Russians. And you may remember a message of comment of Macmillan [Maurice Harold Macmillan] which was made to the President orally about “After all, you’ve got to show them a little beyond the soup. You’ve got to show them a little of the fish,” and so on.

SORENSEN: I seem to recall the Germans objecting that negotiations relative to their future were going on without their being adequately consulted or adequately participating, a notion which the President felt was not valid. But my general impression is that the President finally began to feel that he could not sell either the Soviets or the allies on a valid negotiating posture, and since the Soviets weren’t going to buy it anyway, there was no point in continuing to quarrel with the allies over it.

KAYSEN: So that at some fairly early point, and perhaps it’s difficult to date it exactly, but perhaps by the summer of ’62, the President felt that this was no longer really a live issue?

SORENSEN: No, I don’t think he felt that. I think in the fall of ’62 that, he felt it was very live...

KAYSEN: This was after the Cuban crisis?

SORENSEN: No, just before. Just before we felt that it had every chance of becoming very alive.

KAYSEN: Why?

SORENSEN: Just because of noises coming out of Moscow.

KAYSEN: That is, he thought that there might be some renewed Soviet threat?

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SORENSEN: Yes.

KAYSEN: But was the judgment that I suggested, that as far as we were concerned it was not a very live issue, that we’d come, more or less, to the end of the possibilities of action by the summer of ’62?

SORENSEN: As far as I know, we were not devising any new negotiating positions after that.

KAYSEN: And that the President simply felt, just to repeat here, that there was not enough space for a maneuver between what the Soviets wanted to listen to and what the allies would stand for our talking about to make it worth the effort to continue?

SORENSEN: Right.

KAYSEN: In all or any of the crises of various dimensions that occurred between the Wall and the Cuban Missile Crisis, centering around Berlin, do you remember any occasion in which the President expressed concern or fear that we might be nearing a showdown on Berlin, or did he generally take the view that these were all minor and predictably to be passed over?

SORENSEN: No, I don't believe that he took the position that they were all minor. I recall the harassment of American planes in the air corridor, not the chaff dropping but the buzzing by Soviet planes and so on, which he thought was very serious and could lead to an incident which, in turn, could be explosive.

KAYSEN: Any other Berlin incidents that come to your mind as being particularly dangerous, or leading to the anxiety that they were near the edge of what we could contain?

SORENSEN: Well, I would have to have my memory refreshed as to what those incidents were. I know that the chaff dropping, some of the shootings in connection with the Wall, and most of the various Autobahn stoppings were regarded by the President as the inevitable harassment which would come, and which it was important to confine to the extent possible and not

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let them get out of hand on either side and become a prelude to actual war.

KAYSEN: I think we might leave Berlin now and turn to the next great crisis, which was the Cuban Missile Crisis. When did you first hear about the pictures that we got which showed that there were, in fact, some long-range missiles, or intermediate range missiles?

SORENSEN: They pictures were taken on Sunday, developed on Monday, and were brought to the attention of the President first thing Tuesday morning. He called me into his office on Tuesday morning, told me that there was the first sign of such evidence, asked me to get out and check his previous statements as to what the position of the United States would be with respect to offensive weapons on the island of Cuba, and said there would be a meeting later that morning to discuss our course of action.

KAYSEN: Going back to the situation immediately before that, there had been for

some time, a month or more, continuous rumor, criticism, and criticism in the Senate led by Senator Keating [Kenneth B. Keating] saying that the Soviets were putting missiles in Cuba. What was the President's reaction to this situation?

SORENSEN: His reaction was that this was largely political talk in the middle of a congressional campaign in the fall of 1962 attempting to exploit an obvious political issue. He was having all of these reports checked out to the best of our ability. He was concerned not only by the rumors about missiles but by the statements by Senator Capehart [Homer E. Capehart] and others that we should be invading or blockading Cuba.

KAYSEN: So that while he didn't think that there was any substance in this, other than political substance, his first reaction was to say, "What is it that these fellows might be talking about? Do we have anything that bears them out?"

SORENSEN: During the earlier period?

KAYSEN: Yes.

SORENSEN: Yes, and he made public statements as to what our position would be should any hard evidence of this kind turn up.

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KAYSEN: Were these public statements mostly press conference answers which he made?

SORENSEN: No. they were mostly prepared statements. One was a White House statement, one was an opening press conference statement. Those were the two main statements. There were also press conference answers.

KAYSEN: And had there been a good deal of discussion in the White House that went on before these statements were prepared?

SORENSEN: Yes.

KAYSEN: What was the general drift of this discussion?

SORENSEN: Well, I would say the general drift was that we were concerned about the increasing Soviet shipment to Cuba and concerned about what their intentions might be there. We thought it important that this kind of public statement be made not only to reassure the Congress and the American people but also to put the Soviets and the Cubans on notice as to what the position of the United States would necessarily be. And we were concerned that as a political issue, it would get out of hand with

congressional resolutions and campaign speeches.

KAYSEN: To what extent were the statements made on a reliance that the Soviets just wouldn't put these weapons into Cuba, that it didn't make any sense for them to do so, and they wouldn't do it?

SORENSEN: Well, I didn't hear that statement formally made prior to the time they were actually there, but I believe that was the working assumption of the experts. I know that it was stated by them after they were there as the reason why no one could have expected them to be there.

KAYSEN: But your best judgment would be that the President had stated to him, or had absorbed in a less direct form, the proposition that he was fairly safe from having to face such an incident?

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SORENSEN: No, I don't know that, Carl.

KAYSEN: Well, let me perhaps put that question the other way around, Ted. That none of the advice he got suggested that he was likely to be facing this contingency, and that in making his statements he really was predicting his course of action for something he would have to be doing shortly.

SORENSEN: Well, I really don't know that either. I think he made these statements on the assumption that they would not have to be carried out for two reasons: one because of the unlikelihood of the Soviets' choosing such a course of action, but secondly, because the statements themselves would have a deterrent effect.

KAYSEN: Yes. But you would find it difficult to compare the sense of immediacy, let's say, involved in these statements, on the one hand, and the preparatory measures and statements made in relation to Berlin in the months after the Vienna meeting?

SORENSEN: The biggest difference was that statements on Cuba were made without consultation with the allies, and the statements on Berlin required long clearance with the allies.

KAYSEN: Well, how would that process affect the sort of attitudes and states of mind of the President's advisors? The fact that you have to talk these Berlin matters over with the Europeans all the time means that your own attitudes became more deliberate?

SORENSEN: No. It would mean that the boldness and strength of a statement is in inverse proportion to the number of people who have to clear it.

KAYSEN: But on the other hand, it's true that after Vienna we made substantial changes in our military disposition, and changes in the President's authority to deal with the size of our forces, and so on. There were no corresponding real changes in our dispositions made in the period before the hard intelligence.

SORENSEN: No, but I don't believe anyone felt they were necessary.

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KAYSEN: So that in some sense this does measure a certain difference in attitude?

SORENSEN: Yes, but I think it's a great difference in situation. I think comparison is difficult here.

KAYSEN: Well, let's go back to that Tuesday morning. Later that day you totted up the previous statements, and what they showed was that the President had said that the United States would not tolerate offensive weapons in Cuba that, substantially...

SORENSEN: Which posed any kind of threat to the U.S. That's right.

KAYSEN: I think the major decision which came out of that meeting was to find out some more, get more intelligence?

SORENSEN: At that first meeting?

KAYSEN: Yes.

SORENSEN: Yes, the President ordered complete aerial surveillance of the island, and he called for a consideration by all present of what the alternatives were and how to proceed and, I believe, set up another meeting that same afternoon.

KAYSEN: Well, I won't try to take you through every step of this process. I'd like to ask two questions. First, I think it would be useful if you gave just a kind of general description on the course of the discussion which led finally to the decision to take naval action as the major first military step and the corresponding decision to communicate with the Soviets.

SORENSEN: You mean what were the arguments?

KAYSEN: What were the alternatives, and what were the arguments, and what were the considerations that led to this conclusion?

SORENSEN: Then you are asking me to review the whole...

KAYSEN: Well, I'm asking you to review it step by step and meeting by meeting.  
[Laughter]

SORENSEN: Well, that's an hour long answer easily. I'll try to boil it down. There were many alternatives and many courses of action open. The first one was to do nothing at all. The justification for that position was that the United States was already living under the shadow of Soviet missiles which could be launched from Soviet territory or submarines, and, therefore, there was no real change in our situation which required any kind of drastic action. The second course of action was diplomatic action only – resolutions in the O.A.S. [Organization of American States], motions in the Security Council, protests in the General Assembly, protests to the Soviet Union, and so on. Another possibility was a direct approach to the Cubans, to hold them responsible, to try to use this as an opportunity to break relations with Castro and the Soviet Union or between the Cuban people and Castro. Another possibility, skipping to the other end of the spectrum, was an invasion of Cuba. John McCone's phrase was to "go in and take Cuba away from Castro."

The two most popular courses were the air strike and blockade. The air strike was almost everyone's initial first choice and reaction. The ideal wished for was termed a "surgical" strike, compared to the extraction of a single bad tooth, in which a single air sortie would go in and take out these missiles with conventional bombs and be gone before the Cubans could do anything about it, and confront the Soviets with a *fait accompli* and a warning not to let it happen again.

There were many difficulties with that course of action. One was that it was hard to do it without giving any kind of advance warning to the Soviets and the Cubans; it would be, as the Attorney General pointed out, a Pearl Harbor in reverse and regarded by the world and by history as an attack by a leading power against a tiny nation without any warning or any effort to solve the matter without force. On the other hand, no one could devise a warning which could not lead to endless delays. It would either be termed an ultimatum, and so attacked in the councils of the world, or it could lead to counter-threats or counter-offers, or long bargaining sessions about foreign bases or American missiles abroad, one thing or another, which is

exactly what Khrushchev wanted. Having some pride in my own ability with words, I tried, I recall, to draft a message to Khrushchev which I thought could be as airtight as possible and require his immediate withdrawal of the missiles if the air strike was not to go ahead. But I had to admit on completion of that effort that even I could not make on that would stand the light of logic and history.

Another major difficulty with the so-called surgical air strike, and the real reason, the most important reason, that it was abandoned by the President, who had looked upon it with

some interest initially, was that the more we examined it, the more it turned out to be neither surgical nor merely an air strike. This was because an air strike against these missiles would surely bring up Castro's planes, either to attack our planes or, believing that a war was on, to attack Florida. And, therefore, to be safe we would have to knock out his planes and his airfields. It might be that the gun emplacements opposite Guantanamo would be fired in retaliation or if their commanders felt a war was on, and, therefore, those emplacements would have to be knocked out. It might be that the COMAR torpedo boats would be launched in a retaliatory attack, and those would have to be wiped out, and so on, and on, until by the time we had taken care of every possible means of retaliation, we would have been conducting an air strike against the entire island, the island would have risen in chaos and probably rebellion, and a full scale invasion would have been necessary anyway.

So that the more we talked, the more we liked the idea of quarantine. At first we saw more objections to the quarantine than we saw advantages. Quarantine, or a blockade, practically invited the Soviet Union to put up a blockade, presumably around Berlin. So we set up a special subcommittee of our group to work on Berlin contingencies, what we would do.

I should add here that in the opinion of many, the air strike was an equally strong invitation to the Soviets to respond in kind. I will always remember Dean Acheson coming in to our meeting and saying that he felt that we should knock out Soviet missiles in Cuba by air strike. Someone asked him, "If we do that, what do you think the Soviet Union will do?" He said, "I think – I know the Soviet Union well. I know what they are required to do in the light of their history and their posture around the world. I think they will knock out our missiles in Turkey." And then the question came again, "Well, then what do we do?" "Well," he said, "I believe under our NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] treaty with which I was associated,

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we would be required to respond by knocking out a missile base inside the Soviet Union." "Well, then what do they do?" "Well," he said, "then that's when we hope cooler heads will prevail, and they'll stop and talk." Well, that was a rather chilling conversation for all of us.

I recall another conversation, possibly that same afternoon. I'm digressing a little, but I want to get this in while I'm thinking about it. There was an analysis prepared by the State Department as to what the effect would be on our alliances if we took any one of a number of courses of action. The report was presented by Secretary Rusk, and on questioning, it boiled down to the fact that, inasmuch as our allies already thought that we were preoccupied with Cuba, the Alliance would be splintered if we responded with a strong action. And inasmuch as our allies thought we were not dependable in the face of Soviet threats, the Alliance would splinter if we didn't take strong action. To which General Taylor commented, "And a Merry Christmas to you."

Anyway, getting back to the blockade, there seemed to be many objections, one of which, as I say, was the obvious invitation to the Soviets to respond by blockading Berlin. The other was that it was difficult to see the logical connection between the Soviet action and our response. The blockade had a certain Capehartian ring to it which affected Soviet shipments to the island of Cuba but not the missiles which were already there and rapidly going up. We were afraid that a blockade was likely to be a long and agonizing approach.

During that time, the allies would argue among themselves, the Soviets would make all kinds of counter-threats, the American people would be worried and divided, the Latins would all begin to fade, and it lacked the advantage of the air strike of being something quick and decisive that we could get behind us in a hurry.

At any rate, these conversations, these conferences continued at great length. We would try to judge what the Soviet reaction would be to each step we took, what our reaction would be to the Soviet reaction, their reaction to us, and so forth. It finally came down to basically a choice between limited action as a first step or all-out action as a first step. The limited action advocates settled for a blockade because they felt the surgical strike was impossible, and any kind of diplomatic action was not enough. The all-out invasion advocates felt that that was the only honest position that they could take because they also agreed that the surgical strike was impossible, and a general air strike would lead to an invasion. There was a general

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consensus tending toward the blockade approach by Thursday evening, and we went over to present it to the President. Secretary Rusk was not there since he was having dinner with Gromyko that night, the President having had his famous meeting with Gromyko that afternoon.

KAYSEN: Well let me backtrack a little, Ted, and say that....

SORENSEN: I'm nowhere near finished.

KAYSEN: Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you'd come to a stopping point. Go on.

SORENSEN: McNamara had been very effective in convincing McCone to go along with that point of view. We went over to present it to the President Thursday night, and, somewhat to everyone's surprise, Mac Bundy urged that we not overlook the justification of no action at all. The President tended to favor the blockade point of view but reserved decision. On Friday morning he talked with the Joint Chiefs who were for all-out action, presumably leading to an invasion.

The President spoke to me just before he left for a campaign trip, which it had been decided he should go ahead with an order to not to show any alarm or change in the normal conduct of affairs, and said that the Chiefs had very strongly expressed their point of view. He was rather concerned and hoped we should be able to get more of a consensus in his absence. We met again, therefore, on Friday morning and on Friday afternoon. We reviewed a good deal of the material we had reviewed before.

Finally, it was decided that I would draft the kind of speech which the President would give if the blockade point of view were to be the final decision. I cannot now remember whether I was also supposed to draft the other speech, or whether anyone had drafted it. I know that the justification, approach, and argumentation for the other approach was drafted by those who took it. While I opposed the all-out action and invasion as a first step, I had the same difficulties with the blockade point of view which all of us had had

during the week, and I spend a good part of the afternoon tossing those around. And I came back later that afternoon not with a draft but with a series of questions about the blockade point of view. In effect, the group, by answering those questions and having those answers translated into speech form overnight, did become more persuaded of the logic and rightfulness

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of the blockade course. So that on Saturday morning, a majority, though not unanimous, was prepared to make that recommendation definitely to the President. The lawyers were called in to discuss the legal aspects of blockade and quarantine, and my speech draft was reviewed and rewritten, and the President was called back.

The President held a meeting over in the oval room in the mansion on Saturday afternoon, listened to presentations of both points of view, and there was some silence. And then Ros Gilpatric [Roswell L. Gilpatric], who in my experience rarely spoke on his own in meetings of this sort, spoke up and said that he thought it was essentially a question of whether the President would start with limited or unlimited action, and he thought it should be limited action. His was a very short and a very persuasive statement, and I believe it helped persuade the President, although that had been the point of view toward which he had been leaning all week. The President, however, did not make a final decision even then because he still wanted to satisfy himself that a surgical strike was impossible, he still saw many advantages in that. So he made the blockade decision subject to the possibility that he may still decide that the surgical strike was feasible. And he conferred with someone in the Air Force, one of the top strategic bombing generals, on Sunday morning and was convinced after the talk that the so-called surgical air strike was not feasible and could not even be certain of removing all of the missiles. There was, of course, the additional danger that some of the missiles would be operational and that their commanders would feel that war had broken out and would fire their missiles upon the United States at a tremendous loss of life. Those were essentially the elements leading up to the decision.

KAYSEN: Just to consolidate this, the decision was essentially made by Sunday morning?

SORENSEN: Right.

KAYSEN: Is it also correct that you had circulated and got back comments on a draft speech by Sunday morning, that by Sunday morning you had the material from which to start putting in final form the speech the President gave on Monday afternoon?

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SORENSEN: That's right. The speech went through many drafts. It was initially drafted overnight Friday night. It was redrafted on the basis of the comments of the group Saturday morning. It was redrafted on the basis of the actually

decision taken by the President Saturday afternoon, which, in effect, was a composite decision because it contained not only the blockade or quarantine element, it also contained the warning that an attack by one of these Cuban missiles would be regarded as an attack on the United States by the Soviet Union. It also contained a warning that the construction on the Soviet missiles would have to stop or that we would take further action, and implied that an air strike would be part of that action. It included diplomatic action in the United Nations as well as the OAS: it included a statement to the Cuban people that this was not aimed at them and that we wanted a free and peaceful Cuba; it included a simultaneous message to Khrushchev at the time that the President's decision was to be announced, and so on. So all of that was decided on Saturday afternoon.

I think that the State Department did a good job in working out all of the scenarios that had to be followed – all of the notifying of allies and ambassadors and so on both in Washington and all around the world, the messages to be sent to Khrushchev, and briefings to be given to the NATO council and that sort of thing. The President was quite anxious to get the decisions announced quite quickly because he was very much afraid that either it would leak and the American people would be somewhat panicky not knowing what our response was going to be or that the Soviets would make some kind of a grand announcement and threaten us before we had been able to take the initiative. He therefore favored a speech Sunday night. He, in fact, was amazed that it was not leaked out earlier. He considered it the best kept secret in government.

I had kidded him about that earlier on Wednesday night. The Attorney General and I had met him at the airport when he had returned from a campaign trip to Connecticut, brought him up to date on the discussions that afternoon, and advised that he let us meet on our own for a while so that Thompson, Bohlen, Ed Martin [Edwin M. Martin] and others could speak their minds more freely, as they did when the President was absent. And when he commented then on the amazing tightness, I said very casually as he was getting out of the car, "That's right. We don't know of any leak at all other than your conversation with Joe Alsop [Joseph W. Alsop]," which he for a moment, took very seriously and denied very vehemently. At any rate the reason why the speech was not given Sunday night was

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the difficulty of communicating with the foreign heads of state on a Sunday when all of them were at their villas in the country, and unwilling to see our ambassadors.

KAYSEN: Didn't have the benefit of the White House signal service.

SORENSEN: That's right.

KAYSEN: I think you've explained the timing point which is certainly very important point. I think another point worth comment is: the people chosen to convene to ask for advice, and when and how he decided to select the particular group he selected, what later got the designation of the Executive Committee of the NSC [National Security Council]. What can you say about that?

SORENSEN: Why he selected that particular group?

KAYSEN: Yes.

SORENSEN: I think he selected this group on two bases. First, those people who had some official responsibility in this area. Secondly, it was those people in whose basic judgment he had some confidence. I don't mean to imply there was not a considerable overlap in those two groups.

KAYSEN: Yes. Well, would that, for instance, be the explanation for having the Attorney General and the Secretary of the Treasury [C. Douglas Dillon] in the group, neither of whom was directly responsible, in the sense that the Secretary of Defense and Secretary of State would?

SORENSEN: That's right. He had confidence in their judgment. He wanted to have their participation and, of course, had been inviting them and relying on them in the National Security Council meetings.

KAYSEN: Would there be anybody else that you would select as being especially in this category rather than in the official responsibility category?

SORENSEN: Me? [Laughter]

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KAYSEN: Now in the question of various views. Was there a fair consistency of views throughout the discussion or did everybody shift his view back and forth a good deal, or...

SORENSEN: There was a good deal of shifting back and forth. Probably everyone there changed his view at least once during that week.

KAYSEN: Although I take it from what you have said earlier that the Chiefs held consistently to a single view?

SORENSEN: It's hard to say about the Chiefs. General Taylor was the only one actually taking part in the meetings, and I believe that he and probably the other Chiefs started out – as I say, almost everyone did – with the surgical air strike point of view. When that proved less and less feasible, I would guess that some of the other Chiefs may have moved in the direction of the all-out action and invasion while General Taylor was willing to go along with the blockade. I can't now recall which side he finally came out on. The clearest proponents at the end for the all-out invasion were McCone and Dillon. On Wednesday night, Secretary Rusk stated, in a manner somewhat more firm than his initial pronouncements are usually couched, that he was for the surgical air strike point of view. But approximately five minutes later, after Chip Bohlen and others raised

questions about a warning to the Soviet Union, what our position would be like if we did warn, and what it would be like if we didn't warn, he reconsidered.

KAYSEN: Was there anybody who consistently took a no action position, or did that fall by the wayside fairly quickly?

SORENSEN: Not that I know of. I have a vague impression that in the Friday morning meeting that the President had with the Chiefs, General Shoup had said that he saw no cause for alarm, that this was simply living under missiles and we'd been living under missiles before and no action was required. On Wednesday morning the President received a note from Ambassador Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] which did not come out clearly against taking action but pointed out all the arguments against it, all the dangers, all the hazards, all the reasons for negotiation. He did not advocate action and concluded by saying, as I recall, if action

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is necessary, we should also make clear our negotiating positions. I do not know that you would call that a no-action, a firm no-action, recommendation.

KAYSEN: And Ambassador Stevenson was not at the meetings?

SORENSEN: He was at the meetings Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, I believe, but not before that.

KAYSEN: How about Dean Acheson? Was he at the meetings consistently?

SORENSEN: No, he was at some of the meetings. I recall him at the Friday meeting and one earlier.

KAYSEN: So that it's fair to say, among other things, that there's never been any even moderately accurate published report of what had gone at these meetings?

SORENSEN: That is correct.

KAYSEN: Was there every any other military operation considered beside the air strike and a full-scale invasion?

SORENSEN: There were at least two others which come to my mind. One was to have an air drop of men who would then take out the missile base. That was abandoned by the military as being uncertain and impracticable. The other was a suggestion by Walt Rostow that we look into the possibility of some kind of pellets, rather than bombs, which would completely up the missile works but would not result in any deaths to either Russians or Cubans. I neglected to mention that killing of Russians or

Cubans was one of the considerations against the air strike.

KAYSEN: What happened to that suggestion?

SORENSEN: Well, apparently that wasn't feasible either because I recall raising it daily with the Defense Department and never getting a very satisfactory reply, and I assumed they were looking into it.

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KAYSEN: Well, unless you can think of something we haven't covered, I think we've got ourselves pretty fairly over the main important points up to the President's speech of Monday night.

SORENSEN: Except, of course, for his meeting with the Congress just prior to the speech.

KAYSEN: Good. Let's hear about that. That was on Monday afternoon.

SORENSEN: On that Monday afternoon, before he delivered his talk to the nation, the President had a brief pro forma meeting with the Cabinet in which he told them what he was going to do. There was no discussion and the meeting was over in five minutes. There was a pro forma meeting of the National Security Council to state officially what had already been decided and what was going to be announced that night. There may have also been a meeting of what was now constituted as the Executive Committee of the National Security Council.

The longest meeting was with the Democratic and Republican leaders of both the House and the Senate. I was not present at that meeting, but it lasted far beyond its appointed time. It came very close to the time that the President was due to go on the air, and he had not yet changed his clothes, he had not had any rest at all during the day, and he finally emerged from the meeting very disturbed. I walked over to the mansion with him with the final copies of the speech. He said that the meeting had been one of great dissension, that some – Russell [Richard B. Russell] and others – had talked about the necessity of invading Cuba, that there had been a good many arguments that the blockade was the worst approach of all. It was one of the few times that he ever muttered anything to me about, if they thought they could do the job better than he could, they could have it; it was not great joy to him. In any event, he gave the speech, he received more than one phone call, I understand, after the speech from those that had been present saying that if they had fully understood the situation and the American position, they would not have argued for invasion or a different course in the congressional meeting. So he felt better about it then.

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I might add one choice remark he made which was on Saturday afternoon, after the blockade course had all but been decided upon. He and I and the Attorney General, possibly one or

two others, went outside on Truman's balcony outside the second floor oval room in the White House, and he remarked somewhat ruefully, "Well, I guess Homer Capehart is the Winston Churchill of our generation."

KAYSEN: Now, the next week, of course, was a period of very tense and anxious waiting in which there were a number of communications of various sorts between the President and Prime Minister Khrushchev, Chairman Khrushchev, I should say. How did the attitudes fluctuate during the course of that week? What was the first response we got from the Soviets?

SORENSEN: It was a tough one – that the Americans were taking illegal action which the Soviets would not tolerate, threatening war and so on. He made no precise commitments in that response as I recall, that he would later have to back down from, but it was very tough, unpleasant response. But his responses seemed to fluctuate somewhat during the week also. My recollection is that it was probably the next day that he advised U Thant that he would keep Soviet ships carrying offensive weapons outside of the quarantine zone for a period, which U Thant had requested to try to settle the matter peacefully. Then perhaps the day after that would come another belligerent note, and so on. The key letter was the letter that arrived Friday night, and which, although very long and filled with some threats and rejections and so on, seemed to contain the basic elements of the final settlement: namely that any action the Soviet Union had taken (he still denied they were offensive weapons), any action they had taken was simply to defend Cuba from American invasion, and if there was not going to be an American invasion, the weapons would be withdrawn.

On Saturday while we were in the course of working out a reply to that letter, adapting it somewhat to our own language and terms to make it more precisely what we wanted in terms of inspection of the missile removal, guarantee against their reintroduction, and so on, several events happened which sent our stock plunging again. One was the downing of an American surveillance plane for the first time. The second was a public statement by Khrushchev in which he raised the ante, so to speak, and called for removal of American missile bases in Italy and Turkey as a price for the removal of

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Soviet missiles. (We must come back to this missile removal question, by the way, in terms of the whole negotiating posture.) And the third was the very clear indication from our photographs that work was going ahead full speed in all the missile sites and that all the intermediate range would soon be operational. At the same time Stevenson and the Russians were meeting with U Thant at the U.N.

We decided to ignore the second Khrushchev message, to issue separate warnings about the continuation of work on the missile sites and, I believe, about the plane, and to make new plans for having fighters to stand by as our surveillance planes went over the island from then on, but not yet to take any retaliatory action for the plane knocked down, partly because we did not have sufficient information on it, and to go ahead and send a letter to Khrushchev which contained the terms of an agreement. The letter was rewritten two or

three times, in which I had a hand, and I also read it over the phone to Ambassador Stevenson who expressed some optimism on the basis of his talks in New York and requested one or two changes in the letter. Then it was dispatched.

That was by far the worst day of the entire two week period because the second Khrushchev message had dimmed our hopes that our letter would be a very successful one. The shooting of the plane had raised the temperature of the whole situation. We were concerned about what action might be taken when all the missile sites became operational, and those who had originally pressed for all-out invasion were now pressing once again for stronger action and earlier action by the President. Earlier in the week, it appeared that the Russian ships were headed toward the quarantine barrier, and the President remarked that those who thought the quarantine action was the quiet, most peaceful, less violent, less dangerous action were about to be proven wrong. Fortunately, the ships turned around before they reached the barrier. I might insert here the parenthetical note that the President had said on the previous Saturday afternoon when the arguments for and against the various courses of action were presented to him, "Whichever way we go," he said, "a week or two from now, everyone will wish they had advocated some other action, because all of them are full of dangers and disadvantages."

But the meeting went on and on, all day Saturday, morning and afternoon, and once the letter had been dispatched, the real problem was what the next step was going to be. And people were terribly tired. The Secretary of State had really been in a condition of fatigue most of the week, which worried the President, and he

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remarked on it to me more than once. Tempers were getting a little frayed, and finally the wisest move was made around seven o'clock or so when it was decided to adjourn the meeting for dinner. We had dinner, most of us ate in the White House, the White House mess. Vice President Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson], Secretary Dillon, and Don Wilson [Donald M. Wilson], the deputy director of the USIA [United States Information Agency], sat at my table. We talked entirely about other subjects. And when the meeting resumed, the feelings were not as intense, and no final decisions were made as to what steps we would take the next day, but it was fairly clear that the next day was likely to be a decisive day, either tightening the blockade by including POL, petroleum, oil, lubricants, or by stepping up the readiness for an invasion which had been going on all week because of the time required to prepare for an invasion, or launching an air strike, or taking some other action. On Sunday morning, Bob McNamara later told me, he woke up early, made a list of what he could recommend short of invasion. Most of us woke up Sunday morning to the news that Khrushchev had ordered the missiles withdrawn. So that our meeting that morning was not one to consider further military action, it was one of relief and exhilaration.

KAYSEN: Do you remember anything of the President's own reaction at this moment beyond the relief?

SORENSEN: Relief was certainly predominant. He was cautious. The missiles were still there. He knew the Russians had been guilty of duplicity before. He knew

that a long and probably messy period of bargaining and arrangements lay ahead. He thought that any excess display of exaltation on the part of the United States might cause the Soviets to change their mind, might cause those forces or factions within the Soviet Union which had prevailed in this position to lose out to a more militant faction. In any event he was being very cautious, and not to talk in terms of victory and make the Soviets eat crow.

KAYSEN: There was a general mood all over the world of great relief and also combined with a mood of optimism that this experience ought to make possible new understanding between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. How much did the President share, if he did at all, this latter view? What was his reaction to this view which was widely prevalent?

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SORENSEN: I would say he was cautiously hopeful.

KAYSEN: One of the questions that is discussed a lot about this whole experience is what was its main significance? Was its main significance military, was this an attempt by the Soviets to change the military balance? Was its main significance political, and was the question of the military significance of these missiles really secondary to the political significance of the Soviet act? What are your thoughts about this?

SORENSEN: My thoughts have always been that the military implications were secondary to the political implications. There certainly were military implications, as I understand it; it was a very cheap way for them to improve their deliverable strategic striking power and to get that much closer to the United States in terms of our ballistic missile early warning system. But I think that that was not as important as the political implications, first, of the move itself and what would have happened if we had taken no action or if we had overreacted; and secondly, the political implications of the success of the American position.

Of course, there were some military implications in our success, also. The advocates of a conventional force can point to the line of naval ships and the superiority which we had on the seas, which was one of the important considerations which led us to the quarantine posture: If we were going to have a military confrontation, what better place to have it than in our own backyard, so to speak, and in an element, namely naval power, where we knew that we were superior around the world. And the advocates of greater strategic force could point out that everything we did was backed up by our determination to use our nuclear weapons.

KAYSEN: Do you think the President shared your judgment about the relative importance of the political and military factors in shaping his own decision?

SORENSEN: Yes.

KAYSEN: So that what really influenced him in the feeling that you couldn't take the no-response position, in spite of all the disadvantages that he saw in every proposal in terms of course of action, was that this was a political defeat vis-à-vis the Soviet Union which we could not accept.

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SORENSEN: That's correct. It was in that context that he said on that Saturday afternoon before the decision was made that the worst thing of all would be to do nothing. And I picked up that phrase and inserted it into the speech which he gave Monday night.

KAYSEN: Did he, in the course of that discussion, or in the course of the next week and various moments of waiting, did you get any sense of his comparison of the domestic costs of various alternatives, as to what it was politically easiest for him to do, what would be most popular?

SORENSEN: He felt, that Saturday afternoon when we discussed it on the back of the porch, that the whole situation was going to be very harmful to the Democrats. He felt that it would prove that the Republicans were right in their warnings about Cuba, and that the Democrats would be accused of being soft on Communism, soft on Castro. On the other hand, they would be accused in other parts of being the war party and endangering the security of the country, and he just felt that whichever way he turned it was politically damaging at home. I don't believe, however, that was uppermost in his mind at the time.

KAYSEN: Did he ever express the view, or say anything that might have indicated the view, that direct action was politically appealing in a sense, would be the easiest course, that one should do this, national unity is always on your side?

SORENSEN: Possibly he did in connection with the other side of the coin which I mentioned, namely that a blockade was likely to be regarded as an indefinite, uncertain, prolonged situation which would only add to the frustrations of the American people and the allies.

KAYSEN: We don't want to lose the question of the missiles. Now in fact, the proposal that the U.S. should withdraw missiles from Turkey and Italy was repeated by Khrushchev, but we brushed it aside at the time. What happened in terms of the internal discussions and the thoughts within the government, and the President's own views, about these missiles, that ultimately some months later in the spring we did withdraw?

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SORENSEN: During the preceding week, there had been some discussion about the fact that the Russians had obviously made a case to compare their missiles in Cuba with our missiles in Italy and Turkey. It was thought they may put forward their request for us to withdraw. I do not believe that anyone suggested that we initiate an offer to withdraw them in exchange for a withdrawal of Soviet missiles until the meeting on Saturday, at which time Ambassador Stevenson made that proposal. He also had a proposal over the weekend, which talked in terms of the neutralization of Cuba, which meant, in effect, the withdrawal of Soviet missiles and the abandonment of Guantanamo naval base by the United States. These proposals were very vigorously denounced, at that meeting, particularly by McCone, Dillon, and Robert Lovett, who was present at that meeting, possibly some others.

My great objection to Stevenson's position was that he felt that he had to have a negotiating position. I not only objected to a negotiating position, but I thought his reasons were wrong: namely he felt that we would be going into the Security Council, into the United Nations, on the defensive; that we were taking a belligerent, warlike action by setting up this quarantine. I might say that the President strongly preferred the word "quarantine" to the word "blockade." And I made a point, which was later included in the speech, that on the contrary we should be taking the initiative in the United Nations. We should be not apologetic at all, but hailing the Soviets before the Security Council to explain why they had taken this action threatening peace and security, and so forth.

One of the most interesting comments made during that discussion, however, was a comment made by Douglas Dillon, who had served in the Eisenhower administration, and who said, and these are almost his exact words, "Well, everyone knows that those Jupiter missiles aren't much good anyway. We only put them in there during the previous administration because we didn't know what else to do with them, and we really made the Turks and Italians take them." Later that afternoon, when I had gone back and was rewriting the speech, the President called me on the phone and commented on Dillon's statement and wanted to know if I had jotted that down in my memoirs for the book he said that he and I were going to write about this administration.

KAYSEN: Was that the first time that the President had ever heard such a statement?

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SORENSEN: Yes. So far as I know. He was quite amazed by it.

KAYSEN: Now when the negotiations in the Security Council and with the Soviets began to drag on and cease to be interesting, and when we got the photographs of ships leaving, crates on their decks, other evidences that the Soviet Union was beginning to carry out its engagements, did the President make at that time any sort of reassessment of his political evaluation of the situation, did he conclude that this earlier fear that whatever happened the Democrats would come out on the short end of it, was incorrect and that, in fact, he'd done better on it?

SORENSEN: I don't now recall any specific statements although, of course, in fact the

Democrats did very, very well in the 1962 congressional elections.

KAYSEN: Well, I was going to ask exactly that. In interpreting the election results did the President assign any great weight to these events?

SORENSEN: Yes. I think there was a general feeling which politicians expressed to him that the Democrats indeed were suffering in the week of the crisis, but that once the success had been achieved and the missiles withdrawn, the Democratic strength showed a great resurgence. Certainly that was true in the case of Bayh [Birch Evans Bayh, Jr.] versus Capehart.

KAYSEN: The other very broad question that I think would be worth a comment is the extent to which the President's view, thoughts, feelings about the possibility of war between the United States and the Soviet Union were changed by this experience, his feelings about increasing military strength versus pursuing disarmament?

SORENSEN: Well, I think he felt we came very, very close to war that week. Once again going back to that Saturday afternoon out on the back porch, he talked about the possibilities of war resulting from whatever action we took. Then he remarked, somewhat jokingly, that there was not room in the White House bomb shelter for all of us. But I think that as much as the withdrawal of the missiles seemed to be a turning point and a demonstration that war could be avoided and an indication that the Soviets were now convinced of the suicidal futility of war, I

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think the President felt that we had come so close to it, and due to such a deceptive and aggressive move by the Soviet Union at a time when they were talking very differently, that he, for certainly a long time afterwards, thought more in terms of how close we had come to war than he did in terms of how much we were advanced as a result toward peace.

KAYSEN: But your answer implies that perhaps at some later date his emphasis did change – that if we had had this experience, that the parallel experience in the Soviet Union had had its effect on their thinking. Or is that an unjustified speculation?

SORENSEN: I wouldn't carry it too far. I would say that he became more hopeful as the year 1963 went on. There were initial hopes of a test ban treaty early in the year which then faded. There was the decision to make the speech on peace at American University in June, and the response which it evoked which led him to move along similar lines. The successful test ban negotiation in the summer had a very good response, the agreement on the hot line came in between the two. The agreement on the banning of nuclear weapons from outer space, the sale of wheat came later in the fall. So as the year progressed he had more hope, and more interest, really, in that side of the equation,

but I don't believe he ever let down the other side.

KAYSEN: What effect did the experience of these two weeks have on the President's judgments about the organization of government, how his cabinet and other agencies were set up to do their jobs, and on the leading people on whom he relied?

SORENSEN: Well, without trying to avoid my duty, I think most of the answer to that can be found in a remarkably candid televised interview with three reporters which he gave at the end of December, 1962. As far as individuals go, I think it increased his already high opinion of Ambassador Thompson and Assistant Secretary Ed Martin. He, of course, was pleased, as always, with the performance of Secretary McNamara. And, if I may say so, he remarked to me on one occasion that he thought the Attorney General and I were largely responsible for the success of the first week's meetings.

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KAYSEN: Good!

SORENSEN: And I would add to that, omitting myself, that the Attorney General was particularly good during that week. Never stating a position of his own, he was persistent in trying to get these questions explored, in trying to keep the meeting moving ahead instead of going back and forth on the same old questions, the same old facts, trying to get people to agree on what alternatives were, what their consequences were. I thought he was superb.

KAYSEN: Is there anything more in the further negotiation with the Soviets on the details of the withdrawal that is worthy of note?

SORENSEN: Those were very prolonged and very exasperating, and there were actually two sets of prolonged and exasperating negotiations. One between the United States and the Soviet Union, and the other between those in Washington and those representing the United States in New York, namely, in the latter group, Mr. Stevenson and Mr. McCloy. The President once remarked that the thought we were spending as much time negotiating with them as they were negotiating with the Russians.

KAYSEN: It was widely believed in the press, or stated in the press at the time, that the appointment of McCloy to this task marked the President's lack of confidence in Ambassador Stevenson. Is that a fair comment, do you think?

SORENSEN: It's more, I would say, an expression of confidence in McCloy who was a skillful advocate who was regarded the world over, and particularly by the

allies whose support we desperately needed, as being a very strong man in this kind of area and who knew the disarmament inspection question through and through from his representing the United States at Geneva.

KAYSEN: Well, let me just raise a very general question. I think it's noteworthy that the President followed very consistently the proposition that where you have a delicate and difficult job involving national security problems, if you can get a Republican to do it, you're better off by that much. Would you accept that description?

[-68-]

SORENSEN: I would. I think the President felt that the country was narrowly divided, that it was terribly important to have as much national unity as possible in foreign policy questions, and that the Republicans in and out of Congress would be much less likely to attack a McCloy or a McCone, McNamara, or Dillon, than they would a Stevenson, Bowles [Chester B. Bowles], or Kaysen [Carl Kaysen].

KAYSEN: How much of this did you think was an immediate reflection of the narrowness of the President's electoral margin, and how much do you speculate would have gone on in a second term in spite of what most probably would have been a much wider margin of reelection?

SORENSEN: Oh, I think he felt it was good strategy no matter what his margin was.

KAYSEN: And therefore wasn't simply a response to a concern about the electoral basis of his position?

SORENSEN: That's correct.

KAYSEN: Did his concern about the electoral basis of his position influence him much in this range of matters we've been talking about, in foreign policy?

SORENSEN: I wouldn't say so, no. I think he felt always that not so much the narrowness of his electoral margin but the narrowness of his effective margin in the Congress restricted what he could do in those foreign affairs matters which required appropriations or approval by the Congress.

KAYSEN: Was there ever a sequel to the bipartisan meeting you described just before the President gave his speech in which the president discussed with a bipartisan group what had happened?

SORENSEN: I can't recall that. There may have been, but I don't...

KAYSEN: But I assume that there were the usual leadership meetings with the

Democratic leaders in the weeks that followed?

[-69-]

SORENSEN: No, you see, the Congress was out of session. We didn't meet...

KAYSEN: Oh, that's right.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

[-70-]

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