

**George W. Ball, Oral History Interview – JFK#2, 4/16/1965**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** George W. Ball  
**Interviewer:** Joseph Kraft  
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**Biographical Note**

Ball, Undersecretary of State for Economic Affairs in 1961 and Undersecretary of State from 1961 to 1964, discusses the Cuban Missile Crisis, including the chronology of events, the courses of action that were considered, and the personalities involved, among other issues.

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## George W. Ball – JFK#2

### Table of Contents

<u>Page</u>	<u>Topic</u>
42	Discovery of Soviet missiles on Cuba
43	October 16
45	October 17, discussion of options
52	Robert F. Kennedy
54	Dean Rusk
57	October 18-20
61	John F. Kennedy's meeting with Alexander Andreevich Gromyko
64	October 19, decision

Second of Four Oral History Interviews

with

George W. Ball

April 16, 1965  
Washington, D.C.

By Joseph Kraft

For the John F. Kennedy Library

KRAFT: I think the thing we might be talking about now, if we can, is the Cuban Missiles Crisis and the follow up in the Nassau Conference. Could you say something about your role; how you got into it, when you first became apprised of it?

BALL: We start with the Cuban Missiles Crisis. The missiles, as I recall, were discovered on the 14th of October, but the read-out of the film was not actually made until Monday the 15th. I was called at home by Roger Hilsman [Roger Hilsman, Jr.] on the evening of the 15th. In a few cryptic words he told me that the missiles had been discovered. I immediately got in touch with Alex Johnson [Ural Alexis Johnson], who was having dinner with Max Taylor [General Maxwell D. Taylor], and arranged to have a meeting in my office at nine o'clock the following morning. When we met the following morning, as I recall, Secretary Rusk [Dean Rusk] joined us. We then adjourned to the White House at ten o'clock, as I recall. Incidentally, I could

[-42-]

get the summary and could be following if we want to go through this in depth. I don't know whether it's worth while or not.

KRAFT: I think it would be a good idea.

BALL: All right, hold on just a minute.  
(Roosa [Robert V. Roosa], for all of his conservatism, was a virtuoso of the first order.

KRAFT: He knew what it was about.)

BALL: No, I'm sorry. The meeting at the White House was at 11:45 a.m. At that meeting, which was attended from the Department only, as I recall, by Secretary Rusk and myself, were the men who were subsequently to be constituted as the executive committee.

KRAFT: Had anything transpired in your meeting that morning?

BALL: Only a review of the evidence as we had received it and a very preliminary discussion as to the kind of steps that we might take and what this meant in terms of its larger implications. In addition to Rusk and myself, as I recall, "Tommie" Thompson [Llewellyn E. Thompson, Jr.], that is Ambassador Thompson, was also there. He put

[-43-]

forward some ideas as to what this might mean in terms of the Soviet strategy.

After the meeting at the White House, which, as I recall, lasted for several hours, we returned to the Department and began to work on various alternative plans that might be undertaken to deal with the problem. We met in the afternoon with "Chip" Bohlen [Charles E. Bohlen] as well as with "Tommie" Thompson; Adlai Stevenson [Adlai E. Stevenson] also came down. I think he must have been in Washington at the time.

We went back to the White House again at 6:30 p.m. for a further review of the situation and finally returned to the State Department where "Tommie" Thompson, Dean Rusk, and I discussed the matter till sometime between eleven o'clock and midnight.

One of the decisions that was made that first day was that we would keep very tight security on the whole situation, and that we would not do anything to tip the hands of the Soviet Union.

KRAFT: Was the President [John F. Kennedy] at those meetings at the White House?

[-44-]

BALL: The President was at both of the meetings at the White House--the meeting at 11:45 a.m. and the meeting at 6:30 p.m. Then the following day we met off and on all through the day in my conference room, which became known as the "think tank." John McCone [John A. McCone] had come back from California by this



time, and Alex Johnson was brought into the discussion as well as “Tommie” Thompson. Mac Bundy [McGeorge Bundy] was there, Bob McNamara [Robert S. McNamara], Douglas, Dillon [C. Douglas Dillon], usually, and the Vice President [Lyndon Baines Johnson] almost always came to the meeting. One of the decisions was whether the President should go ahead with his plans for his campaign. We were all in agreement that he should go forward with those plans, which meant going up to Connecticut that night, because any cancellation of the plans would create a sense of crisis that might very well give the show away.

KRAFT: Was the Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko [Andrei Andreevich Gromyko] meeting a decision taken then?

BALL: Well, the Gromyko meeting, as I recall, had already

[-45-]

been set up.

KRAFT: And there was no question....

BALL: Of whether to cancel it.

KRAFT: It was assumed that that would happen.

BALL: The President went up to Connecticut that night. I think he came back the same night. During the course of that day we went over all the possible alternatives that anyone could think of, ranging from doing nothing about it and treating it as though it did not affect the military balance, which was in fact the view that McNamara held as to the actual effect of it, to sending the planes in and taking the missiles out and following that by an invasion. We also had the very difficult decisions to make as to whether this should be treated as primarily a matter between ourselves and Castro [Fidel Alejandro Castro Ruz] or a matter between ourselves and the Soviet Union. We finally came to the conclusion that we had to treat it as fundamentally a confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union.

KRAFT: Why was that a difficult decision? In retrospect,

[-46-]

anyhow, it looks obvious that it had to be between the United States and the Soviet Union.

BALL: There was some thought, as I recall, in the beginning that, if we were to treat this as a matter between ourselves and Cuba, the Russians could to some extent stand aside. The Cubans might be compelled to order the missiles out of the country which would save the Russian face since it wouldn't be a Soviet withdrawal.

But the more we examined this, the more unrealistic it appeared. It seemed to us that we had to work this out with the Soviet Union partly because we really thought, since they had so much more at stake around the world, that there was a greater possibility of working it out with them than there was of trying to bring Castro to a decision which we could probably only achieve by destroying him. To destroy him would probably mean killing a great many Russians.

We also had to make some assumptions as to whether this was the beginning of a much bigger deployment of strength in Cuba than just the missiles. We couldn't be sure,

[-47-]

naturally, as to whether this meant that the Soviet Union intended over time to turn this into a real fortress for attack on the United States or whether it was just intended to put the missiles there and then confront the United States with the fact that they were there, possibly to use them when Khrushchev [Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev] came over to the U.N. as a major political gesture that would greatly enhance his own prestige and power.

KRAFT: You say that in the course of these discussions you identified different possible courses of action ranging from doing nothing to invasion of Cuba. Were these just set out and identified, or were there partisans?

BALL: There were partisans. From the beginning I had been opposed to any act which seemed to me to be irreversible. I had felt that to go in and take the missiles out with an air strike, which would involve killing a great many Cubans, would be the kind of act which would not give the Soviet Union a chance to pull back because it would be an immediate loss of face to them

[-48-]

and would force them into precipitant decision. We might get a panic reaction which would mean the actual setting off of atomic weapons against the United States. There were arguments that one could make on both sides. To go in and take the missiles out with an air strike would involve the use of the United States air power against Cuba primarily. While it might kill some Russians incidentally, it would be primarily an action against Cuba. On the other hand, the blockade, or quarantine, which was put forward very early as one of the alternatives, meant involving other nations as well because we would stop the ships of nations both from the free world and from the bloc, and to this extent it would tend to raise the nature of the confrontation. It wouldn't be then simply the United States against Cuba, but it would be the United States possibly forced to fire on a Swedish vessel or a British vessel or, most likely, a Soviet vessel.

KRAFT: The blockade had emerged as one of the possibilities...

[-49-]

BALL: The blockade emerged very early. It was quite a natural one, but there was a good deal of argument as to what the purpose of the blockade should be. Should it be an economic blockade designed to bring Cuba down, or should it be a blockade directed simply at the introduction of further weapons into Cuba? One of the problems which disturbed some of us, including myself at the beginning, was that, if we directed it just against the introduction of further weapons into Cuba, we could not be sure that the missiles were not already in Cuba. Therefore we would be locking the stable after the horses had already escaped. On the other hand, if we were to direct this at the economic life of Cuba, then this required the Soviet Union to respond in a more drastic way--or might require them to do so--since it would be an enormous loss of face to let Cuba starve. The Soviet Union might feel it had to do something about it.

My own preference all through the discussion,

[-50-]

and even at the end, was for a slight variant on what was actually done. I would have added POL, that is petroleum products, to weapons as the thing against which the quarantine was directed because Cuba had no indigenous fuel supplies. This would, over a time, have put a tremendous economic squeeze on Cuba. This was the point on which Bob McNamara and I were in disagreement through most of the discussion. I finally yielded because I was very happy to have the solution of a limited blockade adopted by a majority of the board of the Ex Com [Executive Committee] as against the solution through an air strike, which would almost certainly have to be followed by an invasion.

KRAFT: Was there a real argument? Were those the two basic possibilities?

BALL: They were the two possibilities as the argument began to shake down over time. There was a wide range of opinion. As I recall, Mac Bundy, for example, started out first putting forth the position that we should do nothing, that we should treat this as a

[-51-]

kind of mistake since we had the assurance of McNamara that in his view this did not alter the balance of military power. It was too dangerous to try to force the issue, and, after all, this wasn't very different from our putting missiles in Turkey and on the periphery Soviet power. He finally swung completely around and toward the end was strongly advocating the air strike. He was joined in that.... As I recall, the Vice President finally came down on the side of the air strike. Both McCone and Doug Dillon were strongly for the air strike so that those of us who were arguing for quarantine at the end, I think, were probably Bob McNamara and myself and "Tommie" Thompson, Alex Johnson. The Secretary was inclined toward the quarantine because it would give time for the Soviets to make up their minds in a considered way.

KRAFT: The Attorney General [Robert F. Kennedy]....

BALL: Quite early on in the discussion in the White House sitting around the Cabinet table, I made an argument which actually had, I think, quite a little effect

[-52-]

on the Attorney General's decision. I remember arguing quite forcibly that, if we were to have an air strike, this was an act which the world--and Americans, on further thought--might well regard as a kind of sneak attack not unlike Pearl Harbor, that this was totally out of character with America; it was totally out of accord with our own traditions. The argument that I made was that no nation could do violence to its own character of its own traditions without thereby changing itself, becoming something else, putting a major kind of blot on its own copy book; that this would have a profound effect not only on the posture of the United States around the world but on Americans themselves in their own thinking. This was later picked up by the Attorney General who argued, referring to my earlier argument, that he couldn't advise his brother to take an action which would be out of character with the American ideals and ideas which would really be something the Americans would, in the long term, be ashamed of. So the Attorney

[-53-]

General finally joined the ranks of those who were on the side of the quarantine. I rather suspect, without knowing it, that his own views were being expressed with quite a little confidence that they reflected his brother's as well because I'm sure that he and the President were having conversations during this time. While he was there as an individual, nevertheless, I think that many of us suspected that these views had been presented by the President.

KRAFT: Was it possible to have a freer exchange absent the President? Was that an important element in it?

BALL: I don't think that was the element so much as the fact that we couldn't have the President do nothing else for a matter of a week. This also related to the Secretary because there was a good deal of ambiguity in writing about this event as to just what the Secretary's role was. The Secretary felt it necessary for him to continue with the normal volume of business so that during this period he was seeing ambassadors; he was conducting the business

[-54-]

of the Department while he left me free to sit in the "think tank" with the rest of the ExComm and argue these matters out. He would come in from time to time. He and I talked together, and I knew the general line of his thinking although he never came out flat-footedly and said which side he was on. But we talked together a good deal; he expressed the view to me, and we discussed it during these days, as to whether it was really appropriate for him to

get into an argument where he was lined, taking a side against other people in the ExComm. It was his view, and I think he was right, that the role of the Secretary of State was to hear all the arguments and then finally make a quiet, private recommendation to the President rather than to participate with everybody else on the ExComm in a kind of general, free-for-all debate. It was because of the way he handled this, which he thought was the only proper way consistent with the dignity and the special position of the Secretary of State, that he was subsequently criticized in things

[-55-]

like the Alsop [Joseph Alsop] article and so on.

KRAFT: Can we revert again to the chronology?

BALL: Yes. This chronology, of course, is well known so I don't think we have to be too concerned about just what happened on each day other than the fact that unless I can add some gloss or illumination to it.

KRAFT: These meeting continued until the President went out to the Middle West....

BALL: He went out that night. During this time, after the day's meetings, almost every night the Secretary and "Tommie" Thompson and I would meet until midnight or one or two o'clock and try to see if we could get to some conclusion as to just what was going on in the Kremlin during this time--how this decision happened to have been reached, and how far we could push them without creating a situation in which the more irresponsible elements might get control of the situation.

KRAFT: Did you come to conclusions or anything like that?

BALL: This was where "Tommie" Thompson's own insights were of

[-56-]

the greatest value. It was his speculation that this was probably a decision of Khrushchev himself, that he would probably have been the moving factor, and that the intention had been a political one rather than--more than--a military one; that he thought that, if he could pull off this great stunt of getting these missiles in place in Cuba, he could achieve this before we learned about it, he could then present us with a *fait accompli*--present the world with this one--and that we probably then wouldn't do anything about it because, after all, he had missiles in Turkey and hadn't done anything about them. But it would put an enormous squeeze on us and heighten his own prestige.

The President didn't get back until Thursday, as I recall.

KRAFT: Saturday, I think.

BALL: That's right. The 17th, which was Wednesday, was the night he went up to Connecticut. Then he got back the same night. The following day we met again at eleven o'clock [a.m.] at the White House, and we went

[-57-]

through all the arguments that we'd been hashing over hour after hour in the "think tank" the day before.

One of the things that we were very concerned with was that, if there was a leak, before we could mobilize the strength for effective action we might be presented with an ultimatum by Khrushchev, and that, if he had said something very hard and firm, it would be hard for him to back down. So we had to be in a position where our force was fully mobilized and available before he knew about it.

One of the other things that concerned us was we didn't know whether there was going to be a simultaneous squeeze on Berlin. We had just been through, at this time, this long period of agony over Berlin; we thought possibly that this emplacement of missiles in Cuba was a means of pressure--that the cost of getting the missiles out would be some deal on Berlin. All this time we were scared to death that there was going to be a leak somewhere.

KRAFT: Did you have any personal problems with leaks? Were

[-58-]

people wondering where you were and things like that?

BALL: No. In fact my own staff had a pretty good idea of what was going on because they were right here and the ExComm was meeting across there. But I knew they were secure. I think people in the Department felt that there was some big meetings that were happening, but actually we used to bring McNamara in through my private elevator and try to get people in and out of there as quietly as possible; the press never caught on.

KRAFT: Saturday afternoon, after the President came back from his Western trip, was the time of decision making, wasn't it?

BALL: Yes, it was a very.... Let me just see if I can recall the actual....

KRAFT: Did anyone take the view that this was a good chance for knocking off Castro?

BALL: Oh, yes. This was, I would say, the McCone-Dillon view. And, I think, ultimately, the Bundy view. "Let's not let this opportunity go by."

[-59-]



I notice that they've listed in this Summary five different ascending orders of attack: 1. Beginning with diplomatic pressure but no military action. 2. A limited surprise air strike against just the missiles. 3. Blockade or quarantine. 4. A massive air strike against the missiles sites as well as the bomber, and everything else of an offensive nature. 5. Invasion. Actually four and five were tied together during most of the discussion because the assumption was that you didn't have a massive air strike without having to follow it by an invasion.

One of the elements, I think, that had influenced Bundy in his earlier thinking about treating this just as a diplomatic matter, had been the handling of the U-2 incident in the Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] Administration, and the feeling that there shouldn't have been an issue for us. It should have been just sort of treated as though it hadn't happened.

Now, all during this time one of the things which was causing a good deal of anxiety was the fact

[-60-]

that the missiles were getting closer and closer to readiness. We were flying extensive air cover at that time. There was a great concern that they would get to the point where we couldn't send an air strike in without the possibility of triggering one of those things. One of the arguments which took place between McNamara and "Tommie" Thompson, I thought, was, in retrospect, rather interesting because McNamara was very much afraid that, if we were to have an air strike, as the planes came in that we might not take them all out immediately, and that a local Russian commander would give the order to fire; then we'd have an atomic weapon landing in the United States. Thompson thought that this was totally impossible because he was convinced that the Russians would never put the local commander in the position where he could, himself, fire this, that this was contrary to the whole pattern of Russian command.

Gromyko came to see the President Thursday night. As I recall, only Rusk and "Tommie" Thompson were with

[-61-]

Gromyko with the President and, I think, the interpreter. Gromyko left the White House at 7:18 p.m. Dean gave him dinner that night. After the dinner, which lasted until 12:25 a.m., Dean came back down, and "Tommie" Thompson and Alex Johnson and I then met with him in his office. We brought him up to date with all that we'd been doing in the ExComm during the day, and he went over the events of the evening with Gromyko. We'd had talks during that day with Bob Lovett [Robert A. Lovett], who had been brought into the discussion, and also with Dean Acheson [Dean G. Acheson]. I think it was on that day that we had talked with Dean.

KRAFT: One other thing that's, I guess, historically important, did Stevenson advocate doing nothing? Did he advocate the diplomatic approach?

BALL: No. As I recall, he was generally in favor of some kind of quarantine. He was out of it from the first day till later during the week and didn't actually participate in much of the discussion. I think, when he came back, we were pretty well split between an air

[-62-]

strike or a quarantine. He was against the air strike which, I think we all assumed, meant that he was more or less for the quarantine.

During this time while the policy group of the ExComm had been meeting, we'd formed the habit of choosing up sides. I mean, assigning people rather arbitrarily to argue one case or another. Then they would retire and write papers not only setting down the arguments but laying out the plans as to how each thing could be carried on.

While Rusk was having dinner with Gromyko--giving a dinner for Gromyko--the rest of the ExComm met with the President at ten o'clock [p.m.] over at the White House. By this time we'd pretty well gotten down to a kind of general agreement; that we were going to hold the Soviet Union as the primary party and interest, that we were going to act--nobody was then arguing for the idea that we just treat this as a diplomatic matter. It was at that meeting that the President sort of tentatively indicated: "Let's

[-63-]

think in terms of a blockade that I can announce next Monday." We set up the detailed planning for the blockade, and various people were assigned various tasks.

On the 19th, which was Friday, the President went off on his trip. We had all told him he had to go. Then, we continued these planning group meetings, developing in some detail the plans both for the blockade and for the air strike. But I think most of us by that time had come to the private conclusion that this was almost certainly going to be an air strike.

KRAFT: A blockade.

BALL: I mean, a blockade. It was on, I think, Thursday night--or Friday night I guess. I can check this in my diary, and I will. I had been committed to make a speech at the Board of Directors of the United States Chamber of Commerce, and I didn't dare cancel. So I went over and made the speech and subjected myself to a lot of questions, most of which were about

[-64-]

Cuba--whether there were any offensive weapons there and so on. I remember developing a form of words which gave the impression that there were none without actually telling a lie. It was a very uncomfortable experience to leave a meeting of ExComm and go over there and have dinner with these characters, speak to them, answer their questions, and argue with them for a couple of hours and then come back into another ExComm meeting. It was a sort

of unreality about the whole business.

One of the things, again, which I think struck all of us was that this was the most beautiful weather I could remember. There was a kind of macabre note that we would be meeting, say in the Cabinet's room of the White House, and come out into the Rose Garden into the most magnificent day one can think of. The symbol that kept coming through my mind was one of those Georgia O'Keefe pictures of a rose growing up through an ox skull. This is the symbol that had formed in my mind about this week.

[-65-]

One of the hard line fellows, also, was Acheson who didn't think a quarantine was really much good.

But even after the Friday night decision of a tentative kind to have a blockade and announce it.... And I must say that when the President indicated that this was the track he was taking, I was enormously relieved because I had a feeling that at least we weren't going to do anything which would be shocking to the sensibilities of the world and which might trigger a precipitous and impulsive response from the Soviet Union. I had a feeling if we suddenly killed a lot of Russians that we might be in deep trouble, that they would feel they had to respond. Now all of this required an awful lot of consideration of the legality of the blockade and the exact means of carrying out, Yes? Yes, I'll interrupt this for just a minute.

I've got to leave here in about ten or fifteen minutes. I'm going to New York to see a show, believe it or not.

[-66-]

KRAFT: My gosh! Congratulations.

BALL: Do you want me to get out for a minute?

KRAFT: No. This concludes the second interview in the oral history project for the Kennedy Library with Under Secretary of State, George Ball.

[END OF INTERVIEW #2]

[-67-]

George W. Ball Oral History Transcript – JFK #2  
Name List

**A**

Acheson, Dean G., 62, 66  
Alsop, Joseph, 56

**B**

Bohlen, Charles E., 44  
Bundy, McGeorge, 45, 51, 59, 60

**C**

Castro Ruz, Fidel Alejandro, 46, 47, 59

**D**

Dillon, C. Douglas, 45, 52, 59

**E**

Eisenhower, Dwight D., 60

**G**

Gromyko, Andrei Andreevich, 45, 61, 63

**H**

Hilsman, Roger, Jr., 42

**J**

Johnson, Lyndon Baines, 45, 52  
Johnson, Ural Alexis, 42, 45, 52, 62

**K**

Kennedy, John F., 44, 45, 46, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57,  
59, 61, 62, 63, 64, 66  
Kennedy, Robert F., 52, 53, 54  
Khrushchev, Nikita Sergeevich, 48, 57, 58

**L**

Lovett, Robert A., 62

**M**

McCone, John A., 45, 52, 59  
McNamara, Robert S., 45, 46, 51, 52, 59, 61

**O**

O'Keefe, Georgia, 65

**R**

Roosa, Robert V., 43  
Rusk, Dean, 42, 43, 44, 56, 62, 63

**S**

Stevenson, Adlai E., 44, 62

**T**

Taylor, Maxwell D., 42  
Thompson, Llewellyn E, Jr., 43, 44, 45, 52, 56, 61,  
62