Interview with Leonard Meeker

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR LEONARD MEEKER

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Initial interview date: April 25, 1989

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Q: When did you first learn of the problem of Soviet missiles in Cuba?

MEEKER: Very late on the afternoon of Thursday, October 18, 1962, Secretary Dean Rusk asked me to come to his office. When I arrived, he told me that photo reconnaissance showed the presence of Soviet missile sites in Cuba, and said that it appeared that the Soviets were shortly going to equip them with nuclear armed missiles. I asked a couple of questions. First, whether it was quite clear and definite from the photography that these conclusions were correct. Secondly, whether, if the missiles, in fact, were there and remained operational, they would, indeed, become a security threat to the United States. His answer to both questions was “Yes.” He asked me to develop a legal analysis of the situation, focusing on the steps which the United States might take in order to secure the removal of the sites, the missiles, and, if present, the warheads from Cuba.

Q: What did your memorandum to Secretary Rusk state concerning the steps open to the United States and international law?

MEEKER: There was not a lot of time to work on this because Mr. Rusk wanted a memorandum by 7:00 that evening, only a little more than four and a half hours away. He

also asked me to work on it alone, without disclosing to anyone else or consulting anyone else about the subject.

So I went back to my office and got out some treaties, including the Rio Treaty of 1947 and the United Nations charter. I began to think about—and then to write—a legal memorandum on the subject. What I concluded and put into the memorandum was that, under the Rio Treaty, the council of the Organization of American States could be convoked as an organ of consultation under the Rio Treaty, and could, under that treaty, recommend to members of the OAS that they take appropriate measures to remove a threat to the peace of America, if they found such a threat to exist.

There is another provision in the Rio Treaty which provides for action by the organization and its members if an armed attack occurs against a member of the inter-American community. It did not seem to me that any armed attack had occurred by any country against any other and, for that reason, I did not rely upon the provisions dealing with armed attack, but rather, on a later provision of the treaty which provides for consultation and recommendation in the event the organ of consultation should find the existence of a threat to the peace of America. I said, “I thought that the council could reasonably conclude that the placement of nuclear armed missiles in Cuba—not only near the United States, but near many other members of the OAS—did indeed constitute a threat to the peace of America within the meaning of the Rio Treaty.”

Under the treaty, the organ of consultation has the right to recommend measures to member states, to be taken in such a case. The recommendation requires a two-thirds vote. It is not binding upon members. It merely authorizes them to take action which is recommended by the organ of consultation. It was necessary, also, to relate this whole subject to the United Nations charter, because the United Nations charter contains provisions prohibiting the use of force against any country in contravention of international law. There is an exception in the case of armed attack, but I did not conclude that this was such a case.

The charter also has another exception, and that exception is for action taken by a regional organization. Indeed, the provisions of the UN charter on regional organizations in chapter eight were designed and tailored specifically to take account of the existence of the inter-American system. So it seemed to me that a very good argument could be made that, if the council of the OAS recommended even military measures to remove what we characterized as a threat to the peace of America, this, indeed, would be consistent with the UN charter, because it would be the action of a regional organization recognized as legitimate in chapter eight of the charter.

Q: Secretary Rusk, you said, requested this memorandum by 7:00 on the evening of October 18. Can you tell us what took place the following morning, then, in the Department of State?

MEEKER: I took the memorandum to Mr. Rusk that evening about 7:00. The next morning, around 8:30 or 8:45, George Ball, then Under Secretary of State, convoked a meeting in his office to discuss the whole problem of the Soviet missiles in Cuba. One of the subjects, which we naturally discussed, was military measures to prevent the introduction of any more Soviet material by sea into Cuba. Some of the participants who were there, naturally, said, “This was a blockade and the United States should declare a blockade of Cuba, and then enforce it with our Navy.” I suggested that this was not really the best terminology, because a blockade implies the existence of a state of war. The United States had not declared war against either Cuba or the Soviet Union, and certainly would not wish to do so. In order to avoid any implication of a state of war from the imposition of measures which we described as blockade, I thought we should adopt different terminology.

I was remembering, then, the speech given by Franklin Roosevelt decades before, in which he had spoken of quarantining the aggressor. So I suggested as an alternative to blockade the term “defensive quarantine.” It seemed to me that if we were to take military measures involving our Navy to prevent the arrival of any more war material in Cuba, we

would do best to describe it as a defensive quarantine—a measure that was defensive in character and which did not imply the existence of a state of war between anyone.

Q: I believe that, later that morning, an Ex-Comm meeting took place—that is, on the morning of October 19. Could you indicate who attended that meeting and what took place there?

MEEKER: About 9:00, on the morning of October 19th, the group which had been meeting in Under Secretary Ball's office moved across the hall to the conference room, where Ex-Comm was to meet. Those present were Secretary Rusk; Under Secretary Ball; Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson; Deputy Under Secretary Alexis Johnson; Assistant Secretary Edward Martin; Secretary of the Treasury Douglas Dillon; Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara; the Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric; and Assistant Secretary for International Affairs in the Defense Department, Paul Nitze; General Maxwell Taylor, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Attorney General Robert Kennedy; Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach; CIA Director John McCone; Ray Cline, also of the CIA; McGeorge Bundy, Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs; Theodore Sorensen, speech writer for President Kennedy; and Dean Acheson, former Secretary of State.

Q: Can you go on, then, to tell us what took place at that meeting?

MEEKER: The meeting began with Secretary Rusk asking Alexis Johnson if he was ready to lay a program before the group, a program of proposed action. Alex Johnson said that he was not ready to do that. Then there followed a briefing on the basis of photographic intelligence presented by a CIA representative, Arthur Lundahl.

After this, Mr. McCone asked Ray Cline to give the most recent intelligence estimate conclusions of the US Intelligence Board. Mr. Cline did this on the basis of three papers which were then distributed to the group. In his presentation, he covered the question of what the state of construction was at the missile sites, and what was believed to be the

probable development at those sites, with the arrival of missiles and possibly war heads later.

Mr. Rusk then said he thought there ought to be some exposition of the legal framework to surround any possible military measures by the United States. He was about to ask me to do that, when Attorney General Kennedy signaled and said Mr. Katzenbach will do that. So Nick Katzenbach, at that point, expressed the view that the President had ample constitutional and statutory authority to take any needed military measures. He thought a declaration of war was unnecessary, and from the standpoint of international law, Mr. Katzenbach thought US action would be justified on the principle of self-defense.

I said I did not think a declaration of war would improve our position, but would, indeed, impair it, and that, furthermore, if we were going to engage in measures which we could describe as a defensive quarantine of Cuba, involving the use of force, we would need to relate this to the provisions and obligations of the United Nations charter. It did not seem to me that the situation in Cuba constituted armed attack by any country against another, and that we needed to consider it on another basis. I said, “I also did not think that one could simply say that any action to be taken by the United States was justifiable, if we said it was self-defense.” I reviewed the provisions of the Rio Treaty and of the UN charter and laid forth the analysis which I had expressed in the memorandum to Secretary Rusk.

There was then a discussion as to whether the necessary votes would be obtainable in the Organization of American States. Mr. Rusk asked Ed Martin, the Assistant Secretary for Latin American Affairs, to give his estimate about this. Mr. Martin said he thought the US could immediately secure the vote of 14 out of the then 20 members functioning in the OAS. He thought that within 24 hours we could raise that majority up to 17, or maybe even 18 or 19. He was hopeful in regard to Ecuador and Chile, and believed there was a good chance of getting Mexico.

At this point, Attorney General Kennedy said, “The President would be placed in an impossible position if we went to the OAS and failed to get the necessary votes, or if there were a delay.” He asked if we could be perfectly sure of the outcome before seeking OAS concurrence. Mr. Martin said he hated to guarantee anything, but he had a lot of confidence about this. You could not go to the American Republics in advance without loss of security, but he felt that a last minute approach by US Ambassadors to heads of state laying the situation on the line would produce the votes. Attorney General Kennedy once again expressed his great concern at the possibility of some slip if this course were to be followed.

Then there was a discussion which covered a meeting held the night before with the President. One participant looked back on that meeting and believed it had arrived at a tentative conclusion to institute a blockade, and thought the President had been satisfied at the consensus, which was seemingly arrived at among his advisors. General Taylor quickly indicated that he had not concurred, and that the Joint Chiefs had reserved their position. McBundy said he had reflected a great deal upon the situation in the course of a sleepless night. He doubted whether the strategy group was serving the President as well as it might, if it merely recommended a blockade. He had spoken with the President this morning, and he felt there was further work to be done. A blockade would not remove the missiles. Its effects were uncertain and, in any event, would be slow to be felt. Something more would be needed to get the missiles out of Cuba. This would be made more difficult by the prior publicity of a blockade, and the consequent pressures from the United Nations for a negotiated settlement. An air strike would be quick and would take out the bases in a clean surgical operation. He favored decisive action with its advantages of surprise and confronting the world with fait accompli.

There was then discussion of this general subject as to which line of action ought to be pursued. Mr. Rusk asked Mr. Acheson for his views. Acheson said Khrushchev had presented the United States with a direct challenge. We were involved in a test of wills,

and the sooner we got to a showdown, the better. He favored cleaning the missile bases out decisively with an air strike. “There was something else to remember,” he said. “This wasn't just another instance of Soviet missiles aimed at the United States. Here they were in the hands of a madman whose actions would be perfectly irresponsible. The usual restraints operating on the Soviets would not apply. We better act, and act quickly.”

As far as questions of international law might be involved, Mr. Acheson agreed with Mr. Katzenbach's position that self-defense was an entirely sufficient justification. But if there were going to be imported a qualification or requirement of approval by the OAS, as apparently suggested by Mr. Meeker, he could not go along with that. Secretary Dillon said he agreed there should be a quick air strike. Mr. McCone was of the same opinion.

General Taylor said that a decision now to impose a blockade was a decision to abandon the possibility of an air strike. A strike would be feasible for only a few more days. After that, the missiles would be operational. Thus, it was now or never for an air strike. He favored such a strike. If this were to take place Sunday morning, a decision would have to be made at once, so that the necessary preparations could be ordered. For a Monday morning strike, a decision would have to be reached tomorrow—meaning Saturday—because 48 hours' notice was required.

Secretary McNamara said that he would give orders for the necessary military dispositions, so that if the decision were for a strike, the Air Force would be ready. He did not, however, advocate an air strike. He favored the alternative, a blockade. Under Secretary George Ball said he was a waiver between the two courses of action.

At this point, Attorney General Kennedy said, with a grin on his face, that he too had had a talk with the President, indeed, very recently, only this morning. It seemed to him three main possibilities. One was to do nothing—that would be unthinkable. Another was an air strike. The third was a blockade. He thought it would be very, very difficult, indeed, for the President if the decision were to be for an air strike, with all the memory of Pearl Harbor,

and with all the implications that this would have for us, and whatever world there would be afterward. For 175 years we had not been that kind of country. A sneak attack was not in our traditions. Thousands of Cubans would be killed without warning and a lot of Russians too. He favored action to make known unmistakably the seriousness of US determination to get the missiles out of Cuba. But he felt the action should allow the Soviets some room for maneuver, to pull back from their over extended position in Cuba.

Mac Bundy, addressing himself to the Attorney General, said this was all very well, but a blockade would not eliminate the bases; an air strike would.

I then asked, at this point, “Who would be expected to be the government of Cuba, after an air strike? Would it be anyone other than Castro? If not, would anything be solved, and would we not be in a worse situation than before?”

After a pause, Ed Martin replied that, of course, a good deal might be different after a strike, and Castro might be toppled in its aftermath. Others expressed the view that we might have to proceed with an invasion after an air strike. Still another suggestion was that US armed forces seize the base areas alone, in order to eliminate the missiles. Secretary McNamara thought this a very unattractive kind of undertaking, from the military point of view.

Toward 1:00, Secretary Rusk said he thought this group could not make the decision as to what was to be done. This was for the President, in consultation with his constitutional advisors, presumably meaning Cabinet members and the Joint Chiefs. The Secretary thought the group's duty was to present to the President for his consideration fully staffed out alternatives. So two working groups ought to be formed, one to work out the blockade alternative and the other to work out the air strike. Alex Johnson was designated to head the first of those, and Mac Bundy the second. Mr. Johnson was to have with him Ambassador Thompson, Deputy Secretary Gilpatric, Mr. Martin, Mr. Nitze, and myself. Mac Bundy was to have Secretary Dillon, Mr. Acheson, and General Taylor. Mr. McCone

was asked to serve with the air strike group, but begged off on the ground that his position and duties on the US Intelligence Board made it undesirable for him to participate in a policy working group. Mr. Katzenbach was detailed to the Johnson group, later visiting the Bundy group to observe and possibly serve there as devil's advocate.

Ted Sorensen commented that he thought he had absorbed enough to start on the draft of a speech for the President. There was some inconclusive discussion on the timing of such a speech, on the danger of leaks before then, and on the proper time for meeting with the President once more, in view of his current Western campaign trip.

Before the whole group dispersed, Ambassador Thompson said, “The Soviets attached importance to questions of legality, and we should be able to present a strong legal case.”

Attorney General Kennedy, as he was about to leave the room, said he thought there was ample basis for a blockade.

I said, “Yes, that's so, provided the organ of consultation under the Rio Treaty adopted an appropriate resolution.”

The Attorney General then said, “That's all political, it's not legal.” On leaving the room he said to Nick Katzenbach, half humorously, “Remember now, you're working for me.”

These two groups met separately until about 4:00. They then reconvened and were joined once more by the cabinet officers, who had been away during the earlier part of the afternoon. The Johnson group scenario, which was more nearly complete and was ready earlier, was discussed first. Numerous criticisms were advanced. Some were answered—others led to changes. There was again a discussion of timing, now in relation to a presidential radio address. Ed Martin thought Sunday might be too early, as it would be virtually impossible to get to the Latin American heads of state on Sunday. Ambassador Thompson made the point that 24 hours must be allowed to elapse between announcement of a blockade and enforcement, so as to give the Soviet government time

to get instructions to their ship captains. About two hours were spent on the Johnson scenario.

Then, at 6:00, the Bundy approach was taken up, its author saying “It's been much more fun for us up to this point, since we have had a chance to poke holes in the blockade plan. Now the roles will be reversed.” Not much more than a half-hour was spent on the Bundy air strike scenario.

More than once during the afternoon, Secretary McNamara voiced the opinion that the US would have to pay a price to get the Soviet missiles out of Cuba. He thought we would at least have to give up our missile bases in Italy and Turkey, and we would probably have to pay more besides.

At different times the possibility of nuclear conflict breaking out was referred to. The point was made that once the Cuban missile installations were complete and operational, a new strategic situation would exist, with the United States more directly and immediately under the gun than ever before. A striking Soviet military push in the Western hemisphere would have succeeded and become effective. The clock could not be turned back. Things would never be the same again. During this discussion, Attorney General Kennedy said, “In looking forward into the future, it would be better for our children and grandchildren, if we decided to face the Soviet threat. Stand up to it and eliminate it now. The circumstances for doing so at some future time were bound to be more unfavorable. The risks will be greater. The chances of success less good.”

Secretary Rusk, toward the end of the afternoon, stated his approach to the problem in this way, “The US needed to move so that a planned action would be followed by a pause, in which the great powers could step back from the break, and have time to consider and work out a solution, rather than be drawn inexorably from one action to another, and escalate into general nuclear war.” The implication of his statement, although he did not say this expressly, was that he favored blockade rather than air strike.

In the course of the afternoon discussion, the military representatives, especially Secretary McNamara, came to expressing the view that an air strike could be made sometime after Sunday, if a blockade did not produce results as to the missile bases in Cuba. Attorney General Kennedy took particular note of this shift in the Defense Department view, and toward the end of the day, made clear that he firmly favored blockade as the first step. Other steps, subsequently, were not precluded and could be considered. He thought it was now pretty clear what the decision should be.

Around 6:30, Adlai Stevenson, who had come from New York, arrived at the meeting and was asked by Secretary Rusk if he had some views on the question of what to do.

Q: He was ambassador to the UN at that time.

MEEKER: At that time, Adlai Stevenson was United States representative to the United Nations. When he was asked what his views were, and specifically whether he favored a blockade, he answered affirmatively. He went on to say, “We must look beyond the particular immediate action of a blockade. We need to develop a plan for a solution to the problem, elements for negotiation designed to settle the current crisis in a stable and satisfactory way, and enable us to move forward on wider problems.” He was working on some ideas for a settlement. One possibility would be the demilitarization of Cuba under effective international supervision, perhaps accompanied by neutralization of the island under international guarantees and with UN observers to monitor compliance.

Once again, there was some discussion of when another meeting with the President should be held. It was generally agreed that the President should continue on his trip until Sunday morning. He would be reachable by telephone prior to that time. In fact, the President's trip was cut short, with the press being informed that he had a bad cold and was returning to Washington.

Q: When did the President return? When was the meeting with him, and what happened at that following meeting, at which, I presume, decisions began to be taken?

MEEKER: The next meeting of Ex-Comm, which was indeed with President Kennedy, took place on Saturday, October 20th. I was not present at that meeting, and therefore, learned of what happened there only from participants who were. At that meeting, it was decided to take, as a first measure, steps to prevent the introduction into Cuba of any further material for completing the missile sites and making them operational. It was decided that these measures would be known as a defensive quarantine, rather than a blockade. It was also decided that the vote of the OAS would be sought to support such measures. Instructions were to be sent to the ambassadors in the Latin American countries to call on the Presidents of those countries on Sunday afternoon to secure their authorization for their representative in the OAS council to vote in favor of a US resolution, recommending steps to remove the missiles from Cuba. It was also decided that President Kennedy would make a radio address on Monday evening, October 22nd, and that a resolution would be introduced in the Security Council the following day.

Q: It sounds to me like a number of your ideas were, by this point, accepted, and I wonder what happened then with the preparations for the President's speech that were to follow over the next day or two, prior to his speech on the evening of the 22nd?

MEEKER: Well, a great deal of work was done on that speech. Ted Sorensen was in charge of it and was the principal drafter, since he had been a participant in several of the meetings, including those where these plans had been most thoroughly discussed. He was in a position to draft a speech which would reflect quite accurately the decisions made, plus, also, the views of President Kennedy. Different drafts were, in fact, circulated in the course of Saturday and Sunday. Various people made comments which were essentially comments of detail. The speech as given Monday night was very much Ted Sorensen's product.

Q: When the President did deliver the speech, then, on the evening of 22 October, could you indicate what the final course was, that was announced?

MEEKER: The course announced was that quarantine measures would be adopted and would be enforced from a time that was set in the speech. The time was set back about a day and a half, following Tommy Thompson's strong suggestion that there should be some time allowed to elapse between announcement of the measures and enforcement of them by the US Navy. In fact, any enforcement would later postpone a little bit longer, and instead of beginning Wednesday, was delayed, by President Kennedy's own decision, until Thursday. In fact, no such measures were ever taken. Tommy Thompson had feted out the great necessity of giving the Soviets time, not only in which to reflect on what course they would follow in response to the President's speech and announcement, but also practical time within which to communicate new orders to ship captains, since various Soviet vessels were on route to Cuba at that time. They were seen by US air and naval reconnaissance approaching Cuba.

He also had pointed out something else which seemed to me always of great importance. He said, “If the US were to begin enforcing the quarantine by actually shooting at a Soviet vessel, and if the vessel were damaged, sunk, or personnel on board were killed or wounded, a whole new situation would arise, far more serious because, at that point, was not involved simply a Soviet attempt to install nuclear missiles in the Western hemisphere, but actual armed conflict between the US and the USSR. The Soviets would consider that their prestige and honor were at stake. At that point, one could not predict what the Soviet response would be, or how the whole affair would end.”

It always seemed to me that Thompson's advice was exceedingly sound. It was based on very long experience in the Soviet Union, knowledge of the Soviet government on how it works, understanding of the Russian mind, and that his counsel was very important in

persuading President Kennedy to move with greatest care and to achieve his intended objectives with minimal risk.

Q: While all this was going on, one presumes that approaches were now being made, in the interval, to the various heads of state of the other American Republics. Could you tell us what happened in the various capitals concerned and at the emergency meeting of the OAS council that followed?

MEEKER: On Sunday afternoon, as planned, the US ambassadors to the Latin American countries did call upon the presidents of those countries, and asked for their authorization to their representatives to vote for the measures which the US was about to propose. When the vote took place in the OAS council, 19 votes were cast in favor of the US resolution. There was one abstention, and that was Uruguay, which, at that time, had a nine man council of government, which could not be brought together and brought to a decision in time for the meeting. However, I believe, one or two days later, Uruguay also cast its vote later in favor of the same resolution.

Q: So it became a unanimous resolution.

MEEKER: It was then unanimous. I should point out, at this stage, Cuba was not sitting in the council, because it had been ejected following long debates within the council about Cuban subversion and aggression in the Western Hemisphere. Because of the conduct of Cuba, its participation in the council of the OAS had been suspended.

Q: We're now fairly deep into the crisis. Could you tell us what your role was from Tuesday, the 23rd of October, through the following Friday, the 26th of October?

MEEKER: I went to New York—either Monday night or Tuesday morning—to be present there to assist the US delegation in presenting the case to the Security Council, and I spent the remaining days of that week in New York. I tried to help Governor Stevenson, and also talked with representatives of a number of other countries that were members

of the council. The effort was focused, as you might expect in such a case, on what legal grounds the United States had for taking measures of force to remove the missile bases from Cuba. Not only the Latin American countries, which are traditionally very concerned with questions of international law that any issue of intervention might arise, but other countries as well wanted to be convinced that, in fact, the United States had a good legal case, and that they could properly turn aside and defeat the Soviet argument— which was that the United States was violating the charter of international law by announcing and preparing to take measures against Soviet shipping on the high seas.

During the next few days, I circulated a memorandum in New York to delegations on that subject, and they were largely satisfied, I think, of the legal basis on which we were proceeding. It was essentially the Soviet veto, which prevented the Security Council from taking any action in favor of the US draft resolution. Friday night, since the proceedings in the council had come to an end—or at a dead end, in fact—I returned to Washington, and was there during the next couple of days while the final d#nouement of the crisis took place.

Q: I believe that was on October 28th, wasn't it? What took place, then, on the 27th of October at the State Department?

MEEKER: The 27th was, in many ways, a crucial day. That morning there began arriving from Moscow a message from Khrushchev to the President—a message which gave all the signs of having been written by Khrushchev, himself, and which appeared to concede that the USSR would unconditionally remove the missiles from Cuba.

After the arrival of this message, there came another one, which appeared to be much more institutional and bureaucratic— and which people believed must have come out of the Politburo, or the Foreign Ministry, or both—which, in effect, said that the missiles could be removed, but subject to certain conditions, as to actions which the US would have to take. There was, naturally, discussion within the government, at that time, as to whether

Khrushchev was losing control of the situation, and how to respond in the face of these two somewhat different messages. The decision that was made was simply to act as if only message number one had been received. A reply was sent out which specifically and expressly accepted what the Soviets had said in what appeared to be the Khrushchev personal message, and the other one was ignored.

A couple of other things were happening at about this time. On Friday night, Robert Kennedy had had a meeting with the Soviet ambassador, and in that meeting he apparently indicated that the US would agree to the withdrawal of US missiles in Turkey. But this could not be announced publicly at the time of the settling of the Cuban missile crisis. He just wanted that to be understood as something that the US would do, but that it could not acknowledge at the time.

Also on Friday night—this was not known until long afterward—Dean Rusk received a call from President Kennedy, in which President Kennedy asked him to arrange for a proposal to be made by U Thant, Secretary General of the United Nations, that the missiles be withdrawn from Cuba, and that also the US missiles be withdrawn from Turkey. Many years later, in fact, in early 1988, Dean Rusk disclosed that, in response to this request from the President, he spoke with Andrew Cordier, who was then Under Secretary of the United Nations, in order to lay the groundwork for such an appeal by the secretary general. However, because the crisis was, in fact, settled bilaterally through exchanges of messages between Washington and Moscow, the U Thant proposal was never floated, and indeed was not known until Mr. Rusk disclosed it in a letter.

Q: Why do you think Khrushchev—or perhaps I should say the Soviet government, since the Politburo was obviously involved—moved to put nuclear missiles in Cuba in the first place?

MEEKER: It always seemed to me, that this was quite directly connected with the US attempted invasion of Cuba in April, 1961 at the Bay of Pigs. At that time, the US sought to

overthrow Castro with an invasion to be mounted by Cuban exiles who had been training in Nicaragua. The plan had been initiated during the Eisenhower Administration. It was still alive, and very much under consideration when President Kennedy took office. The plan evidently underwent changes in the early months of 1961, and earlier ideas for US military participation or US military support of the invasion seemed to have been dropped, on the ground that the United States did not want to seem to be directly involved in this invasion, but hoped that it could be carried out successfully as a Cuban exile enterprise.

In addition, I suspect that the Soviets knew of other efforts on the part of the US, or at least possible plans to eliminate Castro through assassination. They felt that perhaps the best way to protect Castro and the communist experiment in Cuba was to put some military might there.

It could also have been still another element. Khrushchev was a man who was disposed to make bold moves. He might have thought that at a time when the US preponderance in nuclear missiles was considerable, he would be able to even up the balance, to some extent, by placing intermediate range missiles very near to the United States coast, so that the Soviets would have that sort of weapon targeted on US cities and not have simply intercontinental ballistic missiles some thousands of miles away. I suspect all of those elements probably entered in to what was indeed a rash venture.

Q: I think there was another aspect too, and that was that the Sino-Soviet dispute had broken out and reopened in 1960. By this time, through '61 and '62, the dispute had come into full bloom, and the central core of the dispute was that the Chinese at that time felt that a much more vigorous line was necessary in dealing with the Third World. They were accusing the Soviet Union of being soft on capitalism, so to speak, and the Soviets were making efforts to, while on the one hand, say that the Chinese were going too far—they were overly optimistic. On the other hand, it kind of proved their own fidelity to the cause, and their macho nature, you might say, by taking vigorous steps in those areas that were

described by them as being a more vital concern, namely, the relationship between the West and East at the core level, you might say.

MEEKER: Well, that's an interesting element, yes.

Q: In mentioning the Cuban missile crisis, you mentioned the build up of the Bay of Pigs episode as a preliminary step in that direction. Did you have any involvement in the decision to do that?

MEEKER: This was a subject of intense discussion and debate within the State Department in late March of 1961 and the early days of April. At that time, Chester Bowles, who was Under Secretary of State, was very concerned when he learned of the proposal to invade Cuba, and convened a series of meetings in his office at which both Abe Chayes and I were present, also Tom Hughes and some others. And out of those meetings came a series of memoranda addressed by Chester Bowles to President Kennedy objecting to the proposal for an invasion, pointing out various disadvantages of it and urging that the whole plan be dropped.

I remember one morning fairly late in a series of meetings, when Dean Rusk looked into the conference room where Mr. Bowles was having one of these meetings, and said, “If you are preparing another memorandum on Cuba, the President has said he really doesn't want to hear about that subject anymore.” We, at that point, desisted from sending any further memoranda, and, indeed, I think no more meetings were held.

On the Thursday before the Monday invasion of the Bay of Pigs, I guess we were aware in the State Department that the invasion was going to take place, quite imminently, within a matter of a very few days. I thought that, perhaps, I should make one more effort on this subject. I called up Walt Rostow over in the White House, who was Deputy Assistant for National Security. I asked if I could come to see him. I went over there and said essentially two things, “The US role in organizing an invasion of Cuba by exiles was clearly a violation of our international obligations. Furthermore, the whole plan was of such a nature that it

seemed bound to fail for lack of US military participation. And if this plan were proceeded with, the US would be in the worst possible position of taking an action which the world would regard as lawless, and also engaging in a monumental failure."

Walt said that he himself was not working on Cuba—that his main concentration was on Vietnam—but Mac Bundy was the person that dealt with Cuba. He could assure me that Mac and the President had been over this very carefully, and that things were well in hand, and that I should return to the State Department and deal with legal problems. [Laughter]

Q: Well, to go back to the Cuban missile crisis, which we were speaking of most of the time. Do you have any thoughts on how the Kennedy Administration treated their success in securing the removal of the Soviet missiles from Cuba?

MEEKER: President Kennedy had very definite views about this. He understood that an important moment in history had passed. The US had secured its objective of removing the missiles from Cuba. He was also very concerned not to seem to crow over the victory, not to make matters more difficult for Khrushchev, or to appear to humiliate the Soviet Union in the eyes of the world, any more than the facts already made it appear humiliated. He gave directions all down the line that people in the US government were to treat this as a very serious international crisis, which had been settled through careful, thoughtful negotiation. He wanted no one to boast or brag that the US had threatened its nuclear power against the Soviet Union, and had forced the USSR to bow to the American will.

I think it was really this experience which, for the first time, began to motivate Jack Kennedy to feel that something needed to be done to arrange for a better and more stable relationship between the US and USSR. I think he saw very clearly what could happen if a crisis got out of control, if nuclear weapons were to be used, and if a general nuclear exchange were to take place. He was the father of young children. I think he thought of what would happen to them, and to the world, if there were a nuclear war. It always seemed to me that this was the beginning, for him, of a process of thought which led to his

speech at American University in June of 1963, and which led, also, to his pursuing the idea of the nuclear test ban treaty, which was concluded later that summer.

Q: I was rather struck by the fact, particularly in the earlier stages that you described, that a great deal of work was being conducted in the Department of State. Besides yourself, a number of other players from the State Department were there, including Alex Johnson and Llewellyn Thompson, and Martin, of course. Do you have any comments on the degree to which the Department of State as an institution was involved in the decision making process? Obviously, the final decision was the President's. The main players are all mentioned, that is, the Cabinet heads, but there did seem to be a fair amount of institution involvement.

MEEKER: I think the State Department as an institution was, indeed, central in the management of this crisis. A great deal of the work was done there. Meetings were held in the Department, and Department officers prepared positions, papers, and draft messages. It seemed to me, over all, that the US government functioned exceedingly well during those difficult days. The representatives of other agencies, particularly Defense, were participants but, at that time, somewhat less centrally involved than the State Department. Later, when military measures were prepared and ordered, the Defense Department was very active, indeed.

It seemed to me that the government, as a whole, performed exceedingly well throughout the Cuban missile crisis. Security was, indeed, tight. There were no leaks between the early part of the crisis which, you might say, dated from about Monday, October 12th or Tuesday, the 13th. There were no leaks between that time and the President's speech. Indeed, very few people were informed about what was going on or what was being considered. Many of those people were, indeed, State Department people. I think the whole effort was managed efficiently and with great care, and, indeed, you would have to say, with as much wisdom as human beings could muster.

Q: Let us turn now to another topic entirely, that is, to Romania. You were ambassador to Romania from about 1969, that is the beginning of the Nixon Administration, up through early 1973. This is a period when the Romanians were becoming a fairly, in fact, a quite significant country for US policy, due primarily to the refusal of Romania to participate in the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. Romania's sort of maverick reputation began at this point—actually it had been going on a few years before—but it became very clear in this period. This was also the period when President Nixon included Romania as one of the very small number of stops on an around the world trip that he had made not too long after the beginning of his first administration. Could you comment on the hopes and expectations that we, the United States, had concerning Romania at that time, particularly in light of the very authoritarian course that Romania has pursued since? Obviously, this was a very authoritarian state even at that time, and had very many blemishes. We all know that the image that Romania has in the world has declined considerably in the years that have subsequently passed.

MEEKER: In 1969 the United States took a particular interest in Romania because of its assertion of independence from the Soviet Union, and its rejection of the idea of hegemony out of Moscow. This was an interest which the US took, in part, as a means of affording a little protection for Romania against possible Soviet attempts to take it over, in the way that the Soviet Union had taken over Czechoslovakia in 1968. We wanted to encourage as much independence on the part of Eastern European countries as was feasible, and that was, indeed, very limited, indeed. We also wanted, through our political actions and declarations, to afford whatever protection we could to Romania against further Soviet encroachment.

Those, I think, were the two basic reasons for special US interest in Romania at that time. There was, indeed, an apprehension that Romania might be the target of a Soviet move, such as had taken place the year before in Czechoslovakia. That apprehension did not really begin to dissipate until about 1971.

During 1969, I think the US government was not under any illusions about the character of the Romanian government's internal administration. While Romania pursued a somewhat independent foreign policy, and did so courageously, in the face of Soviet displeasure, the internal administration of the country was even referred to as Stalinist. The best thing that could be said about the Romania internal administration at that time, was that executions had stopped. Dissent was not permitted. There was not political freedom, but at least Romanians were not being put to death for political dissent, as had happened in earlier years from World War II on through the '50s.

So when one looks at the history of Romania from the early '70s until the present time, there is, perhaps, not surprise, but there is, surely, disappointment that Romania's course has been so negative, as viewed from our standpoint. I think we had the hope that, along with the independence in foreign policy, there could be some liberalization in the administration of Romania, and that this might come about in the course of time, but not rapidly. During 1968, '69, even in '70, the Romanian government did permit some Romanians to travel abroad. That permission was ended after 1970 because too many Romanians simply failed to return.

Q: I'd like to interject a comment or two. I might say, for the record, that I was Ambassador Meeker's deputy chief of mission during part of that period. The Foreign Minister told me once that—somewhat later—that during the invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Soviets moved large forces up to the frontier, including great masses of armor, which were revved up and made as noisy as possible, with the idea of putting as much pressure on Romania as they could, and that many of the Romanian decisions were made as a result of that. They were quite afraid but, nevertheless, resolved that they would try to stand up. One of the unfortunate, or fortunate, decisions made, they said, he said, was that they saw Czechoslovakia had acceded to the Warsaw Pact invasion, in part, because several leading members of the—although very much in the minority—of the central committee had invited the Soviets in. So the conclusion was reached that you cannot do two things at

one time: liberalize internally and maintain your independence. They opted entirely for the second. Therefore, Ceausescu was more or less designated as the only voice that could speak.

As time went on, he used that concentration of power that was designed for external purposes also for internal purposes, and enforced a line of action internally against, in my belief, a substantial portion of the central committee. This led progressively to the personal side of power for its own sake. In other words, Lord Acton's famous adage about “All power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” a great deal of that has taken place.

MEEKER: The Soviet threat against Romania, certainly, was a very lively one for about three years after 1968. [Telephone interruption] There were rumors over a period of time, often out of Vienna, that there would be Soviet military action against Romania. Usually, the rumors were in relation to Warsaw Pact maneuvers. From time to time it would be announced that such maneuvers would be held in Bulgaria, that Soviet troops would cross Romania on their way to Bulgaria, and, perhaps, they would not return home.

These rumors and the threats that they implied seemed to come to an end in September of 1971, when Brezhnev made a visit to Tito. I think there is some reason to believe that Tito made strong representations to Brezhnev not to press the so-called Brezhnev Doctrine. It was as a result of that visit that the Soviet Union relaxed its psychological warfare campaign against Romania.

As to why the Romanian government, and Ceausescu in particular, pursued very autocratic policies in the internal administration of the country—There probably is also the element that the leadership doubted that the Romanian people could handle democracy. I remember, once, asking Prime Minister Maurer directly why it would not be feasible and desirable to institute and operate more democratic institutions in the political life of Romania. He was a very highly educated and experienced and very wise man. His

answer, somewhat ruefully stated, was that he was afraid that Romanians were simply not ready, not qualified to operate democratic institutions.

Somewhat later, he did try, as Prime Minister, to introduce real debate into the grand national assembly, which met every year, and operated largely as a rubber stamp for government proposed measures. One year he arranged for genuine debate on a measure that was introduced by a government minister. He arranged for some of the members of the assembly to raise questions about the proposal to move amendments. I used to go to the sessions in the grand national assembly to observe what was happening, and I was there during the days when Mr. [Maurer] tried out this experiment.

What happened was that the scene became disorderly as the various amendments were moved. Members of the assembly didn't know what to do. They didn't understand what was going on. The President of the assembly, Stefan Voitec, finally, in bewilderment, and not knowing what his role should be, looked pleadingly over to [Mr. Maurer] and said, “What shall we do?” That was the defeat of Maurer's idea, because he then had to take the rostrum himself, give his answers to the various proposals for change that had been made, his suggestions for disposing of the amendments which had been moved. Thereupon, the assembly proceeded to do exactly what Maurer had said. You could see that he was a disappointed man and that his estimate of the political level of sophistication of his countrymen was born out by the facts.

Q: I believe somewhere along in there, too, he became in considerable agreement with Ceausescu in internal policy, namely, the degree of a certain forced paced economic development. There was a secret speech given by him, and clues that we finally heard something about, but never came out in the press.

MEEKER: Yes.

Q: Then his tenure was short, thereafter.

MEEKER: Yes, that's right. Maurer was an exceedingly intelligent man, and was not in full agreement with Ceausescu, and in his later years felt able to say a little bit about his disagreements, although he never made any major move.

Q: Incidentally, do you have any particular insights into the State visit of President Nixon? That was, I think, in 1969—Or Ceausescu's return trip to the United States?

MEEKER: I was not yet in Bucharest when President Nixon visited Romania. I did come to Washington at the time of the Ceausescu visit in 1970. It seemed to me a rather standard —and not very interesting—state visit in which the forms of conversations took place, and also there was a great deal of tourism with President Ceausescu visiting Williamsburg, going to Detroit, Niagara Falls, and New York.

Q: Sounds familiar. [Laughter] While there were many difficulties in the Romania of our time, my impression is that embassy morale was generally rather good at that point. I've been frequently told over the years, that—and have since—that morale is quite bad. I think it has a great deal to do with the fact that the internal situation is darkened over that period, that the hopes that we had for Romania have declined. However, to go back to the earlier period, what would your views be on the embassy that we had at that period, under your ambassadorship?

MEEKER: I thought that the embassy was a splendid institution and functioned exactly as it should. There were a large collection of very able officers, who did their jobs with professional skill and understanding. The morale of the embassy as a whole seemed to me very good, indeed. The conditions of life were not easy for all embassy members in all respects, but they dealt with their problems in a very objective, sensible manner. I can imagine, from hearing about conditions in Romania during recent years, that the conditions of life for members of diplomatic missions have deteriorated very greatly. The problems facing even a foreigner living in the diplomatic community in Bucharest would be far greater than what we experienced twenty years ago.

Q: Can you comment on any particular issues or events that took place in your period there? Does anything stand out that you might want to comment on?

MEEKER: I suppose one event which, in a way, stands out is the Ceausescu visit to China in the summer of 1971, the early summer. Ceausescu made a long visit to China and North Vietnam in the late spring, early summer of 1971. He returned from that visit with the sense that China under Mao represented true communism, and was an example which Romania should try to emulate. After he returned, one of the members of the inner circle of Ceausescu, asked me to come to his office. He gave me a long briefing on what had happened during the visit, and what had happened in the thinking of Nicolae Ceausescu. The immediate aftermath of this was one of those 4 to 5 hours speeches by Ceausescu to the Party, in which he reported on his visit, and announced for Romania a so-called 17 point ideological program. This was announced in July of 1971. It contained ever so many measures which were completely hateful to Romanians. It involved the end of Western movies in Romania, and the end of the importation of Western music on records. It involved so-called voluntary work on Sunday mornings. This seemed to me to be a turning point in Romania's recent history, from which it has gone steadily downhill.

End of interview