



Unsung Mediator: U Thant and the Cuban Missile Crisis

U Thant has put the world deeply in his debt.¹

—President John F. Kennedy

On October 16, 1962, President Kennedy learned that the Soviet Union was building nuclear missile installations in Cuba. For the next six days the president and his advisers secretly deliberated about the American response. The new threat not only upset the nuclear balance but also placed nuclear missiles capable of destroying most U.S. cities on the territory of a new enemy, Premier Fidel Castro. As the Kennedy administration strove to keep this alarming news secret, it nevertheless shared it with the new acting secretary general of the United Nations, a quiet unassuming Burmese diplomat named U Thant.² Specifically, on Saturday, October 20, 1962, Admiral John McCain, military adviser at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, informed Thant's military adviser, Major General Indar Jit Rikhye, about the missiles.³ General Rikhye went to the Pentagon for a secret briefing and received an album of U.S. photos of the menacing missiles,⁴ which he showed to Thant. Two days later, on Monday, October 22, Rikhye informed Thant that Kennedy would be making an important television broadcast that evening concerning the missiles. Thant conferred with the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Adlai Stevenson,⁵ and a few hours later watched Kennedy make one of the most momentous presidential speeches of the century. The president announced a "naval quarantine" of Cuba, pushing the world closer to nuclear war than ever before. In the deepening crisis, the United Nations, and specifically Secretary General Thant, was to play a significant role in de-escalating and then resolving the nuclear standoff

1. Gertrude Samuels, "The Meditation of U Thant," *New York Times Magazine*, December 13, 1964, 115.

2. U Thant was appointed acting secretary general of the United Nations on November 3, 1961, after the death of Dag Hammarskjöld. He was appointed secretary general on November 30, 1962, shortly after the Cuban missile crisis, retroactive to the time he assumed office in 1961. Hence, his retroactive title, secretary general, is used throughout this article.

3. Indar Jit Rikhye, "Critical Elements in Determining the Suitability of Conflict Settlement Efforts by the United Nations Secretary General," in *Timing the De-escalation of International Conflicts*, ed. Louis Kriesberg and Stuart J. Thorson (Syracuse, 1991), 73–74.

4. General Indar Jit Rikhye, interview by authors, April 30, 2006.

5. Rikhye, "Critical Elements in Determining the Suitability of Conflict Settlement Efforts by the United Nations Secretary General," 74.



Figure 1: U Thant, Secretary-General of the United Nations (1961–1972) (UN Photo).

between the superpowers. Thant (Figure 1) sent appeals and messages, relayed proposals, offered reassurances, advanced the “noninvasion for missiles” formula that formed the basis of the final agreement, shuttled to Cuba to mollify Castro, and helped secure a verification arrangement.

During the crisis, the Kennedy administration came to rely heavily upon the UN secretary general. In recognition of Thant’s intermediary services, Kennedy afterwards said: “U Thant has put the world deeply in his debt.”⁶ It is unfortunate that the role of the secretary general has gone unsung in the history of the crisis, for Thant was intimately involved in assisting the parties to reach an agreement from the time the quarantine took effect until closure of the last verification and arms withdrawal issues weeks later. In fact, the United Nations and its secretary general enjoyed enormous public prominence during the crisis and for a brief period afterwards. Headlines in American and Russian newspapers hailed Thant for his part in de-escalating the crisis. It was only after the crisis, as its history was being written, that the United Nations was edged out. The view that Kennedy’s threat of force alone had compelled the Soviets to back down was vigorously advanced. The popular belief became that, when the superpowers went eyeball to eyeball, “the other guy blinked,”⁷ as Secretary of State Dean Rusk had put it. This famous quotation was used repeatedly by traditionalists to characterize the conflict as an unequivocal American victory. Revisionists, on the other hand, have contended Kennedy needlessly risked war for domestic political gain.⁸

6. Kennedy quoted in Samuels, “The Mediation of U Thant,” 115.

7. Abram Chayes, *International Crises and the Role of Law: The Cuban Missile Crisis* (London, 1974), 84.

8. For a very good summary and analysis of the traditional and revisionist views and literature, see Richard Ned Lebow, “Domestic Politics and the Cuban Missile Crisis: The

Both traditionalists and revisionists pay minimal attention to Thant's mediatory role, as the historiography indicates.⁹

Thant's mediation set an historical precedent. His predecessor, Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld, had pioneered the UN's third-party role, for instance by securing the release of eleven American fliers held captive in the Peoples Republic of China in 1954–55, and again during the Suez Crisis of 1956.¹⁰ Hammarskjöld had expanded the prestige of the United Nations and his innovations helped give Thant a stronger role. The added poignancy and significance of Thant's action is that he corresponded directly with the heads of the superpowers and helped them pull back from the brink during the world's most dramatic nuclear showdown.

New sources have allowed some factual adjustments to our understanding of the Cuban missile crisis, including Thant's efforts. Most of these have been based upon the release of the transcripts of the deliberations of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, known as ExComm,¹¹ which was composed of Kennedy's principal advisers during the crisis. Soviet sources also became available, as did the testimonies of the actual participants in the crisis.¹² However, no studies to date have been devoted to the role Thant played.

This article describes Thant's intervention and analyzes his contributions. It highlights Thant's efforts to de-escalate the crisis, help resolve it, and then implement the settlement. It reveals how Kennedy utilized Thant's assistance to affect the Soviet position and actively sought his involvement at critical junctures. It compiles and summarizes, for the first time, the significant discussions about Thant in the American ExComm. This study uses ExComm and Soviet materials, oral histories, other primary and secondary sources, and previously unknown documentation found by the authors in UN archives regarding highly secret directions given to Thant by the U.S., requesting him to take specific actions.

Traditional and Revisionist Interpretations Reevaluated," *Journal of Diplomatic History*, 14 (Fall 1990): 471–92.

9. For a recent examination of Cuban missile crisis historiography, see the review essay by Robert A. Divine, "Alive and Well: The Continuing Cuban Missile Crisis Controversy," *Journal of Diplomatic History*, 18 (Fall 1994): 551–60. A full appraisal of Thant's role is absent from the literature. Thant took a humble attitude regarding his role, but the lack of credit was decried by his associates, including Sir Brian Urquhart and Major General Indarjit Rikhye. See Brian Urquhart, *A Life in Peace and War* (New York, 1987), 193; and Rikhye, "Critical Elements in Determining the Suitability of Conflict Settlement Efforts by the United Nations Secretary General," 80.

10. Brian Urquhart, *Hammarskjöld* (New York, 1973), 117, 159.

11. The deliberations of ExComm have been reproduced in: Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Cambridge, MA, 1997).

12. See Len Scott and Steve Smith, "Lessons of October: Historians, Political Scientists, Policy-Makers, and the Cuban Missile Crisis," *International Affairs* 70, 4 (1994): 659–84. Kennedy refers to a Soviet invasion of West Berlin.

PHASE ONE: DETECTION AND DECISION

They [the Soviets] can't let us just take out, after all their statements, take out their missiles, kill a lot of Russians, and not do anything. It's quite obvious that what they think they can do is try to get Berlin.¹³

—President Kennedy in response to a call for military action by the Joint Chiefs of Staff including Air Force Chief of Staff General Curtis LeMay, who asserted that a U.S. military attack on Cuba would not provoke any Russian response.

From October 16–22, 1962, Kennedy embarked upon six days of secret deliberations with his principal advisers in ExComm.¹⁴ To ensure the Soviets did not learn that the United States knew about the missiles, the president even kept an appointment with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko on October 17. Gromyko asserted that the only assistance the Soviet Union was providing to Cuba was for agriculture, plus a small amount of “defensive” arms. Kennedy reiterated his earlier statements that serious consequences would arise if the Soviet Union placed missiles or offensive weapons in Cuba, but Gromyko assured him this would never be done.¹⁵

ExComm divided along two lines. The “hawks” advocated an immediate air assault and invasion of Cuba while the “doves” called for negotiations and concessions. Gradually, the compromise position of a “naval quarantine” became Kennedy’s preferred option. It involved force but still allowed negotiation and a Soviet missile withdrawal without hostilities. The word quarantine was used because a naval blockade was, in international legal terminology, an act of war that required a declaration of war.¹⁶

During that week of secret deliberations, many of the Americans expected the United Nations to play a role in the crisis, though not necessarily its secretary general. They confined the United Nations to, firstly, a forum in which the United States would win the battle of world opinion and, secondly, an agency that would provide reliable observers to verify a possible Soviet missile withdrawal. On numerous occasions during that first week, the United Nations was discussed in ExComm. As early as October 20, Kennedy stated that at the United Nations, the United States should identify the Soviet missile buildup in Cuba as “subterranean” in nature.¹⁷ Two days later, on October 22, Secretary of State Dean Rusk said the United States should get UN teams to inspect all

13. May and Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes*, 179.

14. Robert Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York, 1969), 23.

15. *Ibid.*, 39–41.

16. International legal questions relating to the quarantine are summarized in Lester H. Brune, *The Missile Crisis of October 1962: A Review of Issues and References* (Claremont, CA, 1985), 96–97.

17. May and Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes*, 201.

missile activity in Cuba.¹⁸ Kennedy thought the United States should initially frighten the UN representatives with the prospect of all kinds of actions and then, when a resolution was proposed for the withdrawal of missiles from Cuba, Turkey, and Italy, the United States could consider supporting it.¹⁹ Adlai Stevenson proposed that the United States take the initiative by calling a UN Security Council meeting to demand an immediate standstill of missile construction in Cuba.²⁰ Secretary Rusk wondered aloud whether it would be better to move first in the United Nations or the Organization of American States (OAS). He thought American action at the United Nations should be aimed at removing the missile threat while the objective in the OAS should be to persuade other Latin American countries to act with the United States.²¹ When Ambassador Stevenson read from a list of problems he foresaw in the United Nations, Secretary Rusk reiterated his view that the U.S. aim should be a standstill of missile development in Cuba inspected by UN observers and then negotiation of other issues.²² Attorney General Robert Kennedy stated the United States should take the offensive rather than defensive at the United Nations, especially since the Soviet leaders had lied about the strategic missile deployment in Cuba.²³

Because the ExComm envisaged some roles for the United Nations in the crisis, Kennedy gave Secretary General Thant advance warning about the Soviet missiles in Cuba two days before the president's address to the nation and the world. What the president and his advisers did not anticipate, however, was how significant a role Thant would play. Not even Adlai Stevenson, a friend of Thant, anticipated the extent of Thant's intervention and mediation. As the crisis evolved, the new secretary general made appeals to the parties, offered proposals, transmitted messages, visited Cuba, and performed other intermediary functions that served a vital role in resolving the conflict.

U THANT'S GAMBLE

At a critical moment—when the nuclear powers seemed set on a collision course—the Secretary General's intervention led to the diversion of the Soviet ships headed for Cuba and interception by our Navy. This was the indispensable first step in the peaceful resolution of the Cuban crisis.²⁴

—Adlai Stevenson, Statement to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, March 13, 1963

18. U.S. Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-63: Cuban Missile Crisis and Aftermath* (Washington, DC, 1996, 11: 144 (hereafter *FRUS*)).

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, 147-48.

23. *Ibid.*, 148.

24. Adlai Stevenson, *Hearings before the Subcommittee on International Organization Affairs, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 88th Congress, 1st Session* (March 13, 1963): 7.

President Kennedy's televised announcement on Monday, October 22, that the United States would institute a quarantine of all sea shipments to Cuba beginning October 24 alarmed and shocked the world.²⁵ A confrontation between Soviet ships en route to Cuba and the American navy was imminent. Khrushchev condemned the U.S. quarantine as a "gross violation of Charter of United Nations" and "naked interference in domestic affairs of Cuban Republic." He called on the United States to renounce its actions "which would lead to catastrophic consequences for peace throughout the world."²⁶ Unless one side backed down, a sea battle was inevitable. Many people feared an escalation to general war, perhaps by the Soviet seizure of West Berlin, and even a nuclear exchange.

It was in the midst of this widespread international terror that almost half the UN members, mostly the nonaligned countries, implored Secretary General U Thant to assume the role of an intermediary. This he did decisively, much to the surprise of the superpowers. Adlai Stevenson later called this intervention an essential "first step" in resolving the crisis.²⁷

Thant sent his first message to the two leaders on October 24, which happened to be UN Day, in the afternoon, only a few hours after the quarantine had taken effect. It contained an urgent appeal for a moratorium of two to three weeks involving both the voluntary suspension of all arms shipments to Cuba and the quarantine measures, especially the searching of ships bound for Cuba. The aim was to gain time to find a peaceful solution. In this context Thant offered "to gladly make myself available to all parties for whatever services I may be able to perform."²⁸

The world hailed Thant's initiative. The *New York Times* front page headline for the next day read in part: "Thant Bids U.S. and Russia Desist 2 Weeks."²⁹ Notwithstanding the positive publicity, his initiative was initially met with contempt by both Soviet and American officials.

At first, the Soviet response in New York was strongly negative. Thant read his message at the Security Council meeting on the night of October 24 and, importantly, suggested that if the United States pledged not to invade, the offensive armaments might be withdrawn. This was a critical proposal, but it was ignored at the time by the participants. After the meeting, the Soviet Ambassador to the United Nations, Valery Zorin, privately censured Thant for not

25. The entire address to the nation by President Kennedy is reproduced in Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 163–71.

26. Khrushchev's letter is reproduced in *FRUS* 11: 170–71.

27. See note 24.

28. The actual message is recorded in *United Nations Security Council Official Records*, No. 1024, October 24, 1962. U Thant's speech to the Security Council announcing his identical messages is in Ramses Nassif, *Thant in New York 1961–1971: A Portrait of the Third UN Secretary General* (New York, 1988), 27–30. Also see U Thant's comments on his message in U Thant, *View from the UN* (New York, 1978), 163.

29. *New York Times*, October 25, 1962, 1.



Figure 2: U Thant (left) and Soviet Ambassador Valerian Zorin (right) confer at the Security Council meeting of October 24, 1962. An interpreter sits in between. At that televised Council meeting, Thant informed the Council of his identical messages to President Kennedy and Premier Khrushchev. In the Security Council, Thant suggested a Soviet missile withdrawal in exchange for a U.S. nonaggression guarantee. (UN Photo/MH)

forcefully criticizing the U.S. blockade of a sovereign state. When Zorin pressed the same argument the next day, Thant became so irritated that he told Zorin “if he really felt that way, he had better condemn me openly in the Security Council meeting scheduled late in the evening.”³⁰ However, Ambassador Zorin had not received instructions from Moscow on how to respond to Thant’s unexpected appeal, and he was probably not even aware of the presence of the Soviet missiles in Cuba.³¹ Nevertheless, his reproof made it initially appear as if the Soviet side would not be receptive to Thant’s initiative (Figure 2).

Much to Zorin’s embarrassment, Khrushchev’s response to Thant’s message was overwhelmingly positive. At about 3:30 p.m. on October 25, the secretary general received the Soviet leader’s cable. It read:

I have received your message and have carefully studied the proposal it contains. I welcome your initiative. I understand your concern over the situation which has arisen in the Caribbean, for the Soviet Government too regards it as highly dangerous and as requiring immediate intervention by the

30. U Thant, *View from the UN*, 164.

31. *Ibid.*, 165–66.

United Nations. I wish to inform you that I agree to your proposal, which is in the interest of peace.³²

Khrushchev's positive response to Thant's message helped him save face as he ordered most Soviet ships heading to Cuba to turn back. While this ameliorated the crisis at sea, some ships continued towards Cuba, thus testing Kennedy's resolve to enforce the quarantine. These ships would soon enter the interception zone, which could lead to their capture or destruction, and to war. The darkest hours of the Cuban missile crisis had not yet passed.

As this drama was unfolding, American officials also initially reacted negatively to Thant's message. The American feeling was publicly guarded and privately almost hostile. At 2:30 p.m. on October 24, Thant had told Adlai Stevenson that he was going to send identical messages to Khrushchev and Kennedy at 6 p.m. calling for a voluntary suspension of arms shipments to Cuba and the lifting of the quarantine. Stevenson expressed disappointment that these communiqués would not include any mention of the missiles or their construction sites in Cuba and asked Thant to postpone sending the messages for twenty-four hours.³³ The secretary general refused but did agree to meet Stevenson again at 5 p.m., which he did, this time with Charles Yost, a member of the U.S. mission to the United Nations. At that meeting Thant advised them that the telegrams had already been sent. Ambassador Stevenson responded by asking Thant to include in the speech he was going to make to the Security Council that night a reference to the need to stop military construction in Cuba. Thant agreed to do so, though he refused to say anything about the missiles already in place.³⁴

Meanwhile, at the 5 p.m. meeting of ExComm that day, Secretary of State Dean Rusk announced to the president that he expected U Thant to make the above appeal but that it would have "vague references to verification, and no reference to the actual missiles in Cuba."³⁵ Rusk told Kennedy that they had tried to get U Thant to withhold the statement, but he had refused. The president immediately told Rusk to get back to Stevenson on it,³⁶ in other words to press Thant to delay his message. Clearly the president and his advisers were apprehensive about Thant's message for the same reasons Stevenson had been.

Similarly, British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, in a telephone conversation with Kennedy at 7 p.m. that evening, condemned Thant's message. After Kennedy read it to him, the British Prime Minister said: "I think that's a very dangerous message he's sent."³⁷

32. *United Nations Security Council Official Records, No. 1025*, October 25, 1962. Also cited in U Thant, *View from the UN*, 165.

33. Porter McKeever, *Adlai Stevenson: His Life and Legacy* (New York, 1989), 524.

34. *Ibid.*

35. May and Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes*, 372.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*, 388.

The Americans were apprehensive about Thant's message³⁸ because it did not call for a freeze on the construction at the Cuban missile sites and a verified withdrawal of the missiles. The fact that the message was also public³⁹ heightened U.S. fears it might create international pressure on them to accept a halt to the quarantine without a corresponding halt to the construction at the Cuban missile sites.

Subsequent to his telephone conversation with the British prime minister on the evening of October 24, Kennedy received his second correspondence from Khrushchev since the beginning of the crisis. In that cable, sent before Khrushchev had responded to Thant's appeal, the premier accused Kennedy of issuing an ultimatum that the United States would itself never accept and of pushing mankind toward nuclear war. The Soviet leader explicitly stated his government "cannot instruct the captains of Soviet vessels bound for Cuba to observe the orders of American naval forces blockading the island." Khrushchev emphatically stated: "We will not simply be bystanders with regard to piratical acts by American ships on the high seas . . . We will then be forced on our part to take the measures . . . to protect our rights. We have everything necessary to do so."⁴⁰

Tension was rising. Khrushchev's communiqués to Kennedy were still hostile. Though many ships had turned back, this was little consolation to the United States. A Soviet tanker called the *Bucharest* was rapidly approaching the interception zone, and the president was under pressure to board it.⁴¹

At about 10:30 p.m. that night (October 24), Kennedy spoke by phone to Under Secretary of State George Ball regarding Khrushchev's stated intention to defy the quarantine. Ball said "I don't think we have any option but to go ahead and test this thing out, in the morning."⁴² He was referring to the *Bucharest*, which the president was considering stopping. Regarding the ships that Khrushchev had already turned back, the president stated, "he is stopping the ones he doesn't want us to have" [i.e., the ships he wants to keep out of American hands].⁴³ The president had little time to decide how to deal with the Soviet ships still heading toward Cuba. To let them pass would indicate that the United States lacked the resolve to enforce the quarantine. To stop them would risk a naval clash and war. It seemed as if the president was back to square one with Khrushchev.

Turning to Thant's message, Under Secretary Ball said that the president's previous instructions to reply to it immediately had Ambassador Stevenson in

38. Apprehension over the perceived shortfalls in U Thant's message is evident in the actual discussions of the ExComm participants, as recorded in May and Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes*, 372-88.

39. *Ibid.*, 387.

40. Khrushchev's cable is cited in *FRUS* 11: 185-87.

41. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 73-74.

42. "Memorandum of telephone conversation at 10:30 p.m., October 24 between President Kennedy and Under Secretary of State Ball," *FRUS* 11: 188-89.

43. *Ibid.*, 11: 189.

New York worried. In Ball's words, Stevenson was "kicking like a steer" about replying so soon; he was also "concerned primarily about the conditions which we put in that proposed reply because he [Stevenson] feels that those are in effect conditions to talking."⁴⁴ Revisions of the reply to Thant's message continued until well into the next day.

Less than an hour after his first conversation with Ball at 10:30 p.m., Kennedy called Ball again with a new idea. It was now about 11:15 p.m. (still October 24), and the president said he wanted "to give out a message [to the Soviets] in a way that gives them enough of an out to stop their shipments without looking like they completely crawled down."⁴⁵ The president suggested that the United States ask Thant to make a new appeal to the Soviets that they stop their ships for a few days so that preliminary talks could then be arranged in New York. The president told Ball, "the question would be if there is any message we would send to U Thant to give them [the Soviets] a way out."⁴⁶ He added, "we should get ourselves back to U Thant and say that he can request the Soviet Union to hold up their shipping . . . for the immediate area, that we would be glad to get into conversations about how the situation could be adjusted."⁴⁷

When the president initiated this new action involving Thant, Khrushchev had not yet sent his conciliatory response to the secretary general's first message, and Kennedy could not know that Khrushchev's response would be positive. In fact, the president had just received Khrushchev's extremely hostile communiqué threatening defiance of the quarantine. But Kennedy was aware from U.S. intelligence that Khrushchev had ordered back many ships⁴⁸ and undoubtedly now realized that a second message from Thant might help Khrushchev save face.

After his discussion with the president, Ball explained the president's idea to Secretary Rusk, who suggested Ball call Stevenson immediately to "see if U Thant *on his own responsibility* will ask Mr. Khrushchev not to send his ships pending modalities."⁴⁹ Just before midnight Ball spoke to Stevenson who agreed

44. Ibid.

45. "Memorandum of telephone conversation at 11:15 p.m., October 24, between President Kennedy and Under Secretary of State Ball," *FRUS* 11: 190.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid., 11: 191.

48. There was extensive discussion in ExComm that day, October 24, about the many Soviet ships that had turned around. See May and Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes*, 353–54, 357–58, 361. Also, in a telephone conversation with Prime Minister Macmillan, President Kennedy said, "some of these ships, the ones we're particularly interested in, have turned around. Others are coming on . . . the ones that are turning back are the ones that we felt might have offensive military equipment on them, so they probably didn't want that equipment to fall into our hands . . . But we still don't know whether the other ships will respect our quarantine," 384–85.

49. "Memorandum of telephone conversation at 11:25 p.m., October 24, between Secretary of State Rusk and Under Secretary of State Ball," *FRUS* 11: 191–92 [emphasis added].

to try out the idea on Thant.⁵⁰ Stevenson immediately called the secretary general, getting him out of bed. In that discussion Thant agreed to issue a direct appeal to the Soviets in the morning.⁵¹

As this discussion between Stevenson and Thant was taking place in New York, there was concern back in Washington that Stevenson might fail to impress upon Thant the specific message the administration wanted him to convey to the Soviets. National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy confided to Ball that “Stevenson may go down the drain.”⁵² To ensure that Thant’s message contained exactly what the administration wanted, Secretary of State Rusk sent a telegram to New York at 2 a.m. with explicit written instructions to Stevenson about exactly what Thant’s message to the Soviets should state.⁵³

The contents of that message—what the United States wanted—were handed to Thant by Stevenson on the morning of October 25 in the form of a single typed page. This page, recently found in UN archives by the authors, had a note written in the corner “handed to ASG [Acting Secretary General] by Stevenson, 25 October, 62—10:30 a.m.”⁵⁴

The page contained exactly what Secretary Rusk had sent to Stevenson in his 2 a.m. cable. It listed the points that Rusk wanted Stevenson to have Thant send to Khrushchev as Thant’s own proposal. This recently discovered memo to Thant is reproduced here in full:

- I. An expression of concern that Soviet ships might be under instructions to challenge the quarantine and consequently create a confrontation at sea between Soviet ships and Western Hemisphere ships which could lead to an escalation of violence.
- II. An expression of concern that such a confrontation would destroy the possibility of the talks such as you have suggested as a prelude to a political settlement.
- III. An expression of hope that Soviet ships will be held out of the interception area for a limited time in order to permit discussions of the modalities of an agreement.
- IV. An expression of your confidence, on the basis of Soviet ships not proceeding to Cuba, that the United States will avoid a direct confrontation with

50. “Memorandum of telephone conversation at 11:45 p.m., October 24, between Under Secretary of State Ball and the Representative to the UN (Stevenson),” *FRUS* 11: 193–94.

51. May and Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes*, 392.

52. “Memorandum of telephone conversation at 12:30 a.m., October 25, between Under Secretary of State Ball and the President’s Special Assistant for National Security (Bundy),” *FRUS* 11: 195–97.

53. “Telegram from the Department of State to the Mission to the United Nations, 2 a.m., October 25,” *FRUS* 11: 199.

54. “Memo handed to A/SG by Stevenson,” File: “Cuba–Adlai Stevenson October 1962,” DAG1/5.2.2.6.2, box 1, UN Archives, New York.

them during the same period in order to minimize chances of an untoward incident.⁵⁵

Even as Stevenson was passing the above instructions to Thant at 10:30 a.m. on October 25, the United States still had not sent Thant its official response to his first appeal. That U.S. response was not sent until 2:19 p.m. that day.⁵⁶ Ironically, the United States asked Thant to send a second message before it had even responded to his first one. The president's response to Thant's first message emphasized that the crisis was created by the secret introduction of offensive weapons into Cuba and that the answer lay in their removal. The president then referred to Thant's suggestions made in the Security Council to promote preliminary talks and satisfactory arrangements and assured the secretary general that Ambassador Stevenson was ready to discuss these arrangements with him and that the United States desired a peaceful solution of the matter.⁵⁷

Thant sent his second set of appeals at 2:26 p.m.⁵⁸ on October 25. It contained almost word for word what Stevenson had requested in writing earlier that day. Thant asked Khrushchev to instruct Soviet vessels en route to Cuba to stay away from the interception area for a limited time.⁵⁹ Thant simultaneously asked Kennedy, in a separate though similar message, to instruct U.S. vessels to do everything possible to avoid direct confrontation with Soviet ships.⁶⁰ To both leaders he stated that this would "permit discussions of the modalities of a possible agreement which could settle the problem peacefully."⁶¹ He also requested an answer from both governments so that he could advise each one of the other's assurances of cooperation with his appeal to avoid all risk of an untoward incident.⁶²

By asking Thant to convey his second appeal to the Soviets as his own proposal, Kennedy clearly understood the importance of giving his opponent an honorable way out. Khrushchev had just turned back most of his ships. To now accept a proposal directly from his adversary to withdraw all his remaining ships would have been viewed as a complete retreat. But to accept a proposal from the UN secretary general to "temporarily" hold back his ships as an act of

55. Ibid.

56. Laurence Chang and Peter Kornbluh, *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962: A National Security Archive Document Reader* (New York, 1992), 372.

57. President Kennedy's reply to U Thant is reprinted in Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 185.

58. Chang and Kornbluh, *The Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962*, 372.

59. U Thant's message to Khrushchev of October 25 is reproduced in Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 190-91.

60. U Thant's message to Kennedy of October 25 is reproduced in Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 187-88.

61. Ibid.

62. Cleveland interview, UN Oral History, 23. Assistant Secretary of State Harlan Cleveland later claimed that the United States not only provided wording for Thant's second message to Khrushchev, but also the message to Kennedy. Cleveland said "the UN should be telling both sides to cool it . . . so we wrote a message for U Thant to send to both the US and the Soviet Union."

self-restraint to allow negotiations was another matter entirely, especially when supported by an international community that was praising peacemakers.

When Kennedy suggested this tactic to Ball, he was transcending very strongly felt American and British apprehensions about Thant's first message. He was able to ignore his advisers' perceptions about the shortcomings of that message and see an opportunity for a second. Kennedy, during the most desperate moments of the crisis when others were girding for confrontation, realized he could use a mediator to get his opponent to gracefully disengage without appearing to surrender or display weakness. As in other mediated conflicts, compromises proposed by the mediator often originate with one of the protagonists, but when presented as the mediator's idea they appear more palatable. By his actions on the night of October 24, Kennedy facilitated the transformation of the conflict from a bilateral to a mediated one.

The Americans could not anticipate that Khrushchev would accept both Thant's messages, and ExComm deliberated on October 25 about possible responses to the Cuba-bound ships and their cargo.⁶³ One of the things that tempered Kennedy at this juncture was his knowledge that Thant was working for conflict resolution. At about 6 p.m. on the evening of October 25, Kennedy again spoke to British Prime Minister Macmillan by telephone and said:

Now we have got two tracks running. One is that one of these ships, the selected ships which Khrushchev continues to have come towards Cuba. On the other hand we have U Thant, and we don't want to sink a ship . . . right in the middle of when U Thant is supposedly arranging for the Russians to stay out. So we have to let some hours go by . . . In other words, I don't want to have a fight with a Russian ship tomorrow morning, and a search of it at a time when it appears that U Thant has got the Russians to agree not to continue . . . I think tomorrow night we will know a lot better about this matter of the UN's actions and Khrushchev's attitude about continuing his shipping.⁶⁴

Kennedy reiterated the above remarks at ExComm.⁶⁵ He was determined to avoid action at sea until he knew whether Thant's second message would convince Khrushchev to hold back his ships. Of course, Kennedy immediately accepted Thant's proposal: "If the Soviet Government accepts and abides by your request . . . for the limited time required for preliminary discussion, you may be assured that this government will accept and abide by your request that our vessels in the Caribbean 'do everything possible to avoid direct confrontation with Soviet ships'."⁶⁶ The president also underlined the urgency of the

63. May and Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes*, 404fwd.

64. *Ibid.*, 428–29.

65. *Ibid.*, 431.

66. Kennedy's reply to U Thant of October 25 is reproduced in Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 189.

situation, as Soviet ships were still proceeding towards the interception area and work on the Cuban missile sites was continuing.

On the morning of October 26, Thant received Khrushchev's acceptance of his second proposal. The premier wrote quite specifically that he had "ordered the masters of Soviet vessels bound for Cuba . . . to stay out of the interception area, as you recommend." He stressed that this measure, "in which we keep vessels immobilized on the high seas, must be a purely temporary one; the period cannot under any circumstances be of long duration."⁶⁷

The *New York Times* reported the success of Thant's initiative with banner headlines: "UN Talks Open: Soviet Agrees to Shun Blockade Zone Now,"⁶⁸ and on a later page: "Moscow Agrees to Avoid Blockade Zone after New Pleas from Thant on Talks."⁶⁹

News of Khrushchev's cable accepting Thant's second appeal was received in Washington on the morning of October 26 with profound relief. The stand-still at sea permitted a period of communication between the parties that finally focused on the issues of Cuban security and missiles. Tension over the situation at sea did not dissipate totally, but the leaders' attention was no longer fixed on a naval confrontation. Negotiations on the core issues soon began and would lead to resolution of the crisis a mere two days later. Ironically, a myriad of verification and other issues would then arise for Thant to help the parties resolve.

SECURITY COUNCIL: FORUM FOR WORLD OPINION

Do you, Ambassador Zorin, deny that the USSR has placed and is placing medium- and intermediate-range missiles and sites in Cuba? Yes or no—don't wait for the translation—yes or no?⁷⁰

—Adlai Stevenson in the Security Council, October 25.

Throughout the conflict both the United States and the Soviet Union weighed their actions with careful consideration of their impact on international opinion. The Security Council was a key forum. The proceedings were televised live and watched by many worldwide, including Kennedy in the White House. Thant also influenced the superpower game in the Security Council at the climactic moment.

The Security Council meeting of October 25 was one of the most famous UN meetings ever held. Before it began at 4 p.m., President Kennedy spoke on the phone with Ambassador Stevenson outside the Security Council chambers

67. Premier Khrushchev's reply to U Thant of October 26 is reproduced in Kennedy, *Thirteen Days*, 192–93.

68. *New York Times*, October 27, 1962, 1.

69. *Ibid.*, 8.

70. David L. Larson, ed., *The Cuban Crisis of 1962: Selected Documents and Chronology* (Boston, 1963), 138.



Figure 3: US Ambassador Adlai Stevenson displays photos of Soviet missiles in Cuba at the UN Security Council meeting of October 25, 1962. Thant is seated third from the left at the horseshoe table with hand to chin. (UN Photo/MH).

to insist that his speech be of moderate tone.⁷¹ Stevenson preferred to give a fiery speech to lambaste the Soviets. But Kennedy did not approve. According to Stevenson’s adviser, Joseph Sisco, “Kennedy, himself, was very conscious that the focus was on U Thant at that moment,”⁷² and the United States was “waiting word from the Secretary General as to the Soviet reply as to whether it would back off.”⁷³ So Stevenson’s words in the Security Council began relatively mildly—until Thant conveyed the news of Khrushchev’s positive reply to his first appeal. As Sisco later recalled, “we got word that the Russians had responded and they had responded favorably [to Thant’s first message] . . . And we got this through the Secretary General.”⁷⁴ With this confirmation, Ambassador Stevenson was given the green light to press the Soviets hard for the rest of the meeting (Figure 3). He emphatically demanded that Soviet Ambassador Zorin declare to the world if the Soviet Union had missiles in Cuba or not.

71. Interview with Joseph Sisco by James Sutterlin, October 18, 1990, 9–20, UN Oral History, Dag Hammarskjöld Library, United Nations, New York.

72. *Ibid.*, 21.

73. *Ibid.*, 18.

74. *Ibid.*, 20.

When Zorin refused, Stevenson made the bold and famous statement: "I am prepared to wait for my answer until hell freezes over."⁷⁵

NEGOTIATION CLIMAX

It is good, Mr. President, that you have agreed to have our representatives meet and begin talks, apparently through the mediation of U Thant, Acting Secretary General of the United Nations. Consequently, he to some degree has assumed the role of a mediator and we consider that he will be able to cope with his responsible mission, provided, of course, that each party drawn into this controversy displays good will.⁷⁶

—Chairman Khrushchev to President Kennedy, October 27, 1962

From October 26 to 28, negotiations intensified. In New York, Thant was playing a significant role in developing proposals for a settlement between the United States and Soviet Union and also attempting to bring about a change in Castro's position.⁷⁷ In Moscow, October 26 was the day that Khrushchev dictated his long letter to Kennedy outlining a peaceful settlement.⁷⁸ In Washington, the October 26 ExComm morning meeting focused on ideas of how to proceed now that the situation at sea seemed stable. Most members of the administration believed the most likely avenue to a settlement was through intense negotiations probably lasting several weeks and taking place in New York under UN auspices. The U.S. precondition to these negotiations was a freeze on the construction at the missile sites in Cuba so that they remained inoperable. The Americans were not aware that some of the nuclear weapons were already operable.⁷⁹

To head the U.S. delegation (the "UN Team" as it was called in Washington), Kennedy appointed John McCloy, a former assistant secretary of war in World War II and a former World Bank president. He was an influential Republican of great renown. Kennedy had asked McCloy to assist Stevenson, ostensibly to make the U.S. negotiating team in New York more bipartisan, but the real reason for including McCloy was that he had a reputation for being a tough negotiator. The administration feared that Stevenson was a weak one.⁸⁰ The U.S. and Soviet negotiating teams are pictured in Figure 4.

ExComm was exhausted after eleven grueling days of crisis, and though an agreement was suddenly reached on October 28, it could not be predicted even

75. Larson, ed., *The Cuban Crisis of 1962*, 138.

76. *FRUS* 11: 258.

77. U Thant sent a cable to Castro on October 26 stating he had received encouraging responses to his appeal to the United States and Soviet Union for negotiations, and urging that construction of the missile installations in Cuba be suspended during these negotiations. Castro replied with a cable the next day inviting U Thant to visit Cuba. See Ramses Nassif, *U Thant in New York, 1961–1971: A Portrait of the Third UN Secretary General* (New York, 1988), 31.

78. May and Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes*, 685.

79. General Anatoli Gribkov and General William Y. Smith, *Operation Anadyr: US and Soviet Generals Recount the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Chicago, 1994), 4 and 63.

80. May and Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes*, 440.



Figure 4: Secretary-General U Thant stands with the main negotiators at the UN talks to resolve the Cuban crisis. In first row (left to right) are: John J. McCloy (head of U.S. delegation) and U.S. Ambassador Adlai E. Stevenson; U Thant; Soviet deputy Foreign Minister Vasily Kuznetsov (head of Soviet delegation), and Soviet ambassador Valerian Zorin (Photo date: November 20, 1962; UN Photo/MH).

hours beforehand. Indeed the ExComm discussions for October 26 and 27 indicate a dearth of faith that the Soviets would halt construction on their Cuban missile sites. All U.S. calls that they do so, even temporarily, had been futile. For many ExComm participants, the only hope for a cessation of missile activity lay in negotiations involving Thant's good offices.⁸¹

Numerous excerpts from the ExComm discussions at this time clearly indicate how much Thant's efforts were providing hope to the U.S. side. When discussion on the morning of October 26 turned to the question of whether the United States should prohibit POL (petrol, oil, and lubricants) from entering Cuba, thus tightening the quarantine and escalating the crisis, Secretary Rusk wanted to wait in order to give Thant more time. Rusk categorically stated, "I

⁸¹ Stevenson outlined the U.S. preconditions to such negotiations at the morning ExComm meeting of October 26. See May and Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes*, 462–63.

think that there would be some advantage in having a real shot at the U Thant talks for 24 hours before we consider putting on the POL. We really need to have another round there.”⁸²

Similarly, when discussion turned to another form of escalation, using flares for night surveillance of Cuba, Secretary Rusk again objected, citing interference with Thant’s efforts. Rusk said, “I wonder really again, on the nighttime reconnaissance, whether we ought to start that tonight, until we’ve had a crack at the U Thant discussions.”⁸³

In discussing conditions for talks with the Soviets, Secretary Rusk emphasized the United Nations again:

There has to be a UN takeover of the [as]surance on the [missile] sites, that they are not in operating condition . . . Now, this is going to be very difficult to achieve, because the other side is going to be very resistant to UN inspectors coming into Cuba . . . this will involve a considerable effort on the part of the Secretary General, even if the Soviets and the Cubans accept it. He would have to have a UN observer corps, in Cuba. It would have to include up to 300 personnel at a minimum, drawing from countries that have a capacity, a technical capacity, to know what they’re looking at and what directions must be taken to insure inoperability.⁸⁴

Secretary Rusk also thought that the United Nations might later conduct a land-based quarantine “but that ours must remain in position until the UN has an effective one in position . . . They could establish, at the designated Havana ports, inspection personnel to inspect every incoming ship.”⁸⁵

Following the October 26 morning meeting, Kennedy returned a phone call to the British ambassador, David Ormsby-Gore, and told him that the Soviets were pushing ahead to finish the missile sites and that the United States could not wait much longer.⁸⁶ At an intelligence briefing later that afternoon, it was concluded that the Medium Range Ballistic Missiles in Cuba were becoming fully operational and readied for imminent use.⁸⁷ Apparently, the ExComm did not know that some missiles were already operational.

Late in the afternoon of October 26, Ambassador Stevenson met with Thant in the secretary general’s thirty-eighth floor UN office. He explained the U.S. position. If the Soviets agreed to no further arms shipments to Cuba, no further work on the missile sites, and rendered the existing missile sites inoperable in forty-eight hours, then there could be two or three weeks for negotiations.

Stevenson and Thant discussed possible arrangements for verification, but Thant did not think the Soviets or Cubans would accept the U.S. demands,

82. *Ibid.*, 448.

83. *Ibid.*, 449.

84. *Ibid.*, 454.

85. *Ibid.*

86. *Ibid.*, 472.

87. *Ibid.*

especially regarding measures to keep the missiles inoperable. Nevertheless, Thant emphasized that a deal could be reached by trading an American guarantee of the territorial integrity of Cuba for the dismantling and removal of all Cuba's missile sites and offensive weapons.⁸⁸ Thant said he derived his idea from comments made by Cuban President Osvaldo Dorticos from before the start of the crisis. On October 8, in a speech to the General Assembly, Dorticos had enunciated the general notion that "were the US able to give us proof . . . that it would not carry out aggression against our country, then . . . our weapons would be unnecessary and our army redundant."⁸⁹ It appears that Thant had converted communist propaganda into a practical solution to the present crisis.

Historians Ernest May and Philip Zelikow have stated that Thant's proposal to trade the missiles in Cuba for a U.S. noninvasion pledge may have been suggested to Thant by Khrushchev through a Soviet official, probably KGB, in New York.⁹⁰ If this is true, then we have not only a case of Kennedy using the mediator to present proposals to his opponent to render them more palatable, but also of Khrushchev making the same use of the mediator. It would indicate that Khrushchev, wanting a way out of the crisis that would protect Cuba, utilized Thant to test the viability of a proposal.

Whatever the Soviet involvement, Thant saw that this idea offered a quick and simple solution to the crisis and tenaciously pressed it. After advancing it to Stevenson, he even telephoned Secretary of State Rusk directly to press the idea with him. This time he described it as trading a verified standstill that met all U.S. conditions only for American agreement not to attack Cuba during the two or three weeks of negotiation on a final settlement.⁹¹ This formula, first made public by Thant two days earlier in his Security Council speech,⁹² and now being vigorously advanced by him as a potential solution, would soon become the backbone of the settlement.

Another development convinced Kennedy that Khrushchev might accept such an agreement. On October 26, Alexander Fomin, a KGB operative whose real name was Alexandre Feklisov, met with John Scali, an ABC journalist with State Department contacts. Scali reported to Rusk that the Soviets were interested in removing all offensive weapons in Cuba for an American pledge not to invade it,⁹³ which was basically what Thant had proposed to both Stevenson and Rusk.

Rusk told the president, who at 6:30 pm that evening mentioned the possibility to British Prime Minister Macmillan. The latter seized upon this idea

88. *Ibid.*, 478.

89. This part of President Dorticos's speech is quoted in Thant, *View from the UN*, 464.

90. May and Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes*, 685. See also Max Frankel, *High Noon in the Cold War: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York, 2004), 133-34.

91. May and Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes*, 478.

92. Nassif, *U Thant in New York*, 29.

93. See Alexander Fursenko and Timothy Naftali, "Using KGB Documents: The Scali-Feklisov Channel in the Cuban Missile Crisis," *Cold War International History Project Bulletin*, no. 5 (Spring 1995): 58.

with enthusiasm, stating that Cuba might be made like Belgium, an inviolable country by international guarantee. He further suggested that Thant “go [to Cuba] with a team and ensure that the missiles were made inoperable” and even remarked “I am quite sure that Hammarskjöld would have done such a thing.”⁹⁴ Prime Minister Macmillan reiterated this idea in a written message: “If no settlement can be reached out of U Thant’s present conversations, U Thant should make a proposal to the Security Council and/or to the [General] Assembly informing them that he intends to go to Cuba himself, with a suitable team, to see the situation and to secure the immobilization of the missiles and the stopping of further work on the sites to allow discussion to open.”⁹⁵

All this added momentum to Rusk’s earlier idea in the ExComm that Thant should establish a UN observer corps in Cuba. Two days later, on October 28, Thant did in fact announce a trip to Cuba. Prime Minister Macmillan, during the aforementioned discussion with the president, offered to immobilize Britain’s nuclear Thor missiles under UN supervision during the same period to help “save the Russians’ face.”⁹⁶

October 26 ended for ExComm with the receipt of a cable from Khrushchev that suggested a settlement similar to what Thant had proposed, basically a U.S. noninvasion pledge in exchange for a Soviet missile withdrawal. Khrushchev also restated that he accepted U Thant’s earlier proposals regarding the non-shipment of armaments to Cuba during a period of negotiations.⁹⁷ Khrushchev’s message, backed by Fomin’s remarks to Scali and Thant’s confidence and persistence in presenting this suggestion not only to Stevenson but also by phone to Rusk, enabled the ExComm participants to retire that night with cautious optimism.⁹⁸

October 27 was replete with reversals and turns. It began for ExComm with concern about a ship under Soviet charter, the *Grozny*, which was approaching the quarantine line. President Kennedy decided to deal with the *Grozny* by asking Thant to convey a message to the Soviets telling them exactly where the quarantine line was being drawn.⁹⁹ Then came news that shattered the optimism created by Khrushchev’s proposal of the night before. Reuters was now broadcasting that Moscow had announced it would withdraw Soviet missiles from Cuba if the United States withdrew its rockets from Turkey.¹⁰⁰ This shocked ExComm, since Khrushchev’s proposal of the night before had made no

94. The telephone conversation between President Kennedy and Prime Minister Macmillan on the evening of Friday, October 26, is printed in May and Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes*, 480–484. The passage in which the prime minister suggests U Thant might go to Cuba and makes the comparison to Hammarskjöld is on page 481.

95. *Ibid.*, 484.

96. Prime Minister Macmillan’s letter to President Kennedy is reprinted in *ibid.*, 484–85.

97. Khrushchev’s letter to Kennedy of October 26 is reproduced in *FRUS* 11: 235–41.

98. May and Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes*, 491.

99. *Ibid.*, 493.

100. Khrushchev’s letter to Kennedy of October 27 outlining the new proposal is reproduced in *FRUS* 11: 257–60.

mention of U.S. Jupiter missiles in Turkey. The Americans were now not sure what Moscow's real proposal was. Certainly part of the dilemma concerning the withdrawal of American missiles from Turkey was that the Turks would not acquiesce.¹⁰¹ They had rejected earlier attempts to extract the missiles in April 1961.¹⁰²

Throughout the discussion about this dilemma, Kennedy consistently leaned toward including the Jupiter missiles in the deal. He said, "In the first place, we last year tried to get the missiles out of there [Turkey] because they're not militarily useful, number one. Number two . . . to any man at the United Nations or any other rational man, it will look like a very fair trade."¹⁰³

Confusion in ExComm about the real Soviet offer was resolved with the arrival of a "new" cable from Khrushchev. He hailed the beginning of talks "through the mediation of U Thant."¹⁰⁴ Unfortunately, Khrushchev then proposed exactly what the Americans wished he would not, a withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba *and American missiles from Turkey* along with an American pledge not to invade Cuba and a Soviet pledge not to invade Turkey.¹⁰⁵

Shortly after receiving this message, ExComm learned that the Turkish government had sharply rejected the Soviet proposal.¹⁰⁶ There followed more bad news. The Joint Chiefs of Staff made a formal recommendation to the president that he order a massive air strike against Cuba on October 28 or 29 and prepare to invade.¹⁰⁷ Also, a U-2 was missing, and other American pilots reported being shot at over Cuba.¹⁰⁸

These developments increased the confusion in ExComm. Did the new demand in Khrushchev's last letter indicate that he had been overruled in Moscow?¹⁰⁹ News came from New York that Zorin had just told U Thant that Khrushchev's first cable was to reduce tension, but the second contained the substantive proposal.¹¹⁰ President Kennedy's immediate response was to prepare a message to Thant asking if he could get assurances from the Soviet Union that work on the missile sites had ceased. He wanted this message, which was sent to Stevenson for transmission to Thant that day, to state that discussion about

101. A telegram from the U.S. embassy in France to the Department of State on October 25 stated that "Turkey regards these Jupiters as symbol of Alliance's determination to use atomic weapons against Russian attack on Turkey . . . Fact that Jupiters are obsolescent and vulnerable does not apparently affect present Turkish thinking." See "Telegram from the Embassy in France to the Department of State," *FRUS* 11: 213.

102. *Ibid.*, 214.

103. May and Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes*, 498.

104. See Khrushchev's letter in *FRUS* 11: 258.

105. *Ibid.*, 258-59.

106. May and Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes*, 517.

107. *Ibid.*, 519.

108. *Ibid.*, 520.

109. *Ibid.*, 509. Llewellyn Thompson mused that Khrushchev had written the earlier cable of October 26 himself and sent it without clearance.

110. *Ibid.*, 524. Thant was sent courtesy copies of the cables between the leaders.

Turkey could not be undertaken until work on the bases in Cuba halted and they were rendered inoperable.¹¹¹

Discussion in ExComm about Khrushchev's new proposal for a missile trade was arduous. Many objected to any linkage between the missiles in Cuba and Turkey, but Kennedy consistently refused to dismiss it. He stated, "We don't want the Soviet Union or the United Nations to be able to say that the United States rejected it,"¹¹² and "this trade has appeal. Now, if we reject it out of hand, and then have to take military action against Cuba, then we'll also face a decline [in the NATO alliance]."¹¹³ He also said, "I'm just thinking about . . . 500 sorties and . . . an invasion, all because we wouldn't take the missiles out of Turkey."¹¹⁴

Discussion also focused on the question of how to respond to Khrushchev's two proposals. It was decided to accept the proposal outlined in Khrushchev's earlier cable of October 26, which called only for a U.S. pledge not to invade Cuba in exchange for a Soviet withdrawal of its missiles from Cuba, with no reference to Turkey.¹¹⁵ This approach ignored Khrushchev's most recent cable of October 27, which added the removal of the U.S. missiles in Turkey to the bargain.

Discussion on this matter was interrupted by the terrible news that an American U-2 had been shot down over Cuba and its pilot killed.¹¹⁶ There was considerable support for knocking out a Soviet SAM (surface-to-air missile) site, but Kennedy did not give the order, and a decision was postponed to that evening.¹¹⁷ Robert Kennedy and Sorensen left the meeting and wrote the final version of the letter to Khrushchev, which the president approved.¹¹⁸ It made no mention of the missiles in Turkey. The president's brother, Robert, was to personally deliver the letter to Soviet Ambassador Dobrynin that evening.

What happened at that meeting between Robert Kennedy and Dobrynin remains a romanticized part of the crisis. It is now known that Robert did offer, on behalf of the president, to remove the U.S. Jupiter missiles from Turkey, though with the provision that this be kept an absolute secret from all parties.¹¹⁹

111. *Ibid.*, 529.

112. *Ibid.*

113. *Ibid.*, 530.

114. *Ibid.*, 548.

115. Thompson suggested this at *ibid.*, 545–46. Stevenson had already recommended in the earlier ExComm session that the U.S. should "not consider the Turkish offer as reported in the attached Reuters dispatch as an alternative or an addition to the Khrushchev proposal in his letter [of October 26]." *Ibid.*, 502. Stevenson's rejection of the missile trade now is of interest because at the beginning of the crisis he proposed it.

116. *Ibid.*, 570–71.

117. *Ibid.*, 603.

118. The actual letter is reproduced in *FRUS* 11: 268–69.

119. Ted Sorensen, who edited Robert Kennedy's book *Thirteen Days* after his assassination, admitted years later in 1989 that he had twisted the truth. He said Robert Kennedy's "diary was very explicit that this [the missiles in Turkey] was part of the deal; but at that time it was still a secret even on the American side, except for the six of us who had been present at that meeting. So I took it upon myself to edit that out of his diaries." See B. J. Allyn, J. G. Blight, and D. A. Welch, *Back to the Brink: Proceedings of the Moscow Conference on the Cuban*

Even most participants in ExComm did not learn of this aspect of the deal, and the same secrecy was demanded of the Soviets. Robert made it clear to Dobrynin that any Soviet reference to the U.S. assurance to remove the missiles from Turkey would make it null and void.¹²⁰

The next morning the Soviets broadcast their acceptance of the noninvasion deal¹²¹ over Radio Moscow. Clearly news of much heightened U.S. military readiness was a factor in Khrushchev's thinking. On October 26, he learned that the Pentagon had moved U.S. forces from DEFCON 5, peacetime status, to DEFCON 2, just one away from war, and that U.S. hospitals had been ordered to prepare to receive casualties.¹²² Khrushchev acted quickly to defuse the situation. He sent instructions to accept Thant's proposal to avoid a confrontation at the quarantine line and dictated his long letter to Kennedy proposing a peaceful solution based on a U.S. noninvasion pledge for a withdrawal of Soviet missiles.¹²³ Oddly, on the next day, October 27, Khrushchev came to believe that he could get more out of the United States and changed his proposal to include the Turkish missiles in the deal.¹²⁴ But then, on October 28, he again became deeply concerned about an American invasion. An American U-2 had been shot down over Cuba, and Castro was reporting that an invasion was almost inevitable. Castro even seemed to be calling on the Soviets to launch a nuclear first strike on the United States.¹²⁵

All this alarmed Khrushchev and on the morning of October 28 he told the presidium that they were "face to face with the danger of war and of nuclear catastrophe, with the possible result of destroying the human race . . . to save the world, we must retreat."¹²⁶ Ironically, he told them this before the report arrived from Dobrynin about his meeting with the president's brother the night before. Dobrynin's ominous description of his discussion with Robert Kennedy reinforced Khrushchev's decision, as did the assurance that the U.S. missiles would be withdrawn from Turkey.¹²⁷

It is evident that both Khrushchev and Kennedy were affected by their perceptions of their opponent's resolve. Yet the parties employed Thant as a mediator to convey proposals to their opponent as his own, to save face, and to provide support. Perhaps one of the strongest testimonies about the faith that

Missile Crisis, January 27-28, 1989 (Lanham, MD, 1992), 93. This finally proves that the U.S. side did explicitly agree to remove its Jupiter missiles from Turkey as part of the deal, even if it was with the insistence that it be kept a secret from all parties and remain a personal undertaking by Kennedy to Khrushchev.

120. McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York, 1988), 433.

121. Khrushchev's letter of acceptance of the U.S. proposal of October 28 is reproduced in *FRUS* 11: 279-83.

122. Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 262.

123. May and Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes*, 685.

124. Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 274-75.

125. May and Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes*, 688.

126. Fursenko and Naftali, *One Hell of a Gamble*, 284.

127. May and Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes*, 689.

Kennedy had in Thant lies in what became known as the “Cordier maneuver.” By this scheme Kennedy, on October 27, instructed Secretary Rusk to secretly contact Andrew Cordier, then at Columbia University in New York, to pass him a statement calling for the trade of Cuban for Turkish missiles. Cordier had served as a former American under secretary general at the United Nations and was familiar with its workings. He was to give the message to Thant after a signal from Rusk, notably in the event of a Soviet rejection of a covert trade of missiles. The message requested Thant to propose the missile trade at the United Nations.¹²⁸ This would have made it much easier for Kennedy to publicly accept trading the Turkish missiles, for it would have been seen as part of a UN proposed agreement backed by world opinion, which also would have made it more difficult for Khrushchev to reject. This indicates not only how far Kennedy was prepared to go to avoid war, but also how creatively he intended to use the mediator to propose a solution at the United Nations and achieve a peaceful outcome.

In any case, the Cordier maneuver proved unnecessary. On October 28, Washington received the news of Khrushchev’s acceptance of the U.S. proposal. Tensions still remained as the Joint Chiefs of Staff sent a memo to Kennedy interpreting Khrushchev’s statement as an effort to delay U.S. action “while preparing the ground for diplomatic blackmail.” They recommended an air strike the next day followed by an invasion unless there was “irrefutable evidence” that dismantling had begun.¹²⁹

On the same day, October 28, Thant announced he would go to Havana to try to secure Castro’s consent in the establishment of a UN mission to verify the dismantling of the missile sites. Kennedy responded by lifting the quarantine and overflights of Cuba for the period of the secretary general’s visit to promote the success of his mission, and many newspapers worldwide lauded Thant for his constructive role in resolving the crisis.

U THANT’S MISSION TO CUBA

Thant’s Cuba Talks Fruitful;
He Will Fly to Havana Today;
Blockade Halted during Trip.¹³⁰

—Front page headline, *New York Times*, October 30, 1962

Throughout the crisis, Thant had been communicating with Premier Castro. On October 26, he sent a cable urging Castro to suspend work on the missile facilities while negotiations were under way. Castro replied on October 27, stating that Cuba was prepared to accept these compromises only if the United

128. James G. Blight and David A. Welch, *On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Reexamine the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York, 1989), 83–84, 173–74.

129. May and Zelikow, eds., *The Kennedy Tapes*, 635.

130. *New York Times*, October 30, 1962, 1.

States desisted from threats of aggression against Cuba and lifted the blockade. Castro invited Thant to visit Cuba for direct discussions, which Thant quickly accepted.¹³¹

The U.S.-Soviet understanding of October 28 angered Castro. He had not been consulted or even informed by the Soviet Union prior to the agreement. The UN inspection and verification principles adopted by the superpowers now required implementation in Cuba. Castro's consent and cooperation were necessary but in his rage he now demanded five measures. The United States was to cease the economic blockade, all subversive activities, piratical attacks from Puerto Rico, and the violation of Cuban airspace, as well as the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Guantanamo.¹³²

Thant now faced a monumental challenge: how to mollify a humiliated Castro and secure his cooperation in the inspection and verification measures agreed to by the United States and the USSR. Thant's first meeting with Castro in Havana on October 30 was discouraging. Thant made a strong plea for UN supervision of the dismantling of the missile sites, as agreed to by Khrushchev, stressing the U.S. pledge to lift the blockade and not take military action against Cuba. Castro reiterated his vitriolic accusations against the United States and refused to accept any UN supervision, dismissing it as an unacceptable invasion of sovereignty. After about two hours, the secretary general suggested that he and Castro meet alone the following day, and Castro accepted (Figure 5).

Good news awaited Thant upon returning to the villa where he was staying. The Soviet ambassador to Cuba brought the Soviet general in charge of the missile installations to explain the significant dismantling efforts under way. Thant asked the general when the missiles would be completely dismantled, and the latter replied in three days, on November 2.¹³³ Specific details added credibility to the claims: the exact number and status of rockets, launchers and Soviet forces, and the withdrawal timetable over the next few days.¹³⁴ The Soviets invited Thant to visit a missile site, but Thant declined, on Rikhye's advice, saying that the verbal reassurances were sufficient.¹³⁵

The next morning, Thant met Castro again, this time accompanied only by his interpreter. Castro was still bitter and told the secretary general that he was going to broadcast his account of the crisis. At Thant's urging, Castro promised to delete from his speech the parts criticizing Khrushchev for agreeing to UN inspection of the missile sites. Castro would not, however, agree to allow Thant to leave behind one or two UN aides for direct liaison between the Cuban government and the secretary general. He did agree to return the body of the

131. Nassif, *U Thant in New York, 1961-1971*, 31.

132. *Ibid.*, 32.

133. *Ibid.*, 34.

134. Gribkov and Smith, *Operation Anadyr*, 73.

135. Rikhye, interview of October 15, 2006.



Figure 5: U Thant departs for Cuba, waving good-bye to well-wishers as he boards the UN-chartered Varig aircraft on October 30, 1962 (UN Photo/Yutaka Nagata).

U.S. pilot who had been shot down on October 27.¹³⁶ General Rikhye later passed the pilot's remains to U.S. authorities.

Thant returned to New York with these achievements, limited but significant, especially regarding the Soviet assurances that the missile dismantling was almost complete. Former Assistant Secretary of State Harlan Cleveland later stated, "We never thought Castro would agree to inspection . . . it was important that the question be put and that it not be put by us . . . Thant was anxious to get things calmed down . . . So we got him to—he actually sent three messages, as I recall, to Castro reiterating different proposals for inspection."¹³⁷ Thant's three messages to Castro and his earlier message to Khrushchev, all on

136. Nassif, *U Thant in New York, 1961–1971*, 35.

137. Interview with Harlan Cleveland by James Sutterlin, Part II, April 22, 1990, 26, UN Oral History, Dag Hammarskjöld Library, United Nations, New York.



Figure 6: Soviet Deputy Premier Anastas Mikoyan confers with Secretary General Thant on the Cuban situation. Left to right in front row are: Ambassador Valerian Zorin, Vasily Kuznetsov (Soviet team leader); John McCloy (U.S. team leader); Anastas Mikoyan (visiting); U Thant; and Ambassador Adlai Stevenson. In the second row, on the right is Brigadier I. J. Rikhye (UN Military Adviser) (United Nations/MH, cropped photo).

behalf of the United States, led Cleveland to conclude, “how extremely useful to American foreign policy the UN could be if we were skillful about it.”¹³⁸

POSTAGREEMENT NEGOTIATIONS

Following Khrushchev’s acceptance of Kennedy’s proposal, the two principal issues left to be resolved were how to verify the agreed Soviet missile withdrawal and what to do about the Soviet IL-28 bomber aircraft still in Cuba. The United States regarded them as “offensive” and wanted them removed, while the Soviets insisted they had been a gift to Cuba that Castro refused to return. Also the October 28 informal agreement between the leaders still needed to be codified in a more official fashion.

The resolution of these issues fell to the negotiating teams led by McCloy on the American side and Vasily Kuznetsov, deputy foreign minister, for the Soviets (Figure 6). In the two months that followed there were many meetings, some of them facilitated by Thant. Though little is known about them, they initially took place in Secretariat conference rooms with Thant shuttling back and forth between the two negotiating teams or hosting the teams in his thirty-eighth floor conference room. Moreover, as General Rikhye, Thant’s military attaché,

¹³⁸. Ibid., 29.

recalls, it was Thant's presence that often blunted the sharpness of McCloy's belligerent approach to the discussions.¹³⁹

Castro's refusal of UN inspections was a setback. The earlier Soviet agreement to UN inspectors had encouraged the United States to think that a missile withdrawal could be verified. Moreover, to the Soviets, UN inspectors were certainly preferable to American ones, as is evident from the enormous pressure applied on Castro by Moscow to accept UN teams on its territory.¹⁴⁰ Castro's refusal necessitated finding another way.

Thant originated the idea of using ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross) personnel to inspect Soviet ships at sea.¹⁴¹ Though it did not transpire, both superpowers initially agreed to it, which removed the immediate impasse regarding how to verify the missile pullout without UN inspectors. Another possibility considered was using observers from Central American countries.¹⁴² Thant's efforts in this regard kept the negotiations alive by providing reassurance that verification would take place.

Verification was finally accomplished at sea by U.S. ships and planes, which came near Soviet vessels as the canvas covers over the missiles were removed to allow them to be counted.¹⁴³ These bilateral verification measures were worked out at the UN-sponsored talks, where the Soviets also shared information about their ship departures.

After extensive negotiations, on November 19, Castro finally told Thant that he would agree to the removal of the IL-28 bombers.¹⁴⁴ The next day Kennedy announced Khrushchev's decision to remove the IL-28 bombers and ordered the quarantine lifted. In an effort to formalize the agreement between the leaders, the "UN negotiations" produced a Soviet-Cuban draft protocol and an American draft declaration on "the settlement of the Missile Crisis," as well as several draft joint statements, but these were never finalized or signed, despite pressure from Khrushchev.¹⁴⁵ In the end, the Soviets and especially the

139. General Rikhye stated this in an interview with the authors on October 15, 2006.

140. James G. Hershberg, "More New Evidence on the Cuban Missile Crisis: More Documents from the Russian Archives," in *Cold War International History Project Bulletin No. 8/9* (Winter 1996-97): 274.

141. Gromyko credited U Thant with originating the idea in a cable from Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko to USSR Ambassador to Cuba Alexandr Alexeev, October 28, 1962, "Russian Documents," *CWIHPB*, 293. Also, U Thant's military attaché, General Rikhye, has confirmed, in an interview on October 15, 2006, with the authors, that U Thant did originate this idea.

142. Thant, *View from the UN*, 467.

143. Gribkov and Smith, *Operation Anadyr*, 73.

144. See <http://www.marxists.org/history/cuba/subject/missile-crisis/cho4.htm> (accessed November 14, 2006).

145. "Draft United States Declaration, Confidential Eyes Only Stevenson," November 26, 1962, DAG1/5.2.2.6.2, box 1, UN Archives, New York. A Soviet-Cuban version, "Draft Protocol by the Government of the USSR and the Government of the Republic of Cuba," is in box 2. The Soviet-Cuban draft showed that Cuba was willing to allow inspections on its territory provided the inspectors were from non-aligned countries and the inspections would cover the entire Caribbean area, including Florida, to verify all provisions of the protocol, including the

Americans were content with informal understandings and public declarations rather than a binding document. Most importantly, war had been avoided.

U Thant was unanimously elected to an extended term as secretary-general on November 30. On January 7, 1963, he received a joint letter from Stevenson and Kuznetsov that expressed “appreciation for your efforts in assisting our Governments to avert the serious threat to peace which recently arose in the Caribbean area.”¹⁴⁶

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Thant’s Prestige Grows.

—Headline in the *New York Times*, November 4, 1962.

The story of the Cuban missile crisis, including the multifarious activities of the secretary general and ExComm reactions to his initiatives, shows that Thant had a significant impact on both parties. He influenced their thinking, negotiating positions, stance towards the use of force, and proclivity to accept a proposal, including the noninvasion deal that he pressed for both publicly and privately.

When Thant took his first bold initiative in this crisis, it was at the bequest of the smaller, newer, and neutral members of the United Nations, organized in making their appeal to him by the representative of Cyprus, a small and troubled country. Ironically, both the United States and the USSR initially resisted Thant’s first appeal. Soviet Ambassador Zorin condemned it, but Khrushchev then embraced it. U.S. Ambassador Stevenson was disappointed about its content, while British Prime Minister Macmillan condemned it as “a very dangerous message.” Nobody foresaw that it would help effect a Soviet retreat on the high seas. And when some Soviet ships turned back, Kennedy seized upon Thant as an intermediary by asking him to send another message to Khrushchev to help the Soviet leader save face in ordering back the rest of his ships—as Kennedy described it to Ball, so Khrushchev does not have to “crawl down.”

In the aftermath of this crisis, many attributed Kennedy’s success to his resolve and strength. We can see that of equal importance was his rare recognition of the need to provide his opponent with an honorable alternative and of the utility of a skilled intermediary in presenting one. The explicit instructions handed to Thant by Stevenson on October 25 detailed exactly what the Americans wanted Thant to send to Khrushchev as his own proposal, or specifically how they wanted Thant to play a classic third-party role. This act, initiated by Kennedy, transformed the crisis by making Thant its mediator.

An interesting lesson that emerges from this conflict is how a mediator’s offer to assist may be initially rejected by one or both of the parties but then

renunciation of an invasion of Cuba. The text was first published, with commentary, in Carlos Lechuga, *In the Eye of the Storm: Castro, Khrushchev, Kennedy and the Missile Crisis* (Melbourne, 1995), 140–42.

¹⁴⁶. UN Security Council doc. S 7/01/1963, in Nassif, *U Thant in New York, 1961–1971*, 37.

embraced. The Cuban missile crisis clearly indicates that initial rejections of the mediator should not be construed as final, for they can indeed be reversed when calmer minds prevail. In fact, the mediator's actions can even be greatly appreciated later.

Another lesson is the mediator's ability to elicit concessions from the parties in such a manner that they do not appear as submission or capitulation. The enormous significance of Thant's messages echoes in Stevenson's words that "the Secretary General's intervention led to the diversion of the Soviet ships headed for Cuba and interception by our Navy. This was the indispensable first step in the peaceful resolution of the Cuban crisis."¹⁴⁷

From the moment of his second appeal, Thant continued to moderate the parties' behavior. Kennedy's own words at ExComm indicate that he exercised restraint because he chose to wait for Khrushchev's response to Thant's second appeal rather than take military action. This restraint continued afterwards when, on numerous occasions, Kennedy decided not to escalate the conflict because he retained hope in Thant's efforts. Frequent reference to Thant during the ExComm discussions, especially by Kennedy and Secretary Rusk, indicate the extent to which Thant's efforts dissuaded the United States from escalating the conflict. For example, the United States did not add POL to the quarantined items or use flares for night surveillance because of hopes, especially voiced by Rusk, that Thant's efforts might secure Soviet cooperation.

In tight situations the United States turned to Thant for help. When the *Grozny* was approaching the demarcation line, Kennedy, rather than ordering the boarding of this ship, instead asked Thant to convey the exact location of the demarcation line to the Soviets. When Kennedy received Khrushchev's new demand for the withdrawal of American missiles from Turkey, his immediate response was to ask Thant to get assurances from the Soviets that work on the missile sites in Cuba had ceased.

Thant single-mindedly advanced the noninvasion proposal that became the centerpiece of the final settlement. Possibly he did this at Khrushchev's request, which would indicate that Khrushchev used Thant as a means to indirectly introduce an initiative, as did Kennedy. In any case, the leaders both recognized that agreeing to a proposal from a mediator would be more acceptable than backing down to an opponent. Whatever the Soviet role may have been in the Thant proposal, the secretary general certainly gave the noninvasion pledge salience in the negotiating process. He did so by publicly proposing it early (in the October 24 Security Council meeting), then by expressing his confidence to Stevenson that it would be acceptable to the Soviets as a trade for the Cuban missiles, and then by personally telephoning Secretary Rusk, an exceptional move, to press for the proposal.

147. Adlai Stevenson, *Hearings before the Subcommittee on International Organization Affairs, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 88th Congress, 1st Session*, March 13, 1963, 7.



Figure 7: President John F. Kennedy bids farewell to U Thant after visiting UN Headquarters on September 20, 1963, almost a year after the Cuban Missile Crisis. To the right of Thant is US Ambassador Adlai Stevenson (UN Photo/YN).

The significance of all this lies in the fact that when Thant presented the “noninvasion for missiles” trade, the Americans were still pressing for prolonged negotiations of several weeks preceded by a freeze of Cuban missile activity. The Americans simply could not foresee a much faster way out of the crisis than arduous negotiations with the missiles frozen in place. The Thant formula saw the missile sites dismantled in mere days, and Thant was on hand in Cuba to get first-hand reports of the progress.

As early as October 26, when pressure was mounting because the Americans believed the missile sites were approaching operational readiness, Rusk, Kennedy, and even the British prime minister were thinking of the possibility of Thant leading a mission to Cuba well before Castro invited him. They had come to appreciate the mediator’s enormous utility, and their strategy involved him extensively.

Mediated conflicts are of many types and involve varying degrees of mediator activity. In some cases the mediator may even control the proposals and communications between the protagonists, as Kissinger did in his “shuttle

diplomacy” and Jimmy Carter did at Camp David. But a mediator may also play a less formalized role that does not control all communications but that nevertheless effects significant change in the negotiations. This is Thant’s case. Without dominating the process he performed numerous functions, some spontaneously and some at the request of the parties. He facilitated face-saving and de-escalation, transmitted messages, fostered confidence, made proposals, and affected the negotiations profoundly.

President Kennedy later said, “U Thant has put the world deeply in his debt”¹⁴⁸ (Figure 7). Many *New York Times* headlines and articles lauded the secretary general’s role. When *Pravda* first began to signal on October 26 the Soviet readiness to make a deal, it quoted the full text of Thant’s letter to Khrushchev on the front page along with Khrushchev’s reply.¹⁴⁹

Certainly military power and a resolve to use it played a role in this conflict. But so did the influence of a highly respected mediator who assisted the parties in pulling back from the brink. The faith of the parties in U Thant is evident in their discussions, their requests to him, and his many successful initiatives. To view the Cuban missile crisis simply as a victory of U.S. military might is a false and incomplete interpretation of the conflict. This is not only because of the significant effect that Thant had upon the protagonists, but also because Kennedy gave his opponent an honorable way out, and skillfully used a mediator to do so despite advice to the contrary. His victory lay in exercising restraint, even to the point of refusing to give orders to fire upon Soviet antiaircraft installations that had shot down an American plane and in making concessions based in part on the mediator’s suggestions. These qualities led to his, and perhaps America’s, “finest hour.”

Certainly for Thant and his UN organization, the Cuban missile crisis was their “finest hour.” One of the great ironies is that at the outset of this crisis, many officials condemned Thant’s first message and tried to prevent him from mediating the conflict. But, as Virgil wrote, “Heaven thought otherwise.”

148. As quoted in Gertrude Samuels, “The Mediation of U Thant,” *New York Times Magazine*, December 13, 1964, 115.

149. The article is entitled “Reason Must Triumph,” *Pravda*, October 26, 1962, 1.