SAMPLE POSITION MEMO (NSC)

October 19, 1962

Office of the Secretary of Defense
Washington, DC

Memorandum for:
the President
the Vice President
the Secretary of State
the Secretary of the Treasury
the Attorney General
the National Security Advisor
the Director of Central Intelligence
the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

Subject: Options for a U.S. response to Soviet missiles in Cuba

This memo outlines options for U.S. action against Soviet missile installations in Cuba. On October 14, an American U-2 plane photographed Soviet construction of medium-range ballistic missile (MRBM) sites in Cuba, some of which contain missiles that could be launched within eighteen hours. Failure to swiftly eliminate this threat would encourage Soviet aggression and increase the risk of a nuclear attack on the United States.

BACKGROUND:

U-2 reconnaissance has provided evidence of offensive Soviet military activity in Cuba, including the presence of MiG fighter jets, IL-28 bombers, and sites for SS-4 and SS-5 missiles with ranges between 1,000 and 2,200 nautical miles. These distances encompass Washington and other major U.S. cities. U.S. intelligence services estimate that the MRBMs will be ready to launch in eighteen hours and that the longer range SS-5 missile sites could be operational in December.

OBJECTIVES:

This agency has two principal objectives in this matter:

- eliminate the missiles located in Cuba
- avoid nuclear war with the Soviet Union

OPTIONS AND ANALYSIS:

In order to accomplish the aforementioned objectives, this agency proposes two options:

1. Implement a naval quarantine around Cuba.

The United States could implement a naval quarantine on offensive military equipment bound to Cuba, thwarting the further growth and development of missile sites. A quarantine is a limited military response that takes direct action while reducing the risk of significant casualties, and it leaves room for additional U.S. action in the future. It would not, however, eliminate missiles already in Cuba, nor would it halt construction or operationalization of existing sites with equipment already delivered. It also risks escalation of the conflict due to miscommunication between ships or unpredictable Soviet behavior. To that end, if the president orders a quarantine, he should ask Chairman Khrushchev to preemptively stop Soviet ships en route to Cuba.

2. Order air strikes against missile sites in Cuba.

The United States could carry out air strikes against missile sites in Cuba. These could entail surgical strikes targeting only MRBM sites or broader strikes that would also target other Soviet military assets, including IL-28 bombers, MiG jets, patrol boats, tanks, and airfields. Broader air strikes would eliminate missile sites and limit Soviet capability to retaliate against U.S. forces and U.S. bases in Florida. However, no air strikes guarantee 100 percent elimination of the missiles, making several rounds necessary. Moreover, sustained military action carries a relatively high risk of Soviet retaliation and the capture or death of U.S. pilots. This could set off a chain of events that necessitates a U.S. invasion of Cuba. Such an invasion, involving as many as 250,000 U.S. troops, could begin within seven days of air strikes. Though an invasion would be the most direct means of eliminating the threat in Cuba, it would also be the most costly.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND JUSTIFICATIONS:

This agency's first priority is to eliminate the missile threat from Cuba. To do so, it recommends that the president implement a naval quarantine on offensive military equipment headed to that island. The quarantine is a measured response that will inhibit Soviet plans in Cuba with significantly lower risk of casualties and escalation than air strikes. Moreover, if accompanied by dialogue with the Soviet Union, a quarantine could effectively lead to Moscow's removal of the missiles. The United States should seek approval of the quarantine from the Organization of American States in order to lend it further diplomatic weight.

Operationally, the U.S. Navy would establish a quarantine line and signal ships approaching it to stop for boarding and inspection. As a first warning, a nonresponsive ship would receive a shot across the bow as a second warning, a shot would be fired into the rudder to stop the vessel. Any ship determined to be delivering offensive weapons to Cuba, regardless of port of origin, would be turned back.

Although this agency prefers a quarantine, it recommends simultaneously preparing for air strikes and invasion in case such measures become necessary to eliminate the missile threat. The United States should reinforce its naval base at Guantanamo Bay, raise military alert levels, and take steps to protect U.S. shipping interests in the Florida Strait. The Joint Chiefs of Staff have separately identified such preparatory measures.

As part of any response, this agency supports continuing reconnaissance missions over Cuba and strengthening air defenses in the southeastern United States. Finally, the United States should advise the Soviet Union that any attack from Cuba will be seen as an attack from the Soviet Union itself and will prompt a commensurate U.S. response.