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'The Flower of Culture'

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Suspense builds as Soviet ships approach the U.S. blockade of Cuba. 'Everything hinged on the next few minutes or perhaps only the next few seconds.' The whole world comes to a crucial moment.

President Kennedy received reports that Soviet ships were heading toward the line of quarantine interception. There was no guarantee that they would stop and submit to inspection by U.S. forces. If they chose to break the blockade, the Americans would fire on them, and the Soviets would no doubt retaliate. The great fear was that this exchange of fire would escalate, finally developing into a full-scale nuclear confrontation.

As U.S. planes patrolled overhead, the Soviet ships approached the barrier. The fateful moment fast approached.

How must President Kennedy have felt as he listened to updates on the ships' movements? He had made his decision, and now there was no retreating. The die was cast. Everything hinged on the next few minutes or perhaps only the next few seconds. He must have held his breath and felt the enormous weight of his responsibility pressing down on him. The fate of the world rested in his hands.

Then he received news that some of the approaching ships had suddenly come to a stop. Then another report: They had changed course and were turning back. The air of extreme tension subsided somewhat. The entire room seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. The immediate crisis, at least, had been averted.

Premier Khrushchev may also have been shaken by this close call. In *Khrushchev Remembers*, published many years later, he wrote, "We didn't want war." There is every reason to believe he was speaking the truth.

But he also explained that, because of the Cold War rivalry between the two superpowers, the Soviet Union deployed missiles in Cuba to "rouse America and its leadership to realize that they were at the brink of war." In these statements, we glimpse the conflicting thinking of the leaders of the Cold War superpowers — not wanting war on one hand, yet having no intention of eliminating it on the other.

The United Nations was also energetically involved in averting this crisis. That very day, Oct. 24, U.N. Acting Secretary-General U Thant had sent messages to both Kennedy and Khrushchev seeking to settle the confrontation and had made a statement in the U.N. Security Council.

U Thant, a citizen of Burma (present-day Myanmar), had assumed the post of U.N. acting secretary-general the previous year when Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld was killed in a plane crash. Since then, he had worked hard to fulfill the heavy responsibilities of his post. In his statement before the Security Council, he said:

"Today the United Nations faces a moment of grave responsibility. What is at stake is not just the interests of the parties directly involved, nor just the interests of all Member states, but the very fate of mankind. If today the United Nations should prove itself ineffective, it may have proved itself so for all time.

"In the circumstances, not only as acting secretary-general of the United Nations but as a human being, I would be failing in my duty if I did not express my profound hope and conviction that moderation, self-restraint and good sense will prevail over all other considerations."

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U Thant's statement brimmed with his sense of duty as a member of the human race to avoid nuclear war at all costs. At the urging of many non-aligned nations of Asia and Africa, he assumed a mediating role in the crisis; the United Nations was about to enter a new era.

The following day, Oct. 25, Khrushchev welcomed the proposal that U Thant had sent to both superpowers for reaching an agreement. Kennedy, while praising the effort, announced that the first step toward a resolution would have to be the removal of offensive weapons from Cuba.

At the Oct. 25 session of the U.N. Security Council, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson and his Soviet counterpart, Ambassador Valerian Zorin, engaged in a heated exchange over the situation. Zorin criticized the United States, stating that the existence of missiles in Cuba had not been proven. Stevenson asked him whether he denied that missile launching sites had been built there, and Zorin replied that he did not have to answer. Stevenson produced blowups of aerial photographs showing the Soviet bases under construction and demanded an explanation.

Despite these confrontations, mediations continued, with the United Nations playing a significant role. Acting Secretary-General U Thant made further proposals to the Soviet Union and the United States, as the leaders of both superpowers began to work to avert war.

The evening of Oct. 26, Kennedy received a letter from Khrushchev saying that if the United States pledged not to attack Cuba, the Soviet Union would dismantle its bases there. In this, American leaders glimpsed a first ray of hope.

But the following morning, a second, extremely formal letter from Khrushchev arrived. He now demanded that, as a condition for the Soviet withdrawal of missiles in Cuba, the United States promise to simultaneously withdraw its missiles from Turkey.

To be continued