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# General's 1962 Memo Addresses Nuclear Combat on Cuba

By **SCOTT SHANE**

WASHINGTON — In a previously undisclosed memo to President [John F. Kennedy](#) in the closing days of the Cuban missile crisis, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of staff said his forces were prepared to use [nuclear weapons](#) in an American invasion of the island if the Cubans used nuclear arms to resist.

The [top secret memo](#) from the chairman, General Maxwell D. Taylor, dated Nov. 2, 1962, underscored the continuing danger of a nuclear conflict between the superpowers even after the Soviet Union agreed to remove nuclear missiles from the island.

American military officials advocating an invasion to topple Fidel Castro only suspected it at the time, but Soviet forces in Cuba had nearly 100 smaller tactical nuclear weapons as well, a fact that came to light only three decades later.

“We must accept the possibility that the enemy may use nuclear weapons to repel invasion,” General Taylor wrote. “However, if the Cuban leaders took this foolhardy step, we could respond at once in overwhelming nuclear force against military targets.”

The National Security Archive, a research organization at George Washington University, found the three-page memo in government archives and posted it on [its Web site](#) on Monday night.

General Taylor also told the president that military planners were expecting up to 18,500 American troops killed and wounded in the first 10 days after an invasion. But he cautioned that the estimate applied only to a non-nuclear conflict.

“If atomic weapons were used, there is no experience factor upon which to base an estimate of casualties,” General Taylor wrote. “Certainly, we might expect to lose very heavily at the outset if caught by surprise, but our retaliation would be rapid and devastating and thus would bring to a sudden close the period of heavy losses.”

Thomas S. Blanton, director of the National Security Archive, which has published several collections of declassified documents related to the crisis, said the memo added another stroke to the picture of global danger in 1962, which is still being filled in half a century later.

“The American generals were eager for an invasion, and even the possible presence of tactical nuclear weapons in Cuba didn’t give them a sense of caution,” Mr. Blanton said. Kennedy, by contrast, was distrustful of the military brass and very cautious, he said.

Michael Dobbs, an historian and author of “One Minute to Midnight,” a 2008 account of the crisis, said some American military leaders still favored invading Cuba at the time the memo was written, but Kennedy probably had ruled out that possibility. “By November 2, things would have had to go very, very wrong for the U.S. to launch an invasion,” he said.

The Taylor memo, which a handwritten notation says he hand-carried to the White House, is among a number of previously secret documents from 1962 that are still coming to light in connection with the 50th anniversary of the crisis. Many historians see the missile crisis as the closest the world came to a Soviet-United States nuclear exchange during the cold war.

Though the crisis has been studied intensively and is the subject of many books, new evidence and new interpretations continue to emerge. The conventional notion of a tough President Kennedy whose unyielding stance caused the Soviet leader Nikita S. Khrushchev to “blink” has given way to a more nuanced portrait of a Kennedy who prevented war through careful negotiation and secret concessions, including his agreement to remove American nuclear missiles from Turkey.

According to a new book, even after Khrushchev agreed to remove the missiles, Mr. Castro, the Cuban leader, tussled with Soviet leaders over what would happen to the scores of tactical nuclear weapons on the island.

The book, “The Soviet Cuban Missile Crisis,” was written by the late Sergo Mikoyan, whose father, Anastas Mikoyan, was a Soviet statesman who negotiated with Mr. Castro in Cuba in 1962, and it was edited by Svetlana Savranskaya, a researcher at the National Security Archive.

Since they were kept secret by the Soviets, the smaller tactical nuclear weapons in Cuba were not part of Khrushchev’s agreement to remove the missiles. And Mr. Castro desperately wanted to keep them on the island.

[Documents preserved by Sergo Mikoyan](#), who served as his father’s secretary, record the exchanges between the Cuban leader and Soviet officials, who became convinced that the impulsive Mr. Castro could not be trusted with the weapons.

Anastas Mikoyan suggested, implausibly, that the Soviet Union had a law that would prevent it from leaving the tactical weapons in Cuba.

“So you have a law that prohibits transfer of tactical nuclear weapons to other countries?” Mr. Castro asked, according to notes of the conversation. “It’s a pity. And when are you going to repeal that law?”

The Soviet official was noncommittal. "We will see," he said. All the weapons were later removed.

*This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:*

**Correction: October 16, 2012**

In a previous version of this article, the title of Sergo Mikoyan's book was incorrect. It is "The Soviet Cuban Missile Crisis." Also, the year Michael Dobb's book was published is 2008, not 2009.