

Harald Malmgren claims face-office with Gen. Curtis LeMay during Cuban Missile Crisis
Excerpt from Jesse Michels' "American Alchemy" YouTube channel – released April 22, 2025

Pippa Malmgren (00:00): But I would love for you, Dad, to just dive into [the story]: You are in the Situation Room. You are down to the last three hours [of the Cuban Missile Crisis] before you all think that you're hitting the nuclear go button. And can you just describe what was it like in that moment, and how did you avert the nuclear crisis?

President Kennedy (old video clip from televised speech of Oct. 22, 1962) (00:26):
A strict quarantine on all offensive military equipment under shipment to Cuba is being initiated.

Harald Malmgren (00:45): I was appointed liaison between McNamara and McGeorge Bundy and JFK-- I mean, pretty critical job.

Jesse Michels: McNamara is Secretary of Defense at the time.

Harald Malmgren: Yeah. And so, alright, I'm there. I'm wondering what I'm going to work on. And Sunday, the Cuban Missile Crisis unfolds. And I get a call, "Bob wants you to work directly with a smaller group in the War Room." I said, "What's the War Room?" "It's where the generals meet and decide, go, no go. Because they have the weapons, the White House doesn't have them."

Jesse Michels: So this is Bob McNamara, and he wants you to meet...

Harald Malmgren: He wanted me to be there in that room as his guy. They would know I'm his guy. And I said, yeah, they're not going to be eager to hear from this young squirt. He said, "Don't tell them what you think should happen. Ask them a lot of questions. Your job is to slow them down, reduce the heat in the room. Get everybody more calm. If you just keep asking questions and make them think, you'd be surprised how far that goes. And it buys us time and takes the pressure off from them." Because there are some people in that group (I didn't realize it was Curtis LeMay they were worried about) who wants to go ahead and punish Russia for even trying.

So I get started in that and after a few days got used to the group, they got used to me. They didn't ask me to get the coffee. They treated me like I belong there. And I didn't say anything that made them-- I didn't talk down to them. I asked them "How's your wife today?" sort of stuff.

And we got to the last hours, roughly four hours, when JFK told Khrushchev we put a quarantine around Cuba. If one of your ships breaks through the quarantine, that will be an act of war and we will take action. We didn't specify.

And among the generals there were arguments. What should we do? Do we take out the missiles that are in Cuba? But we don't know whether some are armed or not. Do we know that they have the ability to do more than we see? Might they start World War III in order to get a step ahead? This was a time of mutual assured destruction. It was like really terrifying in some sense.

And so we in that final hours waiting to see if the ships were going to stop or not. And there was communication going on none of us were privy to it-- between Khrushchev and JFK.

And there was one additional element the history books have omitted: the Russian ambassador, Dobrynin [Anatoly Dobrynin, Soviet Ambassador to the United States]. He arrived that year in Washington. He was unique. He wasn't a typical diplomat. He was a member of the Central Committee in Moscow. They sent him to Washington as the highest-ranking politician in Moscow. And in that position, he was able to himself talk with the top people in the Central Committee.

(04:58):

Anyway, in those final hours, agitation level was high. We all sat down after somebody had a coffee break, and one of the senior generals sent a signal. We didn't have cell phones. An aide came in and he said, "I want you to call Mary, my wife, tell her to load the car, get everything ready to go, and drive as fast as you can to Maine to our country place." And then he said, "Let's resume now, gentlemen."

Pippa Malmgren (05:40): Yeah. It's like literally, "Mary, take the kids and get out of here. We're about to be at the end." And this is the bit, Dad, where it's so important that it's Curtis LeMay who wants to drop a nuke.

Jesse Michels (05:56): So maybe Dr. Strangelove wasn't so...

Pippa Malmgren (05:59): It was based on him.

Harald Malmgren (06:00): Yeah. But let me finish the story. So in the group, I said, "Gentlemen, all the thinking of the last, ever since the bombers dropped in Japan, all the thinking is about mutually assured destruction. If we go, we both get obliterated. Does this make any sense to any of us in this room? There must be some degree of action less than that." And they all said, "Yeah, well we haven't explored that." I said, yeah, we don't have any calibration. Any idea of small steps or ways to convince that we're serious. It might be if we attack Russia, are we really ready for that? No. Now if we attack Cuba and Russia thinks it's the first step, that they want to get one step ahead of us by being first actor, well, that would be bad. We can't know what they're thinking. But we have to kind of think about that. Or we may take some step and they fire a little bit at us, but a little bit makes us pissed off, and then we decide to unload everything first. Curtis LeMay is in this group saying, "My strategic bombers are ready." He already had all these missiles, but...

Jesse Michels: His nickname is "Bombs Away LeMay."

Harald Malmgren: "Bombs Away," yeah. I had no idea what a miserable, mean, arrogant guy this was. There was nothing written a lot about him, other than he was super aggressive.

Jesse Michels: Is he chief of staff of the Air Force at this time?

Harald Malmgren: Strategic Air Command.

Pippa Malmgren: He's Strategic Air Command. [LeMay had previously served as SAC Commander, but in fact he was U.S. Air Force Chief of Staff at the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis.] Okay. And it's important that you mention how he [LeMay] says, "My guys, we keep sending them up to the point of no return."

Harald Malmgren: Yeah, that's what I wanted to say. He said in the room to all these other generals and admirals, "You can't imagine the morale problem I have. Every day. I send my boys out there, they reach the point of no return where if they keep going they'll run out of fuel." And he said, "I have to order them back." He said, "The morale is really-- they're ready!"

Jesse Michels: He's playing with millions of people's lives to make sure that the morale of his units are okay.

(09:03):

[clip of character "USAF Brig. General Jack D. Ripper" speaking in the War Room in the movie "Dr. Strangelove":] Mr. President. I'm not saying we wouldn't get our hair mussed, but I do say no more than 10 to 20 million killed. tops, depending on the breaks.

(09:25):

Harald Malmgren: He said that and everyone in the room looked down at their lap. They didn't want eyeball him. You know, "I didn't hear that."

Jesse Michels: Yeah. It's like if you have nothing nice to say, say nothing at all. I mean, he is also, for the context for the audience, he was in charge of the 509th Atomic Bomber Squadron in Roswell, New Mexico, that was responsible for the bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Harald Malmgren (09:40): Yah. And he was in charge of all the fire bombing in Germany. Yeah. I mean, yeah, his idea of the enemy is, obliterate them. Anyway, I didn't know what I was up against, or it might have scared me, but it didn't. So I said, well, all the rest of us, let's contemplate the options. We slowly talked. And then it turned out that we got word the Russians stopped the boats at the point of quarantine. And I said, "Can we agree that we should back off? Khrushchev has just backed off."

And Curtis LeMay said, "No way. We've got to teach them a lesson, messing with us, they have to have something to remember. We need some surgical strikes on Russia. It doesn't have to be population-oriented, but we need to make it painful."

And I said, "But that leads us back into will they think that this is just the beginning of Armageddon-- again, we simply haven't had a discussion. We have no communication channel to deal with that. It doesn't make sense. It seems to me backing off for now and letting the discussions continue, how do we avoid this being the preference? All the generals agreed. And the one that had called his wife pushed the button, his aide came in, and he said, "Call Mary back. Tell her, unload the car."

Pippa Malmgren ([11:34](#)): But you also made a suggestion that if you hit Moscow, there wouldn't be anybody to negotiate with. And further, if you let it leak to the Russians that you wouldn't hit Moscow, maybe they wouldn't hit Washington. And everybody in the room just loved that.

Jesse Michels: And if I remember correctly, you kind of rhetorically backed them into a corner where you say, "What would be your prime target first?" And then they say, "Moscow." And then you say, "Oh, if it was it's Moscow, then you can't talk to anybody at Moscow. There's nobody to negotiate with."

Harald Malmgren: Yes, we went through that. Because I said, it's madness. If you're going to start something and you need to stop in that system, there's only one point of decision. If you hit Moscow, there's no one to talk to.

Jesse Michels ([12:26](#)): And then that's at that point, right, LeMay storms out and gets all angry? Is that right?

Harald Malmgren ([12:33](#)): Yeah, no, he literally got up, slammed his papers down, said, "I refuse to go on with this."

[Short segment of Harald Malmgren further elaborating over phone with Michels: "That man was a [inaudible word] maniac. But I have to tell you, I did not buckle." Michels replies, "No, I know you didn't."]

Harald Malmgren ([12:55](#)): Now he had, by the way, just before that, raised the warning level to DEFCON 2. It was not approved by the president.

Jesse Michels ([13:06](#)): Really?

Harald Malmgren ([13:07](#)): He did it.

Jesse Michels: Unapproved? He raised the warning level to DEFCON 2?

Harald Malmgren: Well, he seemed to have that power. I mean, we were surprised. But anyway, he may have had that power.

Jesse Michels ([13:16](#)): Interesting. Wow!

Harald Malmgren: Anyway, I mean when I look back and think, Jesus, you know, I stood in the way of this historic figure, "Bombs Away." I mean, he could have stood up and tried to beat me up. I mean, he was that kind of person. When he stormed out, what a relief to the whole group. But it was the first in a series of evident clashes between him [LeMay] and JFK. It was personal. Somehow it all radiated. This is not about Russians only. Something was going on in his head. We learned later about some of the other things.

Jesse Michels ([14:05](#)): Well, and you had the Bay of Pigs before that as well. Which is this crucial kind of juncture where I think actually Eisenhower kind of left his second term slightly skeptical of [Allen] Dulles. I think initially he was willing to kind of go along with his plans. And JFK didn't quite know what to think. And after the Bay of Pigs, it was really this clear rupture where you had the kind of CIA sort of quote-unquote "Deep State." And they sort of had their own plans, and they really wanted to oust Castro and Guevara. And then you had JFK, and he felt like this whole thing was just botched. And they send these Cuban exiles in there to kind of create this revolution. But it's kind of half done and the exiles are actually left kind of isolated. It doesn't quite work out. And then you have this rift where you have people like Curtis LeMay and Alan Dulles in complete loggerheads with JFK. JFK gets angry. He says, "I want to scatter the CIA to the winds."

([15:05](#)): [clip from movie "The Good Shepherd"] "The President says he's going to break the CIA into a thousand pieces."

Jesse Michels: Is that roughly right?

Harald Malmgren ([15:10](#)): Yeah, that's right. So this was the prelude, that period, to what became a clash over how we respond when we have an excuse. And Curtis LeMay said, "At least let me send my bombers after some strategic facilities of the Russians." But how do you sort out, from the Russians' point of view, bombers coming at us. We don't know their trajectory, we can't study that. It's not like a missile—you know once it's fired, you know where it's going. So high risk. And I said, this doesn't make sense. So everybody agreed except Curtis LeMay, and he blew up, when he thought he was going to dominate.

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Well, I mean, I didn't know that this was a moment of history and that somehow my arguments won, but on the other hand I thought, "This is why McNamara sent me down here."

Jesse Michels ([16:25](#)): Well, that seems it's such an act of genius on his [McNamara's] part, to call you in as a 27-year-old, to stagnate these sort of more aggressive guys like Curtis LeMay...

[end of 17-minute excerpt from 4-hour video]