

## EXCERPT 4

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### WHAT HAPPENS WHEN JFK CHALLENGES OTHER NATIONS TO END THE RACE TO OBLIVION?

Kennedy nodded. He returned to his seat and leaned slightly across the table towards Brezhnev. “Mr. Secretary,” he said, “if I may ask, with respect: what do you want for your country?”

Brezhnev asked the translator to repeat the question. He frowned and locked his eyes on the center of the table before answering. “We want a society where everyone who labors for the good of the whole lives with dignity and honor. We want the prosperity and security that will come from such a society. We want what is just.”

“Thank you, sir. I understand entirely. Now, if you will, what is in the way of your achieving all of that?”

Brezhnev listened to the translator and answered, never lifting his eyes from the table. His voice intensified without growing louder or more animated. “Your aggression, Mr. President, and the resources we continuously spend to contain it.”

“Our aggression,” the President said. “I would suppose you are talking again about Cuba?”

“Cuba,” Brezhnev said. “Vietnam. Guatemala. Korea. Palestine. Iran. Congo. Germany. From your attempt to crush our revolution fifty years ago to your machinations in this country at this very moment, it is difficult to find a part of the world that has been spared your aggression.”

“I see,” said the President. “Do you know, Mr. Secretary, what is most fascinating about that?” Brezhnev showed no reaction. “We see your country in precisely the same way. You roll your tanks across Eastern Europe, suppressing popular uprisings and even building a block wall so that people can’t escape what you call their ‘liberation.’ You fan across Southeast Asia, arming anyone who wants to bring down lawfully constituted governments. You stir up and fortify rebel bands from here to the mountains of South America, buying their acceptance of your doctrine with machine guns and mortar. You plant missiles less than a hundred miles off our shore and point them directly at us.”

Brezhnev’s lifted his gaze to glare at Kennedy. “In every case you mention,” he said, “we are merely protecting ourselves by securing the high ground in battles that you have pressed upon us.”

“Which is exactly what we believe we are doing. If I were to describe the most basic rationale of United States foreign policy, I couldn’t find words more fitting than the ones you have just used.”

Brezhnev shook his head. “But the science of history does not support your view. It supports ours without question.”

“Without questions from you and your colleagues, I’m sure. From our perspective, it hap-

pens that there are a few questions. But that is wholly beside the point, which is this: both of our people believe deeply and sincerely that right is on their side and wrong is on the other, and nothing either one of us can say is going to change those beliefs. And that has led us to the rather absurd situation in which we find ourselves today.” Kennedy spread his arms out broadly to take in the room, the hotel, the city, all of southern Africa.

“Mr. Secretary,” he continued, “We’re called the world’s two great superpowers. Let us consider that for a moment. The world is presently covered by countries that have, let us say, one to twenty percent of the wealth and military capacity that your country and mine enjoy. These little countries have us both doing things we very much don’t want to do: spending resources we’d rather spend improving the lives of our own people, pouring our best young men into fruitless battles to be killed or maimed for life. We’re putting more and more lethal weaponry into the hands of people we can’t trust and buttressing the power of some of the world’s truly loathsome characters. How can these puny little countries make us do all that? I believe you know. By scaring both of us with their threats to embrace and support the other. You have volunteered to be their bogeyman to intimidate us, and we volunteer to fill the same role to scare you.” Kennedy paused, looking for some shift of expression. There was none. “Mr. Secretary, I am embarrassed by how willingly we have accepted this cheap role. Aren’t you? Do real superpowers hop to the whims of third-rate despots the way we do? I don’t think so. And more to the point, is there any reason we must?”

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