**Topic: The Cuban Missile Crisis**

# Fact Sheet

* The Cuban Missile Crisis occurred in October 1962.
* Experts examining photographs of Cuba taken by U2 spy planes saw what they believed to be evidence that Russians were building nuclear missile sites in Cuba.
* It was a major confrontation that brought the Soviet Union and the United States close to war over the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba.

**Causes**

* In 1962, the Cold War was at its coldest. The Russians had built the Berlin Wall the previous year. In April 1962, the Americans put nuclear missiles in Turkey.
* In 1959 a rebel named Fidel Castro took power in Cuba, an island just 90 miles away from Florida. Before Castro took over, the government - led by Colonel Batista - had been a corrupt and right-wing military dictatorship, but the Americans had many business interests in Cuba.
* When Castro came to power, however, he nationalised American companies in Cuba. In retaliation, the Americans stopped all aid to Cuba, and all imports of Cuban sugar. This was a blow to Castro as sugar was the mainstay of the Cuban economy. Castro was forced to look to the USSR for help, and, in 1960, the USSR signed an agreement to buy 1 million tonnes of Cuban sugar every year. Castro, who had not been a Communist when he took power, became a Communist.
* America was alarmed. In April 1961, with Kennedy's knowledge, the CIA funded, trained, armed and transported 1,300 Cuban exiles to invade Cuba. They landed at the Bay of Pigs and made an attempt to overthrow Castro. The invasion was a disaster, and President Kennedy was humiliated.
* In September 1961, Castro asked for - and Russia publicly promised - weapons to defend Cuba against America. Which is why on 14 October 1962, the Americans discovered the missile sites in Cuba. These sites brought every town in the US within range of Soviet nuclear missiles. President Kennedy called a meeting of the National Security Council and on 22 October went on TV to tell the American people that they were under threat.
* The crisis had begun.

**The Crisis**

* President Kennedy did not dare to invade Cuba, because that action could have started a world war - yet he could not let the missile sites be completed. With his advisers, he decided on a naval blockade to prevent Russian ships delivering the missiles for the Cuban sites.
* Khrushchev warned that Russia would see the blockade as an act of war. Russian forces were put on alert; US bombers were put in the air carrying nuclear bombs; preparations were made to invade Cuba. There was massive tension in both Washington and Moscow. Everybody thought the world was going to come to an end. Secretly, the Americans suggested a trade-off of missile bases - US bases in Turkey for Russian bases in Cuba.
* The Russians made the first public move. The ships heading for Cuba turned back, and Khrushchev sent a telegram offering to dismantle the Cuban bases if Kennedy lifted the blockade and promised not to invade Cuba. Then, as though having second thoughts, he sent a second letter demanding the dismantling of the Turkish bases. At the vital moment, a US U2 spy plane was shot down.
* However, Kennedy ignored the U2 attack and agreed publicly to the first letter, and secretly to the second. The crisis was over.

**Timeline of events**

**One week in October 1962**

| **Day** | **Events** |
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| Monday 22 October | Kennedy announces a naval blockade of Cuba. B52 nuclear bombers are deployed, so that one-eighth of them are airborne all the time. Kennedy warns of a full retaliatory response, if any missile is launched from Cuba. |
| Tuesday 23 October | Khrushchev explains that the missile sites are "solely to defend Cuba against the attack of an aggressor". |
| Wednesday 24 October | Twenty Russian ships head for Cuba. Khrushchev tells the captains to ignore the blockade. Khrushchev warns that Russia will have "a fitting reply to the aggressor". |
| Thursday 25 October | The first Russian ship reaches the naval blockade. It is an oil ship and is allowed through. The other Russian ships turn back. Secretly, the US government floats the idea of removing the missiles in Turkey in exchange for those in Cuba. |
| Friday 26 October | Russia is still building the missile bases. In the morning, Kennedy considers an invasion of Cuba. It seems that war is about to break out. But at 6pm, Kennedy gets a telegram from Khrushchev offering to dismantle the sites if Kennedy lifts the blockade and promises not to invade Cuba. |
| Saturday 27 October | However, at 11am Khrushchev sends a second letter, demanding that Kennedy also dismantles American missile bases in Turkey. At noon on the same day, a U2 plane is shot down over Cuba. It looks as if a war is about to start after all. At 8.05pm, Kennedy sends a letter to Khrushchev, offering that if Khrushchev dismantles the missile bases in Cuba, America will lift the blockade and promise not to invade Cuba - and also dismantle the Turkish missile bases (as long as this is kept a secret). |
| Sunday 28 October | Khrushchev agrees to Kennedy's proposals. The crisis is over. |

*(Source: bbc.co.uk)*

On Tuesday 20 November, Russian bombers leave Cuba, and Kennedy lifts the Naval blockade.

**Repercussions of the crisis**

The world had avoided a nuclear war, but it was time for reason. In fact, both leaders had frightened themselves.

Soon afterwards:

* In 1963, a telephone hotline was set up to give instant contact between the two leaders if there was a crisis.
* In 1963, a Nuclear Test Ban Treaty was signed.
* In 1968, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty was signed - the superpowers promised not to supply nuclear technology to other countries.
* Speaking many years later, Khrushchev claimed that he had won the Cuban missile crisis. He had achieved both his aims - America never bothered Cuba again (which is still a Communist country) and the US missile sites in Turkey were dismantled in November 1962.
* The world did not see it that way at the time, because the Turkey deal was kept secret, the West saw Kennedy as the hero who had faced down Communism.
* Meanwhile, Khrushchev lost prestige. China broke off relations with Russia and, in 1964, he was forced to resign as Soviet leader.

# The 'gravest issues'

Early on Tuesday 16 October 1962, John F Kennedy's national security assistant, McGeorge Bundy, brought to the President's bedroom some high-altitude photographs taken from U-2 planes flying over Cuba. They showed Soviet soldiers hurriedly and secretly setting up nuclear-armed missiles.

For some time previously the Soviets had openly been sending weaponry to Cuba, including surface-to-air anti-aircraft missiles (SAMs). To deflect any criticism about this from the Republicans, who were busy campaigning for the November congressional elections, Kennedy had said he would not protest about such defensive weaponry being installed in Cuba, but warned that if the Soviets ever introduced offensive weapons, 'the gravest issues would arise.'

Since Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev had promised repeatedly not to send offensive weapons to Cuba, and America's top intelligence analysts had predicted that he would keep his word, Kennedy felt safe in voicing this warning. The U-2 photographs, however, showed that Khrushchev had been lying. The 'gravest issues' were at hand.

The United States at the time had more than 25,000 nuclear weapons in their arsenal. The Soviet Union had not quite half as many. Kennedy's predecessor, Dwight Eisenhower, had calculated in 1960 that, if a crisis led either side to fire nuclear weapons, all humans in the northern hemisphere could perish. 'Gravest issues' indeed.

**The ExComm and the secret tapes**

To help him decide what to do about the Cuban situation, and how much risk to run of a nuclear exchange, Kennedy assembled a small group that came to be called the Executive Committee of the National Security Council - or ExComm for short. Early in his presidency, Kennedy had had to make a decision about a CIA plan to land Cuban exiles at the Bay of Pigs, in Cuba, with the hope that these exiles would overthrow Cuba's Communist government, headed by Fidel Castro. Kennedy had asked for advice about this from only a handful of people - those he knew he was officially obliged to consult. The operation proved to be a fiasco, and afterwards Kennedy had resolved in future to consult more widely.

Included in the ExComm were the regular participants in National Security Council meetings, plus Kennedy's brother, the attorney general Robert Kennedy, and the President's chief speechwriter, the White House counsel Theodore Sorensen. Both of these men could help Kennedy to think about the domestic political aspects of the crisis. The President also invited several other key advisors to join the group: C Douglas Dillon, who had held high posts under Eisenhower and who gave Kennedy a link to the Republican leadership; Dean Acheson and Robert Lovett, who had served under President Harry Truman and could help Kennedy see the current crisis in longer historical perspective; and a former ambassador to the Soviet Union, Llewellyn (Tommy) Thompson, probably the person in the President's circle who was best acquainted with Khrushchev.

We know today exactly what was said in the meetings of the ExComm, because Kennedy had a tape recorder installed in an unused part of the White House basement, with wires running to concealed microphones in the Oval Office and Cabinet Room. He had told no one about this other than his private secretary, the two guards who maintained the machines, and perhaps his brother, Robert. Since he kept it on through almost all ExComm meetings, anyone today can listen in on the proceedings.

**Quarantine**

In the first day's debates, everyone favoured bombing Cuba. The only differences concerned the scale of attack. Kennedy, Bundy, and some others spoke of a 'surgical strike' solely against the missile sites. 'It corresponds to "the punishment fits the crime" in political terms', said Bundy. Others joined the chiefs of staff in insisting that an attack should also take out air defence sites and bombers, so as to limit losses of US aircraft and prevent an immediate air reprisal against US bases in Florida.

By the third day, 18 October, another option had come to the fore. The under secretary of state, George Ball, had commented that a US surprise attack on Cuba would be '... like Pearl Harbor. It's the kind of conduct that one might expect of the Soviet Union. It is not conduct that one expects of the United States.' Robert Kennedy and Secretary of State Dean Rusk concurred, Rusk observing that the decision-makers could carry 'the mark of Cain' on their brows for the rest of their lives. To meet this concern and to obtain time for gaining support from other nations, there developed the idea of the President's publicly announcing the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba, ordering a blockade to prevent the introduction of further missiles, and demanding that the Soviets withdraw the missiles already there. (Both for legal reasons and for resonance with Franklin Roosevelt's 'Quarantine Address' of 1937, the term 'quarantine' was substituted for 'blockade'.)

To those of Kennedy's advisers who still favoured quick use of military force (the 'hawks' in later classification), this quarantine constituted an ultimatum. If Khrushchev did not capitulate within a day or two, a US air attack on Cuba would follow, followed before long by an invasion. For those in the ExComm who would later be classed as 'doves,' the quarantine bought time for possibly developing some diplomatic solution.

**A Berlin crisis, not a Cuba crisis**

In the early phase of ExComm debate, Kennedy blamed himself for the crisis - 'Last month I should have said that we don't care' - implying that if he had not given such a strong public warning, he could possibly have let Khrushchev get away with placing missiles in Cuba; 'It doesn't make any difference if you get blown up by an ICBM flying from the Soviet Union, or one from 90 miles away. Geography doesn't mean that much', he said. But Kennedy explained over and over to members of the ExComm and others why, since he had issued the warning and Khrushchev had chosen to challenge him, the crisis involved much more than just a personal affront. The reason was that, for Kennedy, the crisis was not centrally about missiles in Cuba; it was about Berlin.

The Soviets had tried to take over West Berlin in 1948-9. Their blockade had been frustrated by an Anglo-American airlift and by the astonishing resolution of the West Berliners, but in 1958 Khrushchev had once more revived the threat, and he continued to do so. In 1961, he and the East Germans built a wall around West Berlin as a stopgap measure to halt the exodus of East Germans from Soviet-controlled areas. Earlier in 1962 he had told Kennedy that he intended to act on West Berlin as soon as the US congressional elections were over.

Counselled by Thompson, Kennedy interpreted the installation of missiles in Cuba as a move preparatory to a showdown on Berlin. For him, such a showdown would create a horrible dilemma. The United States had promised to protect the million and a half West Berliners from Soviet take-over, but had no means whatever for physically preventing the thousands of East German and Soviet troops that surrounded Berlin from taking control of the city if they chose to do so. The only protection for West Berlin was the US threat to respond to an attack by using nuclear weapons against the Soviet Union.

If Kennedy demanded uncompromisingly that the Soviets remove their nuclear weapons from Cuba, Khrushchev would have to decide whether to comply or to take the risk of actual war, which might become a nuclear war. The onus would be on him. If Kennedy showed weakness in face of Khrushchev's challenge, the effect might be to embolden Khrushchev to ignore American warnings about Berlin. It would then be Kennedy, not Khrushchev, who would bear the onus. 'A Soviet move on Berlin,' Kennedy said to the joint chiefs of staff, 'leaves me only one alternative, which is to fire nuclear weapons - which is a hell of an alternative.'

**Dreadful days**

On Monday 22 October, Kennedy went on radio and television, describing the secret Soviet build-up in Cuba, proclaiming the quarantine, and demanding that the Soviets remove the missiles. In the next few days, one harrowing moment followed another.

Kennedy and his advisers mulled over the question of how actually to stop a Soviet ship that crossed the quarantine line. Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara described the Navy's plan for dealing with a Soviet submarine that was escorting a merchantman. A destroyer would use small depth charges to signal that the submarine should surface. McNamara acknowledged that the submarine commander might think he was being attacked rather than being sent a signal and might fire at the destroyer. Kennedy said, 'I think we ought to wait on that today. We don't want to have the first thing we attack as a Soviet submarine. I'd much rather have a merchant ship.'

When McNamara protested, Kennedy gave way, but, as his brother Robert recalled later: 'His hand went up to his face and covered his mouth, and he closed his fist. His eyes were tense, almost grey, and we just stared at each other across the table.' Fortunately, before there was an encounter at sea, Khrushchev ordered all Soviet merchantmen bound for Cuba to turn back.

Meanwhile, Kennedy and his advisers faced the question of how to keep track of continuing missile construction in Cuba. At the urging of McNamara and the chiefs of staff, Kennedy authorised low-level daytime surveillance flights in addition to continuing U-2 flights. He also agreed provisionally to night-time coverage involving the use of flares. Vice-President Lyndon Johnson worried aloud about these. 'Imagine some crazy Russian captain,' he said. 'The damn thing goes "blooey" and lights up the skies. He might just pull a trigger. Looks like we're playing Fourth of July over there or something.' Also fortunately, the crisis ended before flares were actually used.

**Finessing the Turkish missiles issue**

On 26-27 October, the crisis came to a head. Khrushchev cabled Kennedy that he was prepared to remove missiles from Cuba in return for a US promise not to invade Cuba - a promise that had already been given more than once. But, just as Kennedy and his ExComm began to discuss a response, Khrushchev broadcast from Moscow a second message saying the missiles would be removed if, in addition, the United States withdrew nuclear missiles and other 'offensive means' from Turkey.

The second Khrushchev message provoked furious debate. With Ball in the lead, Kennedy's advisers said almost unanimously that Khrushchev's new condition was unacceptable. America's NATO allies would think the United States was sacrificing their security for the sake of its own. Kennedy alone seemed unconvinced. When Ball said, 'If we talked to the Turks... this would be an extremely unsettling business', Kennedy replied with asperity, 'Well, this is unsettling now, George, because ... most people would regard this as not an unreasonable proposal ... I think you're going to have it very difficult to explain why we are going to take hostile military action in Cuba ... when he's saying, "If you'll get yours out of Turkey, we'll get ours out of Cuba."'.

In the end, Kennedy found a way to finesse the situation. He sent Robert Kennedy to see the Soviet ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin, to tell him that the missiles in Turkey were obsolete, and that the US planned to pull them out within about six months. All this was true. He said further, however, that, if the Soviet Union used this knowledge to claim that the US had struck the deal proposed in Khrushchev's radio message, Kennedy would deny the claim and would not remove the missiles from Turkey. What Kennedy wanted was to mollify Khrushchev without seeming to make a concession, and above all to avoid any prolonged negotiations. He had to insist that Soviet missiles come out of Cuba unconditionally, or he would compromise the display of firmness that he judged necessary to protect against a Berlin crisis.

In fact, the exchange between Robert Kennedy and Dobrynin had no effect. Khrushchev had already decided to retreat to a simple request for a no invasion pledge. And the crisis ended on that basis. US reconnaissance aircraft kept watch while the Soviets dismantled their missiles and loaded the parts on ships for return to the Soviet Union.

**Resolution**

The world escaped nuclear war in October 1962 largely because of the prudence of Kennedy and the belated prudence of Khrushchev. Though Kennedy had felt it necessary to be uncompromising in his demand for removal of the missiles from Cuba, he had been careful to put off to the last possible moment any action that could result in killing a Russian. Khrushchev had probably decided to drop his demand for quid pro quo removals from Turkey as a result of learning that a Soviet anti-aircraft missile in Cuba had shot down a US U-2 plane, killing the pilot. Kennedy and Khrushchev both recognised that, once blood had been spilled, it would be very hard to keep any crisis under control.

Because Khrushchev had been faced down, he did not force a new Berlin crisis. The Soviet bloc lived for the next 27 years with a wall around West Berlin that marked East Germany as a huge penitentiary, and it eventually became possible for west and east to turn towards the stabilising compromises of the later period of détente.

(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/coldwar/kennedy_cuban_missile_01.shtml#one>)

# [Cuban Missle Crisis Map of Missle Range](https://www.jfklibrary.org/~/media/assets/Rollout/cmc_map_missile_rangejpg.jpg)Image

*Map of the western hemisphere showing the full range of the nuclear missiles under construction in Cuba, used during the secret meetings on the Cuban Missile Crisis. Date: October, 1962*

*(John F. Kennedy, Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum)*

# The Cuban Missile Crisis

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, leaders of the U.S. and the Soviet Union engaged in a tense, 13-day political and military standoff in October 1962 over the installation of nuclear-armed Soviet missiles on Cuba, just 90 miles from U.S. shores. In a TV address on October 22, 1962, President John Kennedy (1917-63) notified Americans about the presence of the missiles, explained his decision to enact a naval blockade around Cuba and made it clear the U.S. was prepared to use military force if necessary to neutralize this perceived threat to national security. Following this news, many people feared the world was on the brink of nuclear war. However, disaster was avoided when the U.S. agreed to Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev’s (1894-1971) offer to remove the Cuban missiles in exchange for the U.S. promising not to invade Cuba. Kennedy also secretly agreed to remove U.S. missiles from Turkey.

**Discovering the Missiles**

After seizing power in the Caribbean island nation of Cuba in 1959, leftist revolutionary leader Fidel Castro (1926-) aligned himself with the Soviet Union. Under Castro, Cuba grew dependent on the Soviets for military and economic aid. During this time, the U.S. and the Soviets (and their respective allies) were engaged in the Cold War (1945-91), an ongoing series of largely political and economic clashes.

The two superpowers plunged into one of their biggest Cold War confrontations after the pilot of an American U-2 spy plane making a high-altitude pass over Cuba on October 14, 1962, photographed a Soviet SS-4 medium-range ballistic missile being assembled for installation.

President Kennedy was briefed about the situation on October 16, and he immediately called together a group of advisors and officials known as the executive committee, or ExCom. For nearly the next two weeks, the president and his team wrestled with a diplomatic crisis of epic proportions, as did their counterparts in the Soviet Union.

**New Threat to the U.S.**

For the American officials, the urgency of the situation stemmed from the fact that the nuclear-armed Cuban missiles were being installed so close to the U.S. mainland–just 90 miles south of Florida. From that launch point, they were capable of quickly reaching targets in the eastern U.S. If allowed to become operational, the missiles would fundamentally alter the complexion of the nuclear rivalry between the U.S. and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), which up to that point had been dominated by the Americans.

Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev had gambled on sending the missiles to Cuba with the specific goal of increasing his nation’s nuclear strike capability. The Soviets had long felt uneasy about the number of nuclear weapons that were targeted at them from sites in Western Europe and Turkey, and they saw the deployment of missiles in Cuba as a way to level the playing field. Another key factor in the Soviet missile scheme was the hostile relationship between the U.S. and Cuba. The Kennedy administration had already launched one attack on the island–the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961–and Castro and Khrushchev saw the missiles as a means of deterring further U.S. aggression.

**Weighing the Options**

From the outset of the crisis, Kennedy and ExCom determined that the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba was unacceptable. The challenge facing them was to orchestrate their removal without initiating a wider conflict–and possibly a nuclear war. In deliberations that stretched on for nearly a week, they came up with a variety of options, including a bombing attack on the missile sites and a full-scale invasion of Cuba. But Kennedy ultimately decided on a more measured approach. First, he would employ the U.S. Navy to establish a blockade, or quarantine, of the island to prevent the Soviets from delivering additional missiles and military equipment. Second, he would deliver an ultimatum that the existing missiles be removed.

In a television broadcast on October 22, 1962, the president notified Americans about the presence of the missiles, explained his decision to enact the blockade and made it clear that the U.S. was prepared to use military force if necessary to neutralize this perceived threat to national security. Following this public declaration, people around the globe nervously waited for the Soviet response. Some Americans, fearing their country was on the brink of nuclear war, hoarded food and gas.

**Showdown at Sea**

A crucial moment in the unfolding crisis arrived on October 24, when Soviet ships bound for Cuba neared the line of U.S. vessels enforcing the blockade. An attempt by the Soviets to breach the blockade would likely have sparked a military confrontation that could have quickly escalated to a nuclear exchange. But the Soviet ships stopped short of the blockade.

Although the events at sea offered a positive sign that war could be averted, they did nothing to address the problem of the missiles already in Cuba. The tense standoff between the superpowers continued through the week, and on October 27, an American reconnaissance plane was shot down over Cuba, and a U.S. invasion force was readied in Florida. (The 35-year-old pilot of the downed plane, Major Rudolf Anderson, is considered the sole U.S. combat casualty of the Cuban missile crisis.) “I thought it was the last Saturday I would ever see,” recalled U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara (1916-2009), as quoted by Martin Walker in “The Cold War.” A similar sense of doom was felt by other key players on both sides.

**A Deal Ends the Standoff**

Despite the enormous tension, Soviet and American leaders found a way out of the impasse. During the crisis, the Americans and Soviets had exchanged letters and other communications, and on October 26, Khrushchev sent a message to Kennedy in which he offered to remove the Cuban missiles in exchange for a promise by U.S. leaders not to invade Cuba. The following day, the Soviet leader sent a letter proposing that the USSR would dismantle its missiles in Cuba if the Americans removed their missile installations in Turkey.

Officially, the Kennedy administration decided to accept the terms of the first message and ignore the second Khrushchev letter entirely. Privately, however, American officials also agreed to withdraw their nation’s missiles from Turkey. U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy (1925-68) personally delivered the message to the Soviet ambassador in Washington, and on October 28, the crisis drew to a close.

Both the Americans and Soviets were sobered by the Cuban Missile Crisis. The following year, a direct “hot line” communication link was installed between Washington and Moscow to help defuse similar situations, and the superpowers signed two treaties related to nuclear weapons. The Cold War was far from over, though. In fact, another legacy of the crisis was that it convinced the Soviets to increase their investment in an arsenal of intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of reaching the U.S. from Soviet territory.

(<https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/cuban-missile-crisis>)

# Questions

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| 1. What were the US attitudes to Cuba in 1962? |
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| 1. Why did the USA and USSR clash over Cuba in 1962? |
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| 1. Look at the map of the western hemisphere. Why was Cuba of such strategic interest to the USA? |
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| 1. What were the issues on both sides in the Cuban Missile Crisis? |
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| 1. Describe the key events of the Cuban Missile Crisis |
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| 1. List the consequences of the crisis for: | |
| Cuba | Kennedy |
| Khrushchev | International Relations |

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| 1. Who would you blame for the crisis? Please explain why. |
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| 1. Who do you think won the Cuban crisis, Kennedy or Khrushchev? Please explain why. |
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