

October 1962: Kennedy Discovers the Missiles

On October 14, 1962, an American U-2 reconnaissance aircraft flew over the province of San Cristobal in Cuba on a routine mission to gather data. The pictures the aircraft took of the ground disclosed developments that were far from routine. The photos revealed Soviet efforts to install approximately forty nuclear missiles, each capable of devastating an American city.

Since Cuban leader Fidel Castro's first appeals to Moscow in 1960, U.S. officials had repeatedly warned the Soviets against attempting to put missiles in Cuba. The Soviets had assured the United States that they had no intention of giving the Cubans nuclear missiles. They pledged that Cuba would receive only nonnuclear weapons to defend the island from attack.

“There is no need for the Soviet Union to shift its weapons for the repulsion of aggression, for a retaliatory blow, to any other country, for instance Cuba. Our nuclear weapons are so powerful in their explosive force and the Soviet Union has such powerful rockets to carry these nuclear warheads, that there is no need to search for sites for them beyond the boundaries of the Soviet Union.”

—TASS [Official press agency of the USSR]
September 11, 1962

The discovery of evidence that nuclear missiles had been sent to Cuba forced U.S. leaders to respond. The crisis that began when the reconnaissance photos were examined on October 15 was the most dangerous confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States of the Cold War.

Today, it is known to Americans as “the Cuban missile crisis,” to Soviets as “the Caribbean crisis,” and to Cubans as “the October crisis.” At no other time in history has the world come so close to nuclear war.

What did U.S. leaders think Soviet intentions were?

When U.S. leaders discovered that the Soviets were installing nuclear missiles in Cuba, they were stunned. No one was sure of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev or Fidel Castro's intentions. Would the nuclear missiles be used to threaten Cuba's Latin American neighbors, or even intimidate the United States? Did the communist leaders believe that the United States would not oppose their plan? In October 1962, Americans did not know the answers to these questions.

Khrushchev's motives aside, the White House was shocked that the Soviets had ignored U.S. warnings against putting missiles in Cuba. President Kennedy was especially indignant at the secrecy surrounding the Soviet operation. Kennedy administration officials recognized that members of Congress and the American media would press for a strong U.S. response.

Why was the Kennedy administration concerned about the missiles?

In the White House, there was little disagreement that nuclear missiles in Cuba would pose a grave threat to U.S. security. For the first time, American territory would be highly vulnerable to Soviet nuclear attack. From the U.S. perspective, the question was not whether the missiles should be removed but how.

Initially, President Kennedy and his advisers decided to keep their knowledge of the missiles secret from the Soviets and the American public. On October 16, the president called together his closest and most trusted advisers to help him manage the crisis. This group was the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, or “ExComm.”

President Kennedy and ExComm met to consider the options for removing the Soviet missiles from Cuba. The discussion produced three distinct choices for U.S. action, ranging from the purely diplomatic to a full-scale military assault. Each of the three strategies

had supporters within ExComm and President Kennedy weighed each carefully.

On October 20, President Kennedy decided on a blockade of Cuba by the U.S. Navy to prevent further shipments of military supplies to the island. The president decided to use the word "quarantine" instead of the word "blockade" because international law considered a blockade to be an act of war. This option allowed the president to steer a middle course among ExComm's varied options.

Cuban President Fidel Castro was convinced that the United States was going to attack Cuba. On October 26, 1962, he wrote a letter to Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev.

Letter from Prime Minister Castro to Chairman Khrushchev, October 26, 1962

Instructions: *Read the letter and then answer the questions that follow. As you read, use different colors to mark 1) words or phrases that you do not understand; 2) the 3-5 sentences that you think are most important; 3) any sentence that refers to events described in your reading.. Answer the questions that follow with your group. Be prepared to share your answers with your classmates. Use additional paper as needed to record your answers.*

Dear Comrade Khrushchev:

Given the analysis of the situation and the reports which have reached us, [I] consider an attack to be almost imminent—within the next 24 to 72 hours. There are two possible variants: the first and most probable one is an air attack against certain objectives with the limited aim of destroying them; the second, and though less probable, still possible, is a full invasion. This would require a large force and is the most repugnant form of aggression, which might restrain them.

You can be sure that we will resist with determination, whatever the case. The Cuban people's morale is extremely high and the people will confront aggression heroically.

I would like to briefly express my own personal opinion.

If the second variant takes place and the imperialists invade Cuba with the aim of occupying it, the dangers of their aggressive policy are so great that after such an invasion the Soviet Union must never allow circumstances in which the imperialists could carry out a nuclear first strike against it.

I tell you this because I believe that the imperialists' aggressiveness makes them extremely dangerous, and that if they manage to carry out an invasion of Cuba—a brutal act in violation of universal and moral law—then that would be the moment to eliminate this

danger forever, in an act of the most legitimate self-defense. However harsh and terrible the solution, there would be no other.

This opinion is shaped by observing the development of their aggressive policy. The imperialists, without regard for world opinion and against laws and principles, have blockaded the seas, violated our air-space, and are preparing to invade, while at the same time blocking any possibility of negotiation, even though they understand the gravity of the problem.

You have been, and are, a tireless defender of peace, and I understand that these moments, when the results of your superhuman efforts are so seriously threatened, must be bitter for you. We will maintain our hopes for saving the peace until the last moment, and we are ready to contribute to this in any way we can. But, at the same time, we are serene and ready to confront a situation which we see as very real and imminent.

I convey to you the infinite gratitude and recognition of the Cuban people to the Soviet people, who have been so generous and fraternal, along with our profound gratitude and admiration to you personally. We wish you success with the enormous task and great responsibilities which are in your hands.

Fraternally,
Fidel Castro

Name: _____

Instructions: These short films were created to help you understand the three leaders who played a critical role in the Cuban Missile Crisis. As you watch the films, fill in the chart below.

	Castro	Kennedy	Khrushchev
What country is he the leader of?			
What experiences are depicted? What images are used to show these experiences?			
What characteristics of his personality are portrayed? What beliefs and values are shown?			
What are his goals during the missile Crisis?			

Aftermath

Throughout the Cuban Missile Crisis, the fear of nuclear war hung over the heads of both U.S. and Soviet leaders. President Kennedy said he believed that there was a 30 to 50 percent chance that the missile crisis would lead to a nuclear war.

In order to avoid a nuclear exchange, Khrushchev turned his back on his Cuban ally and came to terms with his Cold War rival. By doing so, the Soviet leader risked both his ties with Cuba and his country's reputation as a global superpower.

After the missile crisis, the United States and the Soviet Union established a hotline to ease communication between leaders in times of crisis. The arrangement featured teletype machines installed in both the Kremlin and the White House. Leaders reportedly used the hotline dozens of times. The hotline reduced the risk of a misunderstanding resulting in deadly conflict.

The missile crisis also impressed Kennedy and Khrushchev with the dangers of making nuclear threats. Having come so close to the horror of a nuclear war, leaders on both sides recognized the need to embark on a new path to prevent nuclear confrontation in the future. The ideological conflict would continue, but while they remained in power Khrushchev and Kennedy worked to diminish the tensions between the two nations.

“If we cannot now end our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is the fact that we all inhabit this planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal.... Confident and unafraid, we labor on—not toward a strategy of annihilation, but toward a strategy of peace.”

—President John F. Kennedy,
American University Speech, 1963

What We Know Now: “One Hell of a Gamble”

With the end of the Cold War, key participants in the 1962 crisis from the United States, the former Soviet Union, and Cuba met on several occasions to review the events. Because of these discussions and the declassification of secret U.S., Soviet, and Cuban documents, we now know much more about the missile crisis.

During the crisis, both Kennedy and Khrushchev worried that events could spiral out of control into a nuclear war. Newly discovered evidence suggests that their fears were justified.

According to the head of operational planning for the Soviet General Staff in 1962, General Anatoly Gribkov, nuclear warheads had indeed reached Cuba in the weeks before the missile crisis erupted. The Soviet warheads (as many as 162 of them) were for use on short-range, tactical nuclear missiles. The most powerful tactical missiles on the island were capable of striking targets up to one hundred miles away. Although the U.S. mainland was beyond the range of the missiles, they could have been used with devastating results against American troops invading Cuba. At a 1992 meeting in Havana, Gribkov said that the missiles could have been launched by the Soviet commander in Cuba without authorization from Moscow.

“It horrifies me to think what would have happened in the event of an invasion of Cuba!... It would have been an absolute disaster for the world.... No one should believe that a U.S. force could have been attacked by tactical nuclear warheads without responding with nuclear warheads. And where would it have ended? In utter disaster.”

—Kennedy's Secretary of
Defense Robert S. McNamara

Kennedy, who had been under considerable pressure from the military and members of Congress to invade Cuba, had feared an invasion could provoke a nuclear response. Gribkov's revelation proved his worries were well-founded.

“If we go into Cuba we have to realize that we are taking a chance that these missiles, which are ready to fire, won’t be fired.... The fact is that that is one hell of a gamble.”

—President John F. Kennedy, October 22, 1962