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The Cuban Missile Crisis

For 13 days in October 1962 the world came to the brink of full-scale nuclear war when the two superpowers — the USA and the Soviet Union — stood 'face to face' in conflict with each other over the small Caribbean island of Cuba, located some 150 kilometres off the Florida coast. This article will help you understand what history calls the 'Cuban Missile Crisis', first by providing a background explaining how and why Cuba became such a dangerous flashpoint in the superpower conflict and then by detailing the course of events and consequences of the crisis.

The immediate cause of the Cuban Missile Crisis was the decision by the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev to provide the Cuban government with military supplies and, in particular, nuclear armed missiles. At the same time, however, it is important to understand how the roots of this particular conflict are found in Cuban-American relations during the 1950s as well as in the wider

context of the Cold War, which lasted from 1945 to 1990 and involved much of the world, directly or indirectly.

Cuban communism

From 1952 until 1959 Cuba was ruled by a corrupt dictator, General Batista. Because several major American companies had business interests on the island the US government backed him for the first 5 years of his rule. By 1957, however, Batista's corruption and brutality had become increasingly blatant and American support for his regime quickly began to evaporate. Two years later he was overthrown by a Communist movement led by Fidel Castro. Castro quickly alienated his new government from Washington by nationalising (taking government control of) many major Cuban industries, among them several American-owned businesses. Furthermore, Castro blamed America for Cuba's economic misery and soon took steps to establish closer ties with Moscow and the Soviet regime.

The Bay of Pigs

By 1961, then, the stage was set for some sort of showdown between Castro and US President John Kennedy. This took place in April of that year at Cochinos Bay (the 'Bay of Pigs'), on the southern coast of Cuba, when some 1,500 Cuban exiles who had fled to the USA following the fall of Batista launched an ill-fated invasion. While the invasion was planned and outfitted by the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency), a branch of the American government, from the start it was a disaster for the Cuban exiles and their backers. Not only were the rebels heavily outnumbered (they operated under false and misguided intelligence that their landing would inspire a popular uprising against Castro), but they were badly trained and poorly equipped. Not surprisingly, therefore, it did not take long for Castro's forces to drive the attackers into the ocean; within 3 days all but a handful of the invading force had been killed or captured.

The Bay of Pigs fiasco was a major political disaster for Kennedy; Castro's support among



his people skyrocketed, the USA appeared to many around the world as an aggressor nation and, most immediately, the failed invasion drove Castro ever closer to Khrushchev as the Cuban leader sought Soviet protection against the USA. Moreover, the deterioration in Cuban-American relations impacted on American-Soviet relations, which became worse; when, in June 1961, Kennedy and Khrushchev met for a summit in Vienna the level of political and personal tension was high. The summit is best remembered by many who attended (including Kennedy) for the Soviet leader's open hostility towards his American counterpart.

Soviet missiles on Cuba

The Cuban Missile Crisis itself was sparked in mid-1962 when US intelligence sources reported that Soviet ships were travelling to Cuba. The Soviets claimed the ships were carrying defensive arms to the island. Agents working for the CIA, however, passed on to Washington details of large objects, covered by tarpaulins, being unloaded at Cuban ports. Then, on 16 October, an American U-2 spy plane took photographs of several sites on the island which revealed the presence of missile launchers capable of delivering atomic weapons to most US cities (see Sources A and B).

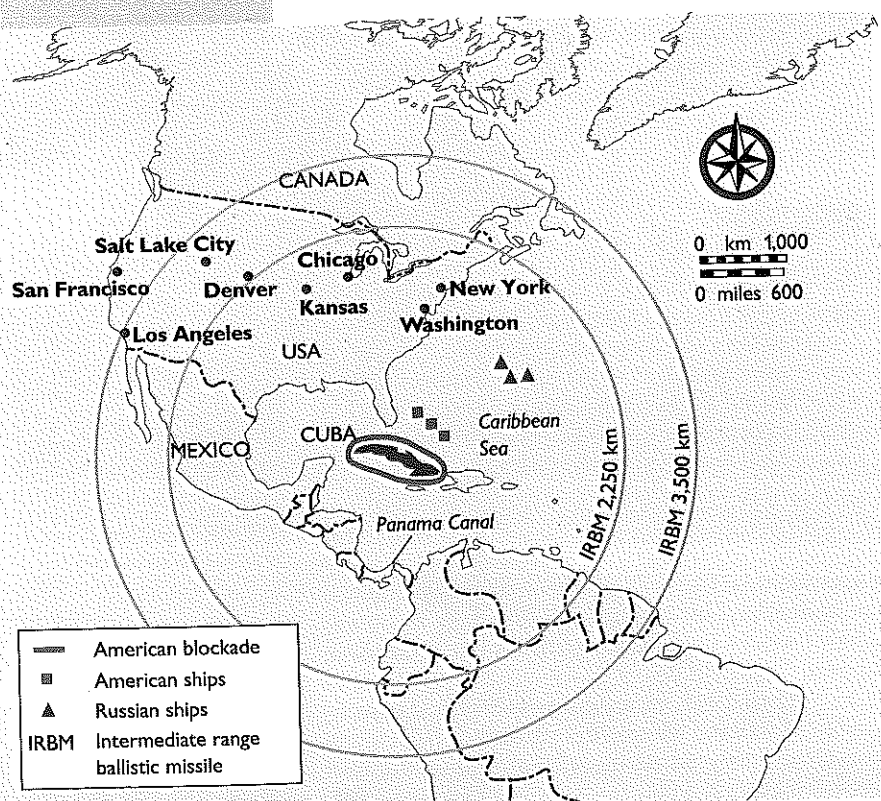
The presence of Soviet missiles on Cuban soil not only presented Kennedy with the most serious threat to US security in that country's history but it also came at the height of the Cold War and at a time when political events had not gone well for America and its allies. For example, in 1960 the Russians had shot down an American U-2 plane on a spy mission over the Soviet Union. Its pilot, Gary Powers, was captured and publicly paraded before the world's media as part of a humiliating propaganda defeat for the USA. Then, a year later (August 1961), the Communists began building the Berlin Wall, effectively setting up a fortified and guarded barrier which divided the city until the wall was knocked down in 1989. Taken together, these events put Kennedy under truly formidable pressure; not only had he to find a solution to the crisis that was favourable to his own country, but he needed to do so in a way that did not result in a full-scale military (nuclear) conflict with the Soviet Union.

Kennedy and his advisors came up with a range of possible responses to the presence of Soviet missiles on Cuba (see Source C). These ranged from doing nothing to carrying out a full-scale American invasion of Cuba. Each option carried with it significant risks; in the end Kennedy decided to blockade Cuba using the US Navy to stop any more Soviet weapons being deployed on the

1 Carry out your own further research on Fidel Castro.

SOURCE A

Map showing US cities within range of missiles from Cuba.



SOURCE B

A CIA photograph showing missile sites on Cuba.

2 How reliable is Source B?

SOURCE C

Cuban Missile Crisis: options and considerations

Option	Advantages	Disadvantages
Do nothing — allow missiles to be based in Cuba.	Gives time to prepare response.	Unpopular in America. Major success for USSR. Threat to US security.
Attack Cuba/USSR with nuclear weapons.	Strike first — before USSR attacks USA in same way.	Full-scale nuclear war, millions killed — the end of humanity?
Air strike against the Cuban missile bases.	Destroy missiles and sites already in Cuba.	War with Cuba and perhaps the USSR. No guarantee all sites would be destroyed.
Blockade Cuba with US Navy — no Russian ships allowed through.	Limited pressure — could be increased later. USSR would be forced to fire first shot to break blockade.	Missiles and sites in Cuba would not be affected. Conflict with USSR rather than Cuba. USSR might do the same to West Berlin.
Air attack against all military sites in Cuba.	Destroy missiles and sites already in Cuba.	Direct conflict with Cuba and perhaps USSR? US casualties.
Invasion of Cuba by US Armed Forces.	Destroy missiles and sites.	War with Cuba and perhaps USSR. US casualties (estimated 25,000). USSR might invade West Berlin.

Peter Fisher, *The Great Power Conflict after 1945*, 1985.

● 3 Group discussion:
Which of the options for Kennedy presented in Source C would you have pursued? Explain your reasoning.

island. At the same time as he ordered the blockade to take effect, Kennedy, as commander-in-chief of the military, placed all US armed forces on highest alert in preparation for possible Soviet military counter-action.

On 22 October Kennedy appeared on television to announce the blockade. During his speech he raised the stakes further by declaring that the USA would respond to 'any nuclear missile launch against any nation in the Western hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the US', which would merit a 'full retaliatory attack against the Soviet Union'. So began the most serious phase of

the crisis and, thereby, the most dangerous week in the history of the earth as the two leaders stood 'face to face' over Cuba, each trying to get the other to 'blink' first and back down.

Between 22 and 28 October — the day Khrushchev defused the crisis by agreeing to remove Soviet missiles from Cuba in return for Kennedy agreeing to end the blockade and promising not to invade — people around the world watched in nervous fear, first as US warships stopped and boarded a Soviet merchant ship and then as news came out that a Cuban anti-aircraft missile battery had shot down a U-2 plane over the island. Thankfully, neither side retaliated against the other for these acts.

With agreement reached between the two sides, the people of the world let out a collective sigh of relief, unaware that Kennedy and Khrushchev had struck a secret personal deal to end the crisis (see

SOURCE E

Your rockets are situated in Britain, situated in Italy and are aimed at us. Your rockets are situated in Turkey. You are worried by Cuba. You say that it worries you because it is a distance of 90 miles from America, but Turkey is next to us. Our sentries walk up and down and look at each other.

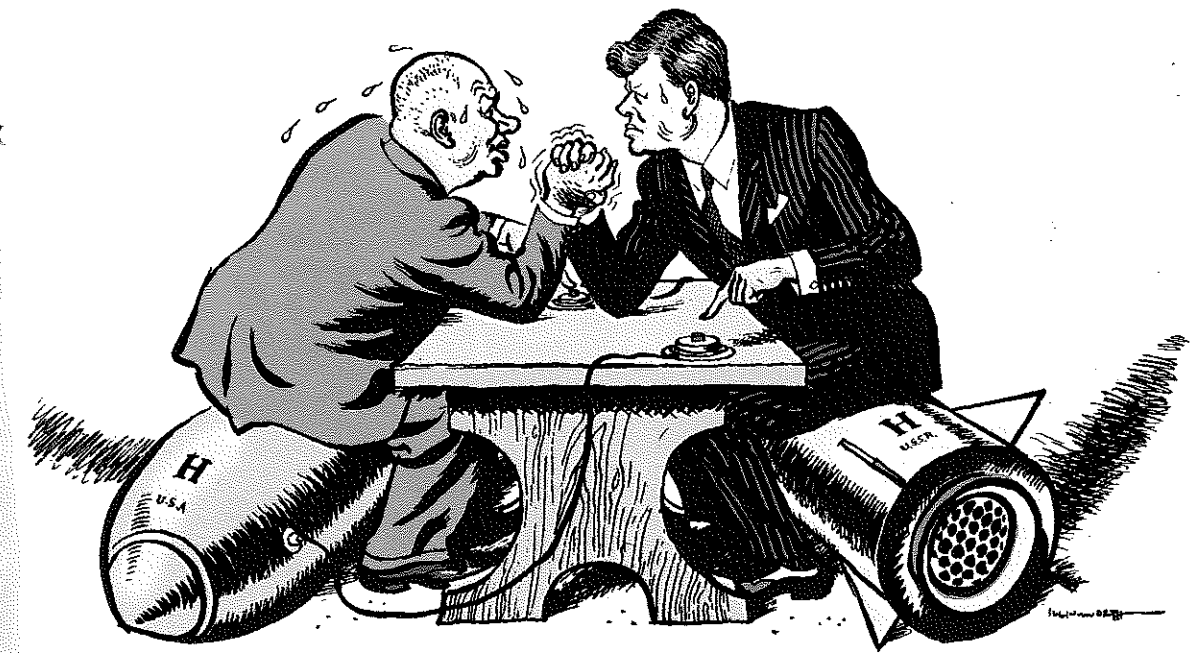
I therefore make this proposal: we agree to remove [the missiles] from Cuba; we agree to carry this out and make a pledge to the United Nations. Your representatives will [declare] that the United States will remove its [missiles] from Turkey.

Part of a letter from Khrushchev to Kennedy which the latter received on 27 October 1962. Quoted in Neil DeMarco and Richard Radway, *The Twentieth Century*, 1997.

SOURCE F

A British cartoon (from the Daily Mail, 29 October 1962).

● 4 What is the cartoonist in Source F saying?



Source E). In return for the removal of all Soviet missiles from Cuba, Kennedy agreed to remove some of the hundreds of US missiles in Europe that were targeted at the Soviet Union. Accordingly, in November 1962 the Soviets dismantled their weapons on the island and a few months later the US government reciprocated by withdrawing missiles from Britain, Italy and Turkey.

Conclusions

There were other significant consequences of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Both leaders were well aware of just how close their countries had come to the brink of nuclear war and everything that this would have meant for the global population.

SOURCE G

We had to find a way of stopping American interference in the Caribbean. The answer was missiles. I had the idea of installing missiles with nuclear warheads in Cuba without letting the United States find out they were there until it was too late to do anything about them. We had no desire to start a war.

We sent the Americans a note saying that we agreed to remove our missiles and bombers on the condition that the President [promised] that there would be no invasion of Cuba by the forces of the United States or anybody else.

Finally Kennedy gave in and agreed to [give] us such an assurance. It was a great victory for us, a spectacular success without having to fire a single shot!

Khrushchev remembers the crisis in his autobiography, published in 1971. Quoted in Neil DeMarco and Richard Radway, *The Twentieth Century*, 1997.

SOURCE H

When one party is clearly wrong, it will eventually give way. That is what happened here. They had no business in putting those missiles in and lying to me about it. They were in the wrong and knew it. So, when we stood firm, they had to back down. But this doesn't mean at all that they would back down when they felt they were in the right and had vital interests involved.

Kennedy recalls his version of events in a private conversation, later published in 1965. Quoted in Neil DeMarco and Richard Radway, *The Twentieth Century*, 1997.

Determined to do everything in their individual and collective power to prevent or minimise a similar clash in the future, Kennedy and Khrushchev set up a direct telephone 'hotline' between the White House and the Kremlin, their respective seats of power. Furthermore, a Test Ban Treaty was signed by the Soviet Union, the USA and Great Britain, by which the three nuclear powers agreed to halt all nuclear tests in the atmosphere.

So the immediate danger passed. Kennedy and Khrushchev had both demonstrated tremendous leadership and diplomatic skills; thanks to these, as well as their concern for the future of the Earth and its people, suffering on a scale barely comprehensible was averted. At the same time, no one in 1962 was able to forget or ignore the fact that the Cold War was still very much ongoing. For several months of that year world attention was focused on events taking place on a small Caribbean island. With 'the bullet dodged' over Cuba, the newest fronts in the superpower conflict quickly opened in 1964 in the Far East, when China detonated its first atomic bomb, and when US combat troops began to land in force in a previously little-known country named Vietnam.

● 5 Read Sources G and H. Both Kennedy and Khrushchev claimed victory in the Cuban Missile Crisis. Which one of them do you feel was more justified in doing so?

SOURCE D
A Russian ship carrying missiles en route for Cuba.

