THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

TO THE BRINK AND BACK
Thirteen Days

• For thirteen days in October 1962 the U.S. and Soviet Union faced off in a conflict of nuclear combat readiness.

• The crisis was the tensest and most volatile event of the Cold War. The two superpowers narrowly averted nuclear holocaust. A nuclear exchange would have put a half a billion people in grave danger. 120 million Americans would most certainly have perished in a nuclear war with the Soviets.
October 14th

- An American U-2 spy plane photographed evidence of the construction of nuclear warhead delivery systems as well as offensive nuclear weapons.

- That same day President Kennedy had traveled to campaign against Republican senator Homer Capehart. JFK considered Capehart’s repeated warnings that the Soviets were planning to install offensive weapons in Cuba a form of grandstanding designed to thwart the Kennedy administration’s domestic agenda.

- On October 15th analysts at the National Photographic Information Center concluded that the pictures showed 8 ballistic missile launch pads. McGeorge Bundy, special assistant for national security affairs, briefed JFK on the threats posed by the IRBMs, which were capable of carrying nuclear warheads over 600 miles.
The Bay of Pigs Fiasco

• While campaigning for president in 1960, JFK charged the Eisenhower administration with allowing a “missile gap” to occur in the arms race against the Soviets and the creation of a Communist state in Cuba.
• Once in office JFK discovered that plans to retake Cuba had been in place. The CIA had been training and supplying an army of 1,500 anti-Castro exiles. After hearing the counsel of his military advisers, JFK ordered the CIA to proceed with plan to overthrow Castro.
• American planners erroneously believed that once the exile landed at the Bay of Pigs one third of Castro’s army would desert the Communists and join the invasion force. They predicted another third would simply desert, and the remaining third would be overwhelmed by the invasion.
• The invasion of April 1961 proved to be a disaster. JFK refused to follow through on a promise to provide the exiles with U.S. naval and air support. Castro’s forces remained loyal and easily defeated the exiles within a few days.
• The international community caught the U.S. clumsily attempting to overthrow the government of another nation.
• Although most of the faulty planning had taken place under Eisenhower, JFK had no choice but to accept full responsibility for the
Inexperienced President

• JFK performed poorly at the Vienna summit in June 1961. Khrushchev pushed JFK around. But the young president learned from the experience and was determined not to be caught off guard again.

• Tensions rose over further the contentious issue of Berlin as thousands of refugees fled Communist East Berlin. JFK understood that Khrushchev had to act aggressively to halt the exodus. When the Soviets erected a wall in violation of international agreements, JFK chose not to act.

• Kennedy knew this sense of urgency explained why the Soviet premier was willing to risk nuclear war by placing offensive missiles in Cuba. The president also surmised that Khrushchev was attempting to neutralize the hundreds of missiles the U.S. placed on the borders of the Soviet Union. JFK privately acknowledged that if he had been in the premier’s position that he would have done the same. The president knew that he was not going to press the button first, and neither was Khrushchev.

Berlin Wall, 1961 or 1962
Operation Mongoose

- JFK lost considerable faith in the competence of his military advisers.
- Still the president remained determined to remove Castro from power.
- Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy directed a plan to overthrow the Castro regime.
- Later the administration developed three invasion plans.
- But JFK continually discounted the possibility that the Soviets were positioning nuclear weapons in Cuba. Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev personally assured the president that no offensive weapons would be placed on Cuba.
The Executive Committee

- Once JFK learned of the “hard evidence” of missile bases capable of launching nuclear attacks on American cities, he ordered Bundy to organize a meeting in the Cabinet Room. Ex. Comm. included Robert F. Kennedy, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric, Bundy, Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Treasury Secretary Douglas Dillon, CIA director John McCon, Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Maxwell Taylor, Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze, UN ambassador Adlai Stevenson, former secretary of state Dean Acheson, and others.

- Everyone agreed that the missiles had to be removed one way or another. The U.S. and its allies would have virtually no warning if the missiles were ever launched from Cuba and posed a grave threat to peace and security. Khrushchev understood this, but he gambled because the Soviets lagged far behind the U.S. in the escalating nuclear arms race. The Soviet missile base in Cuba gain a more favorable position in the nuclear balance of power. Khrushchev also hoped that the missiles in Cuba would provide him with a powerful bargaining position that could force the U.S. into giving concessions in other places, such as Europe.

- Ex. Comm. deliberated every day throughout the crisis, while the president maintained his regular schedule until an appropriate decision could be reached.
The Options

• RFK kept JFK informed of the deliberations.
• JFK demanded to know how long it would be before the missiles could be fired.
• Seven options included:
  – Send the Soviets a formal statement of protest.
  – Bring the issue before the UN Security Council.
  – Impose economic sanctions on the Soviet Union.
  – Form a blockade (quarantine) around Cuba.
  – Conduct a surprise “surgical air strike” against the missile sites.
  – Invade Cuba to oust Castro and remove the missile threat.
  – Launch a nuclear assault directly on the Soviet Union.
• Most initially favored an extensive air strike. But the president wanted to be sure before he proceeded. As JFK explained to his aide Kenneth O'Donnell, “These brass hats have one great advantage in their favor. If we listen to them, and do what they want us to do, none of us will be alive later to tell them that they were wrong.”
The Deliberations

- JFK and his advisers understood that diplomatic measures alone would take too much time and that the weapons would be operational before the crisis could be resolved.
- Taylor acknowledged that air strikes may only destroy 90% of the missiles.
- Llewellyn Thompson, former ambassador to the Soviet Union and expert on the Kremlin, warned that an air strike would probably kill Soviet technicians and that Khrushchev’s response could not safely be predicted.
- An invasion would certainly result in high casualties and potentially take too much time.
- RFK vehemently opposed invasion and air strikes on the grounds that it defied U.S. military tradition and that the world community would view it as unfounded aggression and an overreaction. The attorney general passionately argued for an intermediate course of action—a blockade.
The Decision

- RFK favored a blockade because it show strong resolve, prevent more missiles from reaching Cuba, and perhaps buy some limited time for further diplomacy.

- On October 19th Treasury Secretary Dillon broke with Ex. Comm. members favoring bombing and agreed with RFK that a “sneak attack” would be too much like Pearl Harbor. A consensus gradually developed in favor of trying a blockade first, and if that did not work, then resorting to air strikes.

- On October 20th JFK agreed to a blockade because it was the most reasonable and expedient option. He clearly understood that doing nothing would lead to impeachment and forcing Khrushchev into a corner with no room to back down could be catastrophic. JFK also ordered McNamara to prepare the military for war.
The Address

- The U.S. began to evacuate noncombatants from the naval base at Guantanamo Bay and moving in additional marines on October 22nd.
- Meanwhile, speechwriter Theodore Sorensen finished composing JFK’s address to the national audience. JFK delivered the report to the American people via radio and television on the evening of October 22nd. The president announced that the U.S. Navy would place Cuba under a quarantine designed to prevent additional “offensive military equipment” from reaching Cuba.
- JFK stated: “Within the past week, unmistakable evidence has established the fact that a series of offensive missile sites is now in preparation on that imprisoned island. The purpose of these bases can be none other than to provide a nuclear strike against the Western Hemisphere…. The urgent transformation of Cuba into an important strategic base—by the presence of these large, long-range and clearly offensive weapons of sudden mass destruction—constitutes an explicit threat to the peace and security of all the Americas.” JFK went on to announce that the U.S. would impose a quarantine and increase surveillance. He declared: “It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response.” Kennedy then said the U.S. would reinforce the naval base at Guantanamo Bay. The president, furthermore, called for meetings of the OAS and UN. JFK then challenged the Soviet premier end the crisis: “I call upon Chairman Khrushchev to halt and eliminate this clandestine, reckless, and provocative threat to world peace and to stable relations between our two nations. I call upon him further to abandon this course of world domination, and to join in an historic effort to end the perilous arms race and to transform the history of man.”
- Some historians have charged Kennedy with brinkmanship, while some others have criticized his decision to take a strong public position on Soviet missiles in Cuba.
Reactions

• All over the world people worried that they may die at any moment.

• On October 22\textsuperscript{nd} the Kennedys discussed the blockade order:
  
  \textbf{JFK}: It looks really mean, doesn't it? But on the other hand there wasn't any choice. If he's going to get this mean on this one, in our part of the world [unclear], no choice. I don't think there was a choice.
  
  \textbf{RFK}: Well, there isn't any choice. I mean, you would have been, you would have been impeached.
  
  \textbf{JFK}: Well, I think I would have been impeached.
  
  [Unclear exchange]
  
  If there had been a move to impeach, I would have been under [unclear], on the grounds that I said they wouldn't do it, and . . .
  
  \textbf{RFK}: [Unclear] something else. They'd think up some other step that wasn't necessary. You'd be . . . . But now, the fact is, you couldn't have done any less.

• Rusk presented the American case to the OAS. The OAS unanimously voted to sign the proclamation order that put the quarantine into effect on October 24\textsuperscript{th}. 

RFK and JFK
The Quarantine

• The president authorized the navy to disable any vessel bound for Cuba that refused to stop and be inspected.
• JFK worried that the Soviets would retaliate against Berlin.
• McCone reported that some Soviet vessels had stopped short of the quarantine line. Rusk replied, “We’re eyeball to eyeball, and the other fellow just blinked.” JFK, however, was not convinced. But he hoped to avoid any confrontation with the Soviets. The Soviet decision not to run the blockade provided both governments with additional time to negotiate a peaceful settlement.
• Newly released reconnaissance photos showed that the Soviets were working on the missile sites around the clock.
• Members of Ex. Comm. felt intense pressure to recommend invasion.

The Soviet ship the Grozny crosses the quarantine line but stops after U.S. Navy ships fire star shells across her bow.

Cuban anti-aircraft guns
One Last Round of Diplomacy

• As the military prepared for total war, RFK met with Soviet ambassador Anatoli Dobrynin to warn him that only two days remained before the U.S. would feel obligated to take military action.
• On October 26th Alexander Fomin, an official at the Soviet embassy and Washington station chief for the KGB, called John Scali, a diplomatic correspondent for ABC News. Fomin proposed that the Soviets would remove the missiles from Cuba in exchange for a U.S. pledge not to invade Cuba. Scali responded by meeting with intelligence chief Roger Hilsman, who arranged Scali an audience with Rusk. The secretary of state returned to a meeting with RFK and Bundy. A few minutes later Rusk gave Scali a handwritten response to memorize: “I have reason to believe that the United States Government sees real possibilities in this and supposes that representatives of the two governments could work this matter out with [UN Secretary General] U Thant and each other. My impression is, however, that time is very urgent.”
• The State Department received a desperate personal letter from Khrushchev to Kennedy. Experts agreed that Khrushchev was quite stressed. Essentially Khrushchev hinted that if the U.S. agreed to lift its blockade and pledge not to invade Cuba, the Soviet Union would remove its nuclear weapons from Cuba.
• On October 27th, just as the members of Ex. Comm. began discussing Krushchev’s letter, Press Secretary Pierre Salinger burst into the meeting with the news that Khrushchev had released a public letter demanding that the U.S. remove its Jupiter missiles in Turkey in exchange for the removal of missiles from Cuba. The Jupiter missiles, however, were obsolete. The president had already ordered their removal months earlier, but the Turks protested. JFK could not publicly agree to remove the missiles from Turkey because America’s foes and allies would consider the act “selling out.” Many suggested that the Soviets were merely stalling so that the nuclear weapons in Cuba would soon be operational.
• Later JFK decided to follow through on Bundy’s suggestion that the U.S. would agree to the terms presented by Khrushchev in the first letter and ignore the second letter.
RFK Secretly Meets Dobryninin

- The attorney general asserted that the president could not make a public deal involving the removal of missiles in Turkey. But RFK assured Dobrynin that the Jupiter missiles would be removed from Turkey in the near future. Kennedy also gave Dobrynin a deadline. If the Cuban missiles were not dismantled within forty-eight hours, the U.S. would destroy them.
- On October 28th Khrushchev accepted the deal. The Soviet premier had badly miscalculated the stern American reaction to the placement of offensive missiles in Cuba, though his restraint in the crisis helped to assure a peaceful solution. Khrushchev soon left office in disgrace, while Kennedy’s reputation soared.
Aftermath

• For two weeks the world seemed headed for nuclear war and holocaust. After going to the brink of catastrophe, the two superpowers better understood the dangers of nuclear weapons. The crisis may have led to a lessening in tensions even if major differences remained unresolved.

• Both leaders agreed to the installation of a “hot line” between the White House and Kremlin to facilitate instant communication in the event of another crisis.

• Both JFK and Khrushchev saved the world from nuclear war by resisting the hardliners in their respective governments and by skillfully using diplomacy to end the crisis. JFK also negotiated a limited test ban treaty that slowed the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

• JFK acknowledged the futility of nuclear war in an address at American University: “Total war makes no sense in an age when great powers can maintain large and relatively invulnerable nuclear forces and refuse to surrender without resort to those forces…. We are both caught up in a vicious and dangerous cycle in which suspicion on the one side breeds suspicion on the other, and new weapons beget counterweapons.”

• The notion of mutually assured destruction may have acted as a deterrent after all.
Bibliography


