

Epilogue: On the Brink

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.

On the evening of October 22, Kennedy announced in a televised speech to the American public that the Soviets were installing nuclear missiles in Cuba. He then informed the nation of his decision to enforce a quarantine of Cuba until the missiles were removed. At the time, the president expected that the quarantine would be only the first step in a long war of nerves with the Soviets. In his speech, Kennedy warned that “many months of sacrifice

and self-discipline lie ahead, months in which both our patience and our will will be tested.”

How did the American public react to President Kennedy’s speech?

Kennedy’s speech was designed to galvanize the American public into supporting the quarantine decision of their president. Nonetheless, some critics felt that Kennedy had been too rash and that he should have given diplomacy more of a chance. Others feared that Kennedy would behave with the “same timidity and indecision which doomed the Bay of Pigs.” Many Americans simply held their breath and hoped that the world would not be consumed in a nuclear holocaust.

“Can you imagine not seeing another Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter, birthday, dance, or even Halloween?... We’re just too young to die.”

—A Massachusetts schoolgirl

What was the Soviet Union’s reaction to Kennedy’s speech?

Kennedy’s October 22 address caught the Soviet government off guard. For several hours, there was no response. Soviet diplomats in the United States were especially baffled. Like most Americans, they first learned of the Soviet missile build-up in Cuba through Kennedy’s speech. In Moscow, Khrushchev’s first reaction was anger. On October 23, he blasted the U.S. quarantine of Cuba as a violation of international law. Khrushchev maintained that the missiles in Cuba, regardless of their type, were meant “exclusively for defensive purposes, in order to secure the Cuban republic from an aggressor’s attack.” He also warned the United States that military aggression toward Cuba might lead to nuclear war.



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What diplomatic steps did the United States take?

The U.S. government moved quickly to gain international backing for the quarantine. The U.S. ambassador to the UN, Adlai Stevenson, denounced the introduction of missiles in Cuba in a speech to the UN Security Council. He charged that Castro “aided and abetted an invasion of the hemisphere,” making himself “an accomplice in the communist enterprise of world domination.” Stevenson called for a UN vote to condemn the installation of Soviet missiles in Cuba, but the Soviet ambassador to the UN vetoed Stevenson’s proposal.

The Organization of American States (OAS), on the other hand, did vote twenty to zero in support of the U.S. quarantine, condemned the Soviet Union as an aggressor, and branded Cuba as a threat to security in the hemisphere. The secret manner in which the missiles were placed in Cuba infuriated Latin American governments. Many Latin American leaders also feared Cuban support of communist guerrilla movements in their own countries.

What military steps did the United States take?

As the crisis intensified, many Americans feared that war, possibly nuclear war, was probable. The U.S. naval quarantine went into effect October 24. Initially, Khrushchev ordered Soviet ships to race toward the quar-

antine line. The Soviets threatened to sink any U.S. vessel that tried to prevent their passage to Cuba. That same day, the government put U.S. nuclear forces on DEFCON 2 alert for the first and only time in history: bombers remained airborne, and missile silo covers were opened in preparation for launching. On October 25, at least a dozen Soviet ships en route to Cuba turned back, but preparations at the missile sites on the island accelerated. Soviets and Cubans started working around the clock to make the missiles operational.

War seemed even more likely when Soviet forces shot down a U.S. reconnaissance flight over Cuba on October 27, killing the pilot, Major Rudolf Anderson. The day before Castro had ordered Cuban air defense forces to fire on any U.S. aircraft that flew within range. Meanwhile, ExComm received reports that the missiles in Cuba were about to become operational.

The tension was reaching a breaking point. If the Soviets refused to back down, the United States would be faced with the options to allow the missiles to remain in Cuba, launch an air strike, or to invade the island. To make matters more difficult, there was no assurance that the Soviets exercised complete control over the missile sites, as Khrushchev claimed. No one in Washington knew for sure if nuclear warheads had reached Cuba, but U.S. leaders had no choice but to assume that they were on the island. With these pressures bearing down

DEFCON

DEFCON, or Defense Condition, refers to the U.S. state of readiness for nuclear war. The DEFCON scale runs from five, for peace-time conditions, to zero, for a nuclear attack. On October 24, 1962, the Strategic Air Command was placed on DEFCON 2 for the first and only time in history. Below is a summary of DEFCON 2 measures.

1. Battle staffs were placed on twenty-four hour alert.
2. All military personnel were forbidden to go on leave.
3. One hundred and eighty-three bombers were dispatched to thirty-three airfields.
4. One-eighth of all U.S. B-52 bombers were constantly airborne.
5. Additional bombers were placed on alert on runways throughout the United States.
6. Ninety U.S. nuclear missiles were placed at a heightened state of readiness.

"A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall"

The feelings that many Americans had during the missile crisis may be hard to imagine today. Although reactions varied, the effects of the crisis influenced the lives of many and found expression in popular culture. One reaction can be found in the words of the well-known singer Bob Dylan. Dylan wrote the song "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall" during the missile crisis.

"Hard Rain is a desperate kind of song. Every line in it is actually the start of a whole song. But when I wrote it, I thought I wouldn't have enough time alive to write all those songs so I put all I could into this one."

—Bob Dylan

Below is the third stanza from Dylan's "A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall."

And what did you hear, my blue-eyed son?
 And what did you hear, my darling young one?
 I heard the sound of a thunder, it roared out a warnin',
 Heard the roar of a wave that could drown the whole world,
 Heard one hundred drummers whose hands were a-blazin',
 Heard ten thousand whisperin' and nobody listenin',
 Heard one person starve, I heard many people laughin',
 Heard the song of a poet who died in the gutter,
 Heard the sound of a clown who cried in the alley,
 And it's a hard, and it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard,
 And it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall.

The complete lyrics can be found at:
www.bobdylan.com/songs/hardrain.html.

out of Cuba in return for a U.S. pledge not to invade the island.

On October 27, a second letter arrived signed by Khrushchev. This letter took a much more hardline position, insisting that the United States remove its nuclear missiles from Turkey in return for a withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba. Kennedy found the demands contained in the second letter unacceptable for two reasons. First, Turkey was not willing to have the Jupiter missiles removed. Turkey and other U.S. allies on the Mediterranean counted on U.S. medium-range nuclear missiles to deter an attack by the Soviet Union. Second, with the world watching, Kennedy did not want to appear weak in the confrontation of superpowers, nor did he want his NATO allies to doubt the U.S. commitment to defend Europe.

on ExComm, the committee reconsidered the possibility of removing U.S. Jupiter missiles from Turkey in exchange for the withdrawal of Soviet missiles from Cuba. But even supporters of such a plan recognized that it should not be seen as a public trade.

What role did two letters Khrushchev wrote to Kennedy have in the crisis?

Two letters Khrushchev wrote to Kennedy marked a new stage in the crisis. The first letter, received October 26, was an emotional appeal apparently composed by Khrushchev himself, calling on Kennedy to avoid the catastrophe of nuclear war. Khrushchev indicated that the Soviet Union would take its missiles

How did Kennedy respond to Khrushchev?

After hours of analyzing and discussing the two letters, Kennedy and his advisers decided to respond only to the first letter and to ignore the second one. On the evening of October 27, the president offered to "give assurances against the invasion of Cuba" and to "remove promptly" the quarantine measures that were in effect. In return, Kennedy expected the Soviets to remove the missiles from Cuba under international observation and supervision. Kennedy also demanded safeguards to ensure that the Soviets would not place such weapons in Cuba again.

That same evening, President Kennedy

sent his brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, to meet with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin. During the course of his meeting, Robert Kennedy warned Ambassador Dobrynin that events were spiraling out of control. Unless the Soviets agreed to remove the missiles, Kennedy stated, the president would order U.S. forces to destroy them.

“We had to have a commitment by tomorrow that those bases would be removed. I was not giving them an ultimatum but a statement of fact. He should understand that if they did not remove those bases, we would remove them. President Kennedy had great respect for the Ambassador’s country and the courage of its people. Perhaps his country might find it necessary to take retaliatory action; but before that was over, there would not only be dead Americans but dead Russians as well.... Time was running out. We had only a few more hours—we needed an answer immediately from the Soviet Union. I said we must have it the next day.”

—Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy

Robert Kennedy also revealed to Dobrynin that the U.S. missiles in Turkey were outmoded and that the United States had already made plans before the crisis to remove them. However, he advised Dobrynin that if the Soviets tried to present the withdrawal as a missile trade, the United States would deny that any such agreement existed.

Why was President Kennedy so anxious about the Soviet response to his ultimatum?

Neither the president nor his advisers were confident that Khrushchev would accept the final American offer. U.S. preparations for an air strike against the missile sites and an invasion of Cuba intensified. Over 100,000 battle-ready troops massed in Florida to await the president’s orders.

No one was sure what Khrushchev’s

reaction would be to a U.S. invasion of Cuba. Would Khrushchev retaliate against U.S. forces in West Berlin, or Turkey? If Soviets were killed in Cuba, would the USSR strike at NATO troops in Europe? Worse yet, if some of the missiles in Cuba were ready for launch, would they be fired at invading U.S. troops or targets in the United States? Members of the ExComm pondered the dangers facing their country after their meeting at 9 p.m. on Saturday, October 27.

President Kennedy had just read Barbara Tuchman’s *The Guns of August*, which described how the leaders of Europe miscalculated their way into World War I in 1914. The president did not want this crisis to become the subject of a future book about how superpower miscalculations led to World War III.

“If anybody is around to write after this, they are going to understand that we made every effort to find peace and every effort to give our adversary room to move. I am not going to push the Russians an inch beyond what is necessary.”

—President John F. Kennedy

What did Castro say in his cable to Khrushchev?

On October 27, Khrushchev received President Kennedy’s letter and Ambassador Dobrynin’s report of his meeting with Robert Kennedy. In addition, he received a cable from Castro. The Cuban leader expressed his belief that the United States would invade his island in the coming days and called on Khrushchev to launch nuclear missiles at the United States in response to the expected attack.

Khrushchev was faced with a difficult decision. Should the Soviet leader refuse the U.S. offer, risk military confrontation, and a possible invasion of Cuba? Should he stick to his proposed swap of Turkish missiles for Cuban missiles and hope that the United States would give in? Or should he accept President Kennedy’s offer?

The next day, Premier Khrushchev chose

to defuse the confrontation. In order to get the message as quickly as possible to President Kennedy, Khrushchev ordered that a message be broadcast by radio. Radio Moscow announced that the Soviet Union was ordering the dismantling and removal of the missiles in exchange for U.S. guarantees of Cuban sovereignty. The Cuban missile crisis, which had brought the superpowers to the brink of war, possibly nuclear war, was over.

“The Soviet government, in addition to earlier instructions on the discontinuance of further work on construction sites, has given a new order to dismantle the weapons, which you describe as offensive, and to crate them and return them to the Soviet Union.”

—Official Communiqué of the Soviet Union

Castro’s Crisis

Castro was enraged by Khrushchev’s decision. News of the deal between the Soviets and the Americans reached him by radio. The Soviets did not consult him because Moscow believed that he would not endorse the U.S.-Soviet agreement.

Once the missile crisis had burst into public view, Castro pushed for a five-part agreement that would end the quarantine, and also would guarantee Cuba against U.S. attack, limit the activities of anti-Castro Cuban exiles living in Miami, return the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo to Cuba, and end the ongoing U.S. economic blockade of Cuba.

While Moscow, Washington, and the rest of the world breathed easier after October 28, Castro kept Cuba on a war footing. He had already ordered the mobilization of 270,000 Cuban soldiers on October 22 in anticipation of a U.S. invasion. Castro was convinced that the United States would not honor its pledge not to invade Cuba. He had believed all along that the Soviet missiles were needed to deter U.S. intervention and defend the Cuban revolution.

In the weeks following the resolution of the missile crisis, Soviet diplomats pressed Castro to accept the Kennedy-Khrushchev agreement. Castro, however, would not permit U.S. specialists to come to Cuba to verify the removal of the missiles, and he accused the Soviets of abandoning Cuba in the face of U.S. aggression. Verification had to take place in international waters. The Soviet-Cuban talks dragged on until November 19 before Castro reluctantly gave his assent to other aspects of the agreement. Adding to the pressure the Cuban leader felt, the United States continued its naval quarantine and daily reconnaissance flights during the negotiations.

In the end, Castro saw the arrangement that resolved the missile crisis as a threat to Cuba’s security. Khrushchev had not only agreed to withdraw the missiles, but also to remove a squadron of Soviet bombers from the island.

“We believe that besides having salvaged world peace and having prevented nuclear war, we should also have salvaged peace for Cuba, a peace that included a halt to the economic blockade, turning over the naval base at Guantanamo, and an end to all attacks on Cuba.”

—Cuban official Jorge Risquet

How did the end of the crisis affect relations between the United States and the Soviet Union?

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 on the minds of Kennedy and Khrushchev the dangers of making nuclear threats against each other. Having come so close to the unthinkable 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.

“I am convinced that if there had been no Caribbean crisis, the danger of nuclear war in the subsequent years

would have been incomparably greater. Nuclear weapons might have been used in Vietnam and in other cases.”

—Georgy Shakhnazarov, an aide to former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev

Kennedy focused on building on the opening in Soviet-U.S. relations that the Cuban missile crisis created. The ideological conflict would continue, but both 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.



A U.S. destroyer inspects a Soviet ship transporting a missile from Cuba to the Soviet Union.

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 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union thirty years later, 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 Khrushchev's motives for installing nuclear missiles in Cuba as well as Castro's motives for accepting them. In addition, a clearer picture has emerged about the military circumstances around the Cuban missile crisis.

Why did Khrushchev install missiles in Cuba?

Following the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Soviets shared Castro's conviction that the United States would use force to snuff out communism in Cuba. They believed that nuclear weapons would be a powerful deterrent to a U.S. invasion of the island. Many scholars believe that one of Khrushchev's primary motives for installing the weapons was to protect Cuba.

Khrushchev also hoped to address the imbalance of nuclear forces between the superpowers. In 1962, the United States could claim a decisive edge over the Soviet Union both in sheer number of nuclear warheads (which contain the explosive device) and in the number of missiles. The U.S. nuclear arsenal consisted of three components: long-range missiles based on land, long-range bombers loaded with nuclear weapons, and submarine-launched missiles. In addition to nuclear forces based in the United States, more than one hundred U.S. missiles in Turkey could reach the Soviet Union, as could shorter-range

missiles stationed in other NATO countries.

In contrast, though we did not know it at the time, the Soviets' ability to strike U.S. territory was limited. Khrushchev boasted in the late 1950s that the Soviets were on the verge of overtaking the United States in nuclear missile technology. Concern about a "missile gap" created anxiety in the United States. Many Americans feared the Soviets would take the lead in deploying long-range nuclear missiles, just as they had launched the first space satellite in 1957.

Under Presidents Dwight Eisenhower and John Kennedy, additional funding went toward strengthening the country's nuclear capability. Meanwhile, U.S. policymakers came to realize that many of Khrushchev's claims were exaggerated. By the time of the missile crisis, Soviet nuclear capability was still far behind U.S. capability. U.S. intelligence in 1962 estimated that the Soviets had 75 land-based missiles capable of reaching American soil, while the United States had 226 missiles that could reach the USSR. In fact, we know now that the Soviets actually possessed only twenty missiles on their territory in October 1962. Moreover, the Soviets had no submarine-launched missiles and were at a seven-to-one disadvantage in long-range bombers.

"It naturally tormented our leadership a great deal. Because we were actually subject to a possible attack of American missile forces, and aviation forces, and we had nothing with which to respond."

—Sergei N. Khrushchev, son of Premier
Nikita Khrushchev

Khrushchev believed that placing the missiles in Cuba would address the nuclear imbalance. The missiles would be within striking distance of many major American cities, including Washington D.C., and could reach key military bases in much of the Southeast. In addition, they could be used as bargaining chips to negotiate a withdrawal of U.S. nuclear forces from Turkey and other NATO countries, or as leverage to pressure the United

States to abandon West Berlin. The next phase of Khrushchev's plans in Cuba called for the installation of intermediate-range missiles that could reach almost every corner of the United States.

Scholars of the crisis conclude that in addition to protecting Cuba from external attack, the placement of the missiles was intended to correct the nuclear imbalance. According to Douglas Dillon, Kennedy's treasury secretary, the presence of forty missiles in Cuba "radically altered the numbers of deliverable warheads, and in that sense radically increased Soviet capability."

Former Soviet officials and scholars have confirmed that Khrushchev felt Soviet missiles in Cuba would serve as a response to the deployment of U.S. missiles in Turkey.

“Khrushchev wanted very much to make them [Americans] feel the same, to give them the same medicine which we were swallowing, having foreign missiles at our doorstep.”

—Aleksandr Alekseyev, Soviet Ambassador to Cuba during the crisis

Aleksandr Alekseyev, Soviet Ambassador to Cuba during the crisis, suggests that Khrushchev simply had not considered the possibility that the United States would react as strongly as it did.

Why did Castro agree to have missiles in Cuba?

While understanding Soviet motives in the crisis is crucial, the Cuban viewpoint is equally important. Castro knew that accepting Soviet missiles risked provoking a U.S. invasion or an air strike. Yet, Castro unhesitatingly welcomed the missiles, not only because he thought they would deter a U.S. attack on Cuba, but also because he believed that they would strengthen the Soviet Union and other communist countries.

“We agreed on the installation of the missiles, noting, first of all, that this assured an improvement in the socialist camp's defense capabilities, and that if the socialist camp was prepared to run a risk on Cuba's behalf, then Cuba should also assume its share of the risks.”

—Cuban Official Jorge Risquet

In Castro's mind, accepting the missiles was proof that Cuba was willing to position itself on the front line of the Cold War. Castro may have even been flattered by Khrushchev's offer to make Cuba the first communist country, other than the Soviet Union, in which Soviet nuclear missiles would be deployed.

“Fidel fell to thinking, and then said, ‘If this will serve the socialist camp, and if it will hinder the actions of American imperialism on the continent, I believe that we will agree.’”

—Aleksandr Alekseyev, Soviet Ambassador to Cuba during the crisis

Castro may also have believed that accepting the missiles would strengthen Cuba's ties to Moscow, and would demonstrate to Moscow that Cuba was willing to take risks. According to scholars close to the crisis, Castro probably hoped that his actions would be reciprocated in some way at a later date.

How great was the danger of the use of nuclear weapons during the crisis?

Both Kennedy and Khrushchev were terribly anxious about the possibility of 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 in the international arena. The Soviet warheads (as many as 162 of them) were designed to be delivered by 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