

The cuban missile crisis

[War](#), [Cold War](#)



The Cuban Missile Crisis The Days the Earth Held its Breath By Michael Karlov

The twentieth century was a very dark time for mankind. Humanity had survived through two devastating World Wars, the Great Depression and many other revolutionary events. Moreover, humanity witnessed firsthand what science was able to achieve in the military sphere and how much destruction could possibly follow. After the complete obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 with the power of state-of-the-art weaponry, a brand new type of threat opened up to the world: the threat of nuclear war and total annihilation of the human race. This threat was not only real, but completely possible. With Soviet-U. S relations at a critical point following disagreements over contested Berlin, there was great fear that a third, even more devastating, world war was around the corner. The threat of nuclear war escalated during those uneasy times with Russia and the U. S arming themselves to the teeth, preparing for full-on open conflict - mutually anticipating an invasion. One particular point in history had the whole world shaking over its fate. This point was dubbed "The Cuban Missile Crisis". The Cuban Missile crisis was, arguably, the most significant political event that occurred during the second half of the twentieth century. This paper explores the political situation in the world at the time, the events leading up to the Cuban Missile Crisis, the revelation, US and Soviet actions in the crisis and the immediate and remote aftermath. Even before the Second World War, the U. S was hostile to Soviet Russia and its communistic ideologies that directly conflicted with western ideas of a free market and capitalism. The United States even orchestrated a series of covert actions against the Bolsheviks during the infamous Revolution of 1917 by funding

the Bolshevik enemies - the Whites, and later on interfering with military operations by sending in thousands of troops to Vladivostok and Archangelsk to help the Whites in combat. ¹ Later on, even though the U. S had many economic ties with Russia following Vladimir Lenin's institution of the New Economic Policy (NEP), political relationship was still unstable even though the U. S. had finally recognized the U. S. S. R. as a sovereign nation in the 1930's. As Adolf Hitler's Operation Barbarossa overwhelmed the Soviet Union during mid 1941, The United States provided Russia with huge quantities of weapons, ships, aircraft, rolling stock, strategic materials and other humanitarian supplies through the Lend-Lease Program signed by F. D Roosevelt. ² After the groundbreaking victory in the Second World War, disputes started to arise around influence in Berlin and around ideological differences. The United States feared that the growing power of the Soviet Union might cause a shift in global power, leaving the United States and many democratic countries of Europe vulnerable to its ideological influence. This became a real possibility after the creation of the Eastern Bloc and Russia's development of the atomic bomb in 1949 which resulted with the United States organizing NATO to "contain communism" from spreading over the whole world. After the success of the Cuban Revolution of 1959 Fidel Alejandro Castro took power. The United States feared that Castro, a communist, would ally with the Soviet Union. Clearly, having a potential ally to the enemy near the coast was a sizable threat to U. S security so the U. S decided to take action. The U. S. tried using military force to assassinate Fidel Castro in the Bay of Pigs Invasion which, ultimately, was a failure. ³ In May of 1960 Cuba openly allied with the Soviet Union. Soviet Premier Nikita

Khrushchev promised to defend Cuba with Soviet arms if any military action was taken by the U. S. following the failed invasion. At this point in the Cold War Russia was secretly losing the arms race. The United States already had “Jupiter” ballistic missiles positioned in Turkey and Italy aimed at every major city of the Soviet Union. To Khrushchev this wasn’t surprising news and he understood that the U. S. S. R. would perish if it didn’t find an equally strategic advantage. With Cuba as U. S. S. R.’s new valuable ally, the opportunity was obvious. In June 1962 Castro reached an agreement with Khrushchev. Throughout the late-summer and early-fall of 1962 the Soviets ferried launch equipment and personnel necessary for the preparation of missiles to Cuba. Because they feared being discovered they could not use military ships. Therefore civilian ships were used. In one instance, troops rode on a cruise liner posing as tourists. In all, sixty missiles and their warheads were transported to Cuba. On October 14, 1962, a U-2 reconnaissance aircraft took numerous photographs of suspicious sites. Soviet leadership started the deployment of nuclear missiles in the belief that Washington would not detect the missile sites until it was too late. Luckily for the United States, some information was leaked to the CIA from a Soviet defector - GRU colonel Oleg Penkovsky. With his information the U. S. were able to quickly identify the missile launching sites that were being erected in Cuba. Some historians say that Penkovsky’s leaked information was crucial. Viktor Suvorov, former GRU colonel, Soviet Defector and author of such famous books as *The Icebreaker* writes: And historians will remember with gratitude the name of the GRU Colonel Oleg Penkovsky. Thanks to his priceless information the Cuban crisis was not transformed into the last

World War. Arthur Lundahl, Director of the National Photographic Interpretation Center upon analyzing the photographs of the missiles stated that: " If there was ever a time I want to be right in my life, this is it. " The National Photographic Interpretation Center found what they they thought to be surface-to-air missiles. Closer inspection revealed, however, six large missiles 60-65 feet long. What the photo interpreters had discovered were SS-4 nuclear missiles. Officials decided to inform the president immediately. " Mr. President, there is now hard photographic evidence that the Russians have offensive missiles in Cuba." These were the words that President John F. Kennedy heard early in the morning on the 16 October while having breakfast, still wearing pajamas. This was shocking news. Later that day President Kennedy and his advisors scheduled two meetings. In the first meeting he looked at the pictures personally, exclaiming that " They look like footballs on a football field". Kennedy was informed that even though the missiles do not currently have nuclear warheads armed, it is only a matter of time before the Russians ship the main weaponry (later documents revealed that the Soviet Union already had nuclear warheads even at this point in the crisis.) From such a great vantage point, the SS-4 missiles could target any city in the 1100 miles radius which left the whole eastern coast vulnerable. Later on, at 11: 45 A. M, Kennedy held another meeting. For this meeting he hand-picked a group of trusted government officials in total secrecy to advise him on the crisis. This assembly was later on referred to as the Executive Committee of the National Security Council or the Ex-Comm. The first Ex-Comm meeting had a clear goal: to decide what actions the U. S. should take against Cuba and the Soviet Union. Robert McNamara, then

Secretary of Defense, outlined many different courses of action the U. S. could take to settle the crisis. Mainly these courses of action fell into three categories. McNamara said during an Ex-Comm meeting: Mr President, in this list there are a series of alternative plans ranging from Roman numeral N°1 with a minimum of about 50 sorties directed solely against the known MRBMs as of last night, to alternative N°5 which covers alternative invasion plans. All of these plans are based on one very important assumption: that we would attack with conventional weapons against an enemy who is not equipped with operational nuclear weapons. If there is any possibility the enemy is equipped with operational nuclear weapons, I am certain the plans would have to be changed. ¹¹ The first one had to do with open political negotiations, which the majority of the committee deemed unlikely to succeed. A more popular course of action would involve declaration of open surveillance combined with a blockade of Cuban ports so no more nuclear warheads could arrive via sea. The most extreme course of action was a full-on invasion of Cuba in order to seize or destroy the nuclear warheads before the Soviet Union had a chance to react. This was a very risky proposal. In order to maintain secrecy, Kennedy followed his pre-crisis schedule. As of this point the Soviets didn't know that the U. S. knew of the missiles in Cuba. Officials feared that if the Russian's found out then they might hide the missiles or simply launch them if they were ready. The latter, however, was unlikely, but the U. S. did not want to take any chances. John F. Kennedy understood that if the nation found out about the critical situation in Cuba, uncontrollable panic would follow. Consequently, Kennedy did not break any public engagements for the next four days. On October 17,

Kennedy flew over to Connecticut to campaign for the Democratic Party and congressional candidate Abe Ribicoff.¹² He was in a mood and he made a good supporting speech. However, as soon as JFK entered his car he became serious and focused his whole attention on the crisis.¹³ The next day, Kennedy fulfilled a scheduled meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrey Gromyko. Ex-Comm did not know if Gromyko personally knew about the missiles or if he was informed that the U. S. knew. Kennedy decided not to confront the minister on the issue. After a polite exchange of minor world events, Kennedy shifted the topic to Cuba. Gromyko read a statement saying that Soviet aid was solely for the purpose of contributing to the defense capabilities of Cuba and to the development of its peaceful democracy. If it were otherwise, the Soviet government would have never become involved in rendering such assistance.¹⁴ In response Kennedy re-read a statement that he has said on September 4 saying that the U. S. would not tolerate offensive weaponry on Cuba. During another Ex-Comm meeting a majority opinion had been reached on recommending a blockade of Cuba. Kennedy liked the idea of the blockade because it provided the Soviets a way out of the crisis. However, because the Ex-Comm still hadn't ultimately decided what action to take, Kennedy instructed his speech writer Theodore Sorensen to draft two different speeches to give to the American public on October 22: one announcing a blockade and another announcing an air strike.¹⁵ Before leaving for a campaign trip to the Midwest, Kennedy met with the Joint Chiefs. The Joint Chiefs still promoted the idea of air strikes. Kennedy, who was already late, asked his brother to continue the Ex-Comm meetings to draw up full plans for both scenarios. Again, he chose not to

cancel this trip because he wanted to maintain secrecy. On Saturday, October 20, Robert Kennedy called the President to say that he had to come back to Washington and cancel his trip to finalize his decision. It was necessary for the President to make a final decision whether to air strike the missile sites or hold a military quarantine. At first John F. Kennedy was reluctant but finally he agreed, canceling his trip by saying that he had an "upper respiratory infection". He returned to Washington. The next day Kennedy met with his top advisors to further discuss the missiles in Cuba. He wanted to know the percentage of success if a surgical air strike of Cuba was to take place. General Walter Sweeney, the head of Strategic Air Command (SAC) replied that all the missile sites that were known would be taken out. However, 100 percent success could not be guaranteed. Kennedy asked the general the estimated casualties, civilian and military. Sweeney responded that the number would range from 10,000 to 20,000. The only rational option left was a blockade of Cuba. Preparations were made for Kennedy's following speech. The State Department informed American allies around the world of Kennedy's decision. Senate leaders were called to Washington for a special briefing. Many senators wanted an air strike. Around 300 Navy ships set sail, not yet having direct orders of quarantine. Military alert was raised to DEFCON 3 and instructions were given to be ready to launch missiles on Russian cities within minutes of the President's speech. Twenty planes with nuclear bombs were ready to strike the U. S. S. R. on command. On October 22, President John F. Kennedy gave his famous speech on television. In his well-known speech he described the situation in Cuba and gave a detailed explanation of America's decision. Kennedy stated: [Our first step is] To halt

this offensive buildup a strict quarantine on all offensive military equipment under shipment to Cuba is being initiated. All ships of any kind bound for Cuba from whatever nation or port will, if found to contain cargoes of offensive weapons, be turned back. This quarantine will be extended, if needed, to other types of cargo and carriers. We are not at this time, however, denying the necessities of life as the Soviets attempted to do in their Berlin blockade of 1948. Kennedy used the word “ quarantine” instead of “ blockade”. This suggestion was made by George Ball, Secretary of State. A blockade, as defined under international treaties is an act of war. A quarantine, on the other hand, is “ merely an attempt to keep something out of a particular area. ” Kennedy's second step was to continue surveillance of Cuba. He stated: I have directed the continued and increased close surveillance of Cuba and its military buildup. The foreign ministers of the OAS [Organization of American States], in their communiqué' of October 6, rejected secrecy on such matters in this hemisphere. Should these offensive military preparations continue, thus increasing the threat to the hemisphere, further action will be justified. I have directed the Armed Forces to prepare for any eventualities; and I trust that in the interest of both the Cuban people and the Soviet technicians at the sites, the hazards to all concerned of continuing this threat will be recognized. Kennedy also stated that a missile fired from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere would be viewed as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States and followed by a devastating response. Earlier that day, Kennedy had sent Khrushchev a copy of his speech. Upon reading it, Khrushchev became furious. He was enraged at his military for not successfully hiding the

missiles and he was angered by the American "quarantine", which was an act of war, no matter what it was technically called. Khrushchev sent a response to Kennedy stating that the missiles in Cuba are purely defensive and that Kennedy's statement poses a serious threat towards world peace and the security of nations. In response to Kennedy's speech, Fidel Castro mobilized all of Cuba's military forces. He had anticipated invasion from the U. S. ever since the Bay of Pigs invasion. Internationally Kennedy's speech received mixed views. The British press questioned the authenticity of the existence of Soviet bases in Cuba and linked his actions to his re-election. The Chinese People's Daily announced that "650,000,000 Chinese were standing by the Cuban people." However, most other countries in Europe sympathized Kennedy's decision and speech, namely Germany and France. On the following day, Kennedy ordered six jets to fly over the missile sites. These jets brought back stunning close-up pictures. The photographs showed that the Soviets were testing the missiles for launch. On the same day, the Organization of American States unanimously approved of the quarantine, realizing that they were also threatened by the missiles in Cuba. Kennedy signed the Proclamation of Interdiction. The blockade was to take effect the following day at 10:00 A. M (EST). The situation was extremely tense. Soviet ships kept coming closer to the line. U. S. ships were ordered to communicate with the Russian vessels and if those did not stop, the U. S. were to disable any incoming ships. There were two major concerns: 1) that Russian submarines would be accompanying the vessels and 2) that Khrushchev had not yet instructed the ships captains on what they should do. ²¹ At 10:25 A. M. Ex-Comm received a message that the Soviet Ships had

stopped and were turning back. Khrushchev was not ready to challenge the military blockade and bring the crisis to a whole new level. Upon hearing this good news, Secretary of State Dean Rusk told McGeorge Bundy: " We've been eyeball to eyeball and the other fellow just blinked. ".²² On that day military alert was raised to DEFCON 2, the highest in history. The notification, sent round the world from Strategic Air Command HQ, was purposely left uncoded to let the Soviet Union know just how serious the U. S. were.

Although no action was taken from Russia, the crisis had not been avoided. It was a stalemate with no resolution appearing. Kennedy stated: " National security must come first... we can't negotiate with a gun at our head... if they won't remove the missiles and restore status quo ante, we will have to do it ourselves. " Kennedy had U. S. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson confront Russia at the United Nations. Soviet Ambassador Zorin refused to comment.

Stevenson showed the reconnaissance photos of missile sites in Cuba. Their effect was stunning. There was now no doubt that there was Soviet presence in Cuba.²³ Ex-Comm was considering a " face-saving" option for the U. S. - to ask the Soviet Union to remove the missiles from Cuba and in exchange remove the missiles from Turkey. The United States would not lose a strategic position if this was to take place. By this time U. S. had submarines with nuclear warheads capable of targeting Moscow and other major centers around Russia's borders. In the Caribbean tensions were also high. The Soviet tanker Bucharest approached the quarantine line. The U. S. let it through because there was no reason to believe it carried contraband cargo.

²⁴ On the 26th Kennedy received a letter from Khrushchev. The letter stated that the U. S. and Russia were " pulling on ends of a rope in which

there is a knot. The more we pull, the tighter the knot of war becomes.

Later that night and unknown to Ex-Comm, Robert Kennedy went to the Soviet Embassy to meet with Ambassador Dobrynin. Dobrynin claimed that the missiles in Cuba were justified because of American missiles in Turkey. Kennedy offered a potential settlement. October 27 was the worst day of the crisis. A U-2 reconnaissance plane was shot down over Cuba and another U-2 had, supposedly, gone off course and mistakenly flew into Russian air space. Officials feared that Russia might think that the U-2 was on a reconnaissance mission precluding a nuclear strike. Ex-Comm had previously decided that if a scout plane was to be shot down over Cuba, the Air Force would retaliate by bombing. After the downing of the U-2 the Joint Chiefs pushed even harder for a strike on Cuba. Kennedy, however, ordered to wait until another plane was shot down. At 11: 03 A. M. a second letter arrived from Khrushchev. This letter was more demanding. Khrushchev stated that if the U. S. remove the missiles from Turkey Russia would, in turn, remove their missiles from Cuba. Robert Kennedy's secret proposal was looked upon in the Kremlin. Understanding that strategically the missiles in Cuba were far more important than the U. S. missiles in Turkey Kennedy hesitated in negotiating with Khrushchev for a better deal for the U. S.. Robert Kennedy proposed to completely ignore Khrushchev's second letter and answer, publicly, to the first. In case Khrushchev did not accept the terms of the agreement, Kennedy drew up a contingency plan for publicly announcing a Turkey-for-Cuba missile trade. Early in the morning on October 28 Khrushchev met with a circle of his advisers outside of Moscow. He had stayed up most of the night and received statements

from diplomats in the U. S. so he was aware that the crisis was at a very extreme point. Khrushchev received word that Kennedy was going to make an address to the nation at 5: 00 PM. Nikita Khrushchev feared the worst - that the U. S. was going to declare war on the Soviet Union. He wrote another letter to Kennedy: Esteemed Mr. President: I have received your message of October 27, 1962. I express my satisfaction and gratitude for the sense of proportion and understanding of the responsibility borne by you at present for the preservation of peace throughout the world... In order to complete with greater speed the liquidation of the conflict... the Soviet Government... in addition to previously issued instructions on the cessation of further work at building sites for the weapons, has issued a new order on the dismantling of the weapons which you describe as " offensive," and their crating. This message, received early in the morning by Eastern Standard Time effectively ended the crisis. Reaction among the Ex-Comm members was mixed: some were extremely relieved, others feared that Khrushchev just wanted to buy more time. General Curtis LeMay suggested that the U. S. " go in and make a strike on Monday anyway. " Kennedy, however, understood that Khrushchev's response was genuine and that he would stay true to his word. When Fidel Castro learned of Khrushchev's decision he was furious. He considered his decision as an act of cowardice and betrayal. Castro did not like the fact that Cuba had not got what it wanted out of the crisis - mainly Guantanamo Bay, which the Russian's guaranteed would fall back under Cuban control. This would later greatly fracture Soviet-Cuban relations. The compromise was an embarrassment for Nikita Khrushchev and the Soviet Union because the withdrawal of the " Jupiter"

missiles from Turkey and Italy wasn't made public. The relations of many Soviet states greatly deteriorated - namely with China as China also saw Russia's decision as cowardice. Following the crisis the Hotline Agreement was made, which created the Moscow-Washington hotline, a direct communications link from the Oval Office to the Kremlin. However, the most important events that came later on, under the rule of Leonid Brezhnev - for the U. S. S. R. and Gerald Ford - for the U. S., were the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks. The Talks ended with Russia and the U. S. A. signing an anti-nuclear pact that limited the amount of nuclear warheads each country was allowed to hold. Personally I believe that the outcome of the Cuban Missile Crisis was a defeat for the United States, strategically. Unknown at the time, Russia was losing the arms race - the U. S. A. had many more nuclear warheads than Russia could ever dream of producing. By creating such a tense situation, Khrushchev provoked the United States into signing a disarming treaty, thereby guaranteeing safety to his country and his people. The Cuban Missile Crisis was, perhaps, the most tense time of the Cold War and, arguably, of human history. Just one wrong decision could have caused a global catastrophe. Every living person has to be forever in debt to the brave men that were afflicted with the Ex-Comm and to Mr. Nikita Khrushchev. These people showed extreme diplomatic mastery. Works Cited: Michael J. Carley. Review of Foglesong, David S., *America's Secret War Against Bolshevism: U. S. Intervention in the Russian Civil War, 1917-1920*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. June, 1996. <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=489> Herring, George C. *Aid to Russia, 1941—1946*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1973. Author unknown. *The Bay*

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