

Cuban missile crisis essay



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Many agree that the Cuban Missile Crisis was the closest the world ever came to nuclear war; but exactly how close did it come? The Crisis was ultimately a showdown between the United States and the Soviet Union from October 16 to October 28, 1962. During those thirteen stressful days, the world's two biggest superpowers stood on the brink of a nuclear catastrophe.

The Crisis started as a result of both the Soviet Union's fear of losing the arms race, and Cuba's fear of US invasion. The Soviet Premier, Nikita Khrushchev, thought that both problems could easily be solved by placing Soviet medium range missiles in Cuba. This deployment would double the Soviet arsenal and protect Cuba from US invasion. Khrushchev proposed this idea to Cuban Premier, Fidel Castro, who, like Khrushchev, saw the strategic advantage.

The two premiers worked together in secrecy throughout the late-summer and early-fall of 1962. The Soviets shipped sixty medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) along with their warheads, launch equipment, and necessary operating personnel to Cuba. When United States President, John F. Kennedy discovered the presence of these offensive weapons, he immediately organized EX-COMM, a group of his twelve most important advisors. They spent the next couple of days discussing different possible plans of action and finally decided to remove the US missiles from Turkey and promise not to invade Cuba in exchange for the removal of all offensive weapons in Cuba.

On October 28, Khrushchev sent Kennedy a letter stating that he agreed to the terms Kennedy stated, and the crisis ended.

The Cuban Missile Crisis can be blamed on the insecurity of Cuba and the Soviet Union. After the United States' unsuccessful attempt to overthrow Castro and end communism in Cuba at the Bay of Pigs in 1961, Castro was fearful of another US invasion. The US Armed Forces conducted a mock invasion and drafted a plan to invade Cuba to keep Castro nervous. As a result, Castro thought the US was serious, and he was desperate to find protection. This protection came in the form of sixty Soviet medium-range ballistic missiles (Detzer 30-32, 39, 55, 68, 87).

During his presidential campaign, Kennedy repeatedly stated that the US had fewer missiles than the Soviets, contradicting the Pentagon's claim that the opposite was true. However, during the summer of 1961, when Khrushchev constructed a wall around West Berlin, the Kennedy Administration revealed to Khrushchev that the US. did, in fact, have more missiles than the Soviet Union. What worried Khrushchev the most, though, was that the Soviet missiles were only powerful enough to be launched against Europe, but the US missiles were capable of striking the entire Soviet Union. He worried that if the Soviet Union lost the arms race that badly, it would invite a nuclear attack from the US. Khrushchev needed a way to counter the United State's lead (May 49). In April of 1962, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev came up with the idea of installing medium-range missiles in Cuba. Cuba was close enough to the United States that the Soviet missiles would be an effective deterrent to a potential US attack against either the Soviet Union or Cuba. Castro accepted Khrushchev's offer, since it would protect Cuba and, therefore, solve Castro's previous dilemma.

In mid-July of 1962, the Soviet Union began its buildup of offensive weapons in Cuba. The Soviets spent most of the late-summer and early-fall of 1962 ferrying launch equipment and personnel necessary for the preparation of missiles to Cuba. Since they could not use military ships (for fear of being discovered) the Soviets used civilian vessels. However, even with this caution, their actions were detected. As the US monitored the suddenly increased shipping activity to Cuba, rumors started in Washington.

On August 10, John McCone, director of the CIA, sent the President a letter stating his belief that the Soviets were placing MRBMs in Cuba. On August 29, a U-2 on a reconnaissance flight over Cuba revealed the presence of SA-2 SAM (Surface-to-Air-Missile) sites. On September 4, to calm the Congress and public, Kennedy announced that there were Soviet missiles in Cuba, but that since they were defensive and not offensive, the US had nothing to worry about.

Pressured by Congress, Kennedy ordered another U-2 flight over Cuba for October 9. However it was delayed until Sunday, October 14. After the pictures from the reconnaissance flight were analyzed, the National Photographic Interpretation Center found what at first were thought to be more surface-to-air missile sites. A closer look, however, showed six much larger SS-4 nuclear missiles; each 60 to 65 feet long. They now knew they had a big problem.

President Kennedy was informed of the missiles during breakfast the next day. It was now clear to him that the Soviets had been purposefully deceiving him for months. Kennedy immediately scheduled two meetings for

that morning. At the first one, he looked over the photos. The missiles he saw had a range of 1, 100 miles and could hit major US cities including New York, Washington DC, and Philadelphia. At the time, the missiles were not yet operational, nor did they have nuclear warheads, but they soon would.

At the second meeting, Kennedy hand-picked a group of his twelve most trusted government officials to advise him on the crisis. This group was referred to as the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, or EX-COMM. EX-COMM included Vice President, Lyndon Johnson; Secretary of State, Dean Rusk; Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara; Chairman of the JCS, General Maxwell Taylor; Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, McGeorge Bundy; Secretary of the Treasury, Douglas Dillon; CIA Director, John McCone; Attorney General, Robert Kennedy; Undersecretary of State, George Ball; Special Counsel, Theodore Sorensen; Deputy Secretary of Defense, Roswell Gilpatric; and Soviet Specialist, Llewellyn Thompson (Fursenko 223-224).

In that meeting, Secretary Of Defense Robert McNamara outlined three possible courses of action the US could take against Cuba and the Soviet Union. The first was “ The political course of action.” It involved Castro and Khrushchev getting together and resolving the crisis on a diplomatic level. This plan was rejected since most members of EX-COMM thought it wouldn’t work. The second plan was to blockade Cuba to prevent any more offensive missiles from entering. The third plan was military action against Cuba, starting with an air attack with missiles, followed by an invasion.

Since EX-COMM falsely believed that the missile warheads were not yet in Cuba, the goal of any action they agreed on was to stop the warheads from reaching Cuba. In order to maintain secrecy, Kennedy followed his planned schedule. So far, the Soviets still didn't know the Americans knew of the missiles in Cuba, and neither did the American public. If the Soviets found out, they might hide the missiles or launch them sooner than they had wanted. If the public found out, the nation would panic.

Kennedy was in a good mood and even joked a little while in public, but became very serious when he entered his car and called a meeting with EX-COMM. Throughout EX-COMM's discussions, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Especially the Air Force strongly argued for an air strike. Before the Air Force was done, they had planned a massive air strike that would have wiped Cuba off the planet's surface, had Kennedy not denied the plan. After another U-2 flight on the night of October 17, the military discovered intermediate range (IRBMs) SS-5 nuclear missiles. Not counting Washington and Oregon, these missiles could reach all of the continental US.

On October 18, Kennedy met with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrie Gromyko. This was a strange meeting. Since EX-COMM wasn't sure if Gromyko knew of the missiles, Kennedy decided not to confront the minister on the issue. Later that evening, while a dinner was being held in Gromyko's honor, EX-COMM had an important meeting. During the meeting, a majority opinion had been reached on recommending a blockade to the White House. At the White House, Kennedy liked the idea of a blockade, but couldn't decide between it and an air strike.

Kennedy met again with EX-COMM on October 20 to discuss his decision. He liked the idea of a blockade because it allowed the US to start with minimal action and increase the pressure on the Soviets as needed. On the 21st, Kennedy decided to blockade Cuba. In the speech Kennedy would give to the nation, he would use the word “ quarantine” instead of “ blockade.” This was an important detail. A blockade, as defined under international treaties, is an act of war. A quarantine, however, is merely an attempt to keep something unwanted out of a particular area. In this way, the US could have its blockade, but the international community would not consider it an act of war.

Later in the day, another U-2 flight revealed bombers and MiGs being assembled and cruise missile sites being built on Cuba’s northern shore (Brugioni 315). On Monday, October 22, within minutes of Kennedy’s address to the nation, almost 300 Navy ships set sail for Cuba. Military alert was raised to DEFCON 3 and instructions were given to be ready to launch missiles. Twenty planes armed with nuclear bombs were also in the air ready to strike the USSR at exactly 7: 00 p. m., Kennedy began his speech. He stated, “...I have directed that the following initial steps be taken: First, to halt this offensive build up, a strict quarantine of all military equipment under shipment to Cuba is being initiated. Second, I have directed the continued and increased close surveillance and its military build up. Third, 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 on the Soviet Union.”

Kennedy sent a copy of his speech to Khrushchev, who became infuriated. He was angry at both his military for not successfully hiding the missiles and the American “ quarantine” which, no matter what they called it, was an act of war. Khrushchev’s first response to the speech was to instruct the ships on their way to Cuba not to stop. Castro also responded by mobilizing all of Cuba’s military forces.

On October 23, Kennedy ordered six Crusader jets to fly a low-level reconnaissance mission. The mission, flown at 350 feet and at 350 knots, brought back amazing close-up pictures of the missile sites. It also showed that the Soviets were testing the missiles for launch. One of the pilots, William Ecker, commented that, “ When you can almost see the writing on the side of the missiles, then you really know what you’ve got.” That evening, Kennedy, backed by the Western Hemisphere, signed the Proclamation of Interdiction. By the end of the day, the US ships had taken up position along the quarantine line, 800 miles from Cuba. The quarantine was to take effect at 10: 00 a. m., on October 24. At 10: 25 a. m. the next day, EX-COMM received a message that the Soviet ships were turning back without protest. Khrushchev was not yet ready to expand the crisis by challenging the blockade. This did not mean, however, that the crisis was over (May 333-336).

That day, military alert was raised to DEFCON 2, the highest level ever in US history. The notification, sent around the world, was purposefully left uncoded so the Soviets would know just how serious the Americans were. Khrushchev responded to this with another letter to the White House. It accused the President of “ advancing an ultimatum and threatening that if

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we do not give in to your demands you will use force.... Therefore the Soviet Government cannot instruct the captains of the Soviet vessels bound for Cuba to observe the orders of the American naval forces blockading that island.”

On the morning of October 25, Khrushchev received a response from Kennedy stating that the US was not going to back down. Still attempting to avoid war, Kennedy was looking for alternatives. Journalist Walter Lippman suggested a “ face-saving” missile exchange. Ideally, the Soviets would remove their missiles from Cuba and the Americans would remove their missiles from Turkey. This suggestion was shot-down, however, because government officials in both the United States and the Soviet Union misinterpreted it to be a trial balloon from the Kennedy administration. But after a CIA report announced that the quarantine had failed to halt progress in the development of the missile sites, Kennedy believed only an invasion or a trade like the one Lippman had suggested would work. Kennedy also decided to enhance pressure by increasing the number of low-level flights over Cuba from twice per day to once every two hours.

On the 26th, Aleksandr Fomin, the KGB station chief in Washington, hinted that there might be a solution. He proposed the dismantling of Soviet bases under UN supervision in exchange for a public promise from the US not to invade Cuba. Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, told Fomin that the US government saw real possibilities, but that time was very urgent, and the proposal could take too much time. At 6: 00 that night, the White House received a letter from Khrushchev which stated that the Soviet Union would declare that all of their ships bound for Cuba were not carrying any

armaments, if the US would not invade Cuba. At a meeting between Robert Kennedy and Ambassador Dobrynin later that night, the idea of trading Soviet missiles in Cuba for American missiles in Turkey came into play again.

Saturday, October 27, was the worst day of the crisis. First, a U-2 on a “routine air sampling mission” over western Alaska picked the wrong star to navigate by and flew off course into Soviet Airspace. When he realized his mistake, the pilot immediately radioed for help. The rescue station operator was able to give him directions to turn his plane onto the right course. By that time, however, the Soviets had detected the U-2 and launched MiG fighters to intercept the spy plane. The Americans also launched their F-102 fighters to provide cover for the U-2. The F-102s, prepared for fighting, had been armed with nuclear tipped air-to-air missiles. Fortunately, the U-2 left Soviet air space in time and the two fighter groups never met. Back at the White House, Secretary of Defense McNamara feared that the Soviets could have interpreted the flight as a reconnaissance mission leading up to a nuclear strike, but Kennedy told him not to worry (Brugioni 455-462). Around noon the same day, news reached EX-COMM that a U-2 had been shot down over Cuba. The plane was hit by a surface-to-air missile and crashed in the island’s eastern jungle.

EX-COMM had previously decided that if an American reconnaissance plane was downed, the Air Force would retaliate by bombing the offending site. Now that it had happened, the Joint Chiefs, who had been pressing for permission to bomb Cuba, pressed even harder. General Taylor insisted that, “no later than Monday morning, the 29th” the US should strike Cuba.

Kennedy chose not to attack, but to wait for another plane to be shot down. Then he would order the destruction of the SAM site.

The next event in that long day was a low-level reconnaissance mission flown by six F8U-1P Crusader jets. Two of the jets aborted the mission early due to mechanical problems, but the remaining four continued on their course. As the fighters passed over the San Cristobal and Sagua la Grande missile sites, Cuban ground forces shot at the planes with anti-aircraft guns and small arms. One plane was hit by a 37mm shell but, fortunately, it returned safely.

On Sunday, October 28, Khrushchev met with a circle of his advisers outside of Moscow. At the opening of the meeting, a general entered and read a statement he had just received that Kennedy was going to make an address to the nation at 5: 00 pm. At that point, Khrushchev feared the worst. That address could be the announcement that an invasion was already underway. Khrushchev was not prepared to start a war, therefore he and his advisers drafted a letter with the utmost urgency. When done, the letter was rushed to the broadcasting station. Khrushchev hoped the message would reach Kennedy before 5: 00 pm. The letter read: “ 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 October 28, at 9: 00 am, effectively ended the crisis. The reaction among the EX-COMM members was mixed. Most were relieved, but others, especially the Joint Chiefs, considered the announcement a ploy by Khrushchev to buy more time. Kennedy, however, knew the response was genuine. At 11: 00 a. m., EX-COMM ordered a halt to all reconnaissance flights (May 630-635).

In Cuba, Castro was furious. Khrushchev had not had time to inform his ally of the decision, so Castro learned about the agreement over the radio. Hours later, and still angry, Castro countered the agreement by saying a true solution would have included five more points: (1) an end to the economic blockade against Cuba; (2) an end to all subversive activities carried out from the United States against Cuba; (3) a halt to all attacks on Cuba carried out from the US military bases on the island of Puerto Rico; (4) the cessation of aerial and naval reconnaissance flights in Cuban airspace and waters; (5) and the return of Guantanamo Naval Base to Cuba.

Eventually, with the help of the UN, Castro backed down and all sides reached an agreement. A UN inspection team was assigned to monitor the removal of the missiles and the demolition of the missile bases in Cuba. Then, the Soviet Navy shipped the missiles back to the USSR. The missiles were sent back on the decks of the ships so that American reconnaissance planes could count the missiles and make sure that all had been removed.

Nine months after the crisis ended, Kennedy and Khrushchev signed an agreement to ban nuclear testing in the atmosphere. This marked the beginning of what seemed to be a new willingness to cooperate and communicate. However, on November 22, 1963, President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. Eleven months later, Premier Khrushchev was removed from office by communist “hard liners” (Brugioni 572-574). One can’t help but wonder what would have happened if these two men had stayed in power. Maybe the same two people who brought us so close to nuclear war, now changed by the experience, could have brought us far from it.