

# [America and events in cuba 1959 62 history essay](https://assignbuster.com/america-and-events-in-cuba-1959-62-history-essay/)

Castro and a surprisingly small army of revolutionaries fought the government and defeated it in 1959, using guerrilla warfare. In a recent TV series this type of warfare was called the ‘ war of the flea’. Guerrillas tend to have limited, light weapons to fight against government armies in their own country. They fight by hiding, attacking and hiding again, e. g. ambush. They are often fighting for a popular cause among the ordinary people, who allow them to hide and give them basic supplies. The Cuban revolutionaries were popular because they promised land reform. That means, land will be taken from rich landowners and divided up between the labourers who have no land. Castro was a socialist. The Americans did not like Batista much, but soon they would hate Castro far more.

The new government began to take over businesses in Cuba, such as plantations and factories. The USA was the main market for Cuban sugar, but the American government opposed Castro by banning trade with Cuba. So Cuba took over even more American businesses and property. It turned to the USSR and its allies for help. The Soviets were quick to make a deal with Castro, seeing a chance to gain an ally close to the USA. They agreed to buy Cuban sugar and sell Cuba oil. Castro built a communist state in Cuba. Would America be able to stop him and contain communism in its own ‘ backyard’?

American opposition to the new Cuban government.

The USA took in exiles from Cuba, people who had done well under Batista and lost money when Castro came to power. They tried to persuade the American government to overthrow Castro. The United States was still highly anti-communist and many people were keen to help them. It was unacceptable to have a communist state so deep in America’s sphere of influence. They thought it would be easy to overthrow Castro: the Americans were used to influencing governments in the Caribbean and Central America in the past.

How did the USA oppose the new government in Cuba?

In April 1961 a small army of Cuban exiles invaded Cuba at the Bay of Pigs but were quickly defeated by the Cuban army. The exiles had been trained and armed by the CIA and helped to reach Cuba by the US Navy, with air cover provided by the US Air Force. The attack failed to get beyond the beach. The US government did not admit involvement. Privately the Kennedy administration blamed the Eisenhower presidency. The invasion attempt was planned by the CIA under Eisenhower. Kennedy was faced with choice of cancelling or going ahead. He made the mistake of going ahead with a scheme that took too much for granted. In April 1961 Kennedy had been president for only 3 months.

The US government also tried to block trade with Cuba, not only US-Cuba trade but trade between other countries and Cuba. The CIA tried to assassinate Castro by various means, failing every time. They even tried – and failed – to make his famous beard fall out.

## The Cuban Missile Crisis, October 1962

After the Bay of Pigs invasion attempt Soviet arms were provided to Cuba, making it the best equipped army in Latin America by July 1962. The USA seems to have reluctantly accepted the arms build-up as long as nuclear weapons were not included.

September 11

October 14

October 16

Kennedy warned USSR. He would use any means necessary to prevent Soviet missiles being sited on Cuba. USSR said it would not put any on Cuba.

U2 photographs showed evidence of nuclear missile sites being prepared on Cuba. Some would soon be ready for use.

Kennedy is told of missile build-up.

What options did Kennedy have?

Do nothing – USA had more nuclear missiles than the USSR and threat of retaliation against USSR would prevent Soviet missiles ever being fired from Cuba. Overreacting would endanger world peace. But, this option looked weak, the Soviets had altered the balance of power and lied about their intentions.

Air strike – Destroy the missiles. Cuba an easy target. U2 reconnaissance was detailed. But, could not guarantee destruction of every missile, so retaliation against American cities possible. It would be more just to warn the other side first. Soviets on Cuba might be killed – could start war with USSR.

Diplomatic pressure – Avoid war. Work through UN. Keep the moral high ground. But, might fail to make progress and look weak. Khrushchev already believed Kennedy was weak because of the Bay of Pigs failure. The Soviets would have assumed they could get away with anything.

Invasion of Cuba – Destroy Castro government as well as missiles. Would have appeared really tough. But, dangerous, as with air strike. Soviets might have tried to defend Cuba by threatening USA or Western Europe. Could have escalated to full war with USSR.

Blockade – Tough, but not outright aggression. Would buy time and make Soviets choose the next move. But, missiles already on Cuba could have been used soon. A naval confrontation could escalate to war.

October 20

October 22

October 23

October 24

October 26

October 27

October 28

Kennedy decided to blockade Cuba.

Kennedy announced blockade to the world, calling on Khrushchev to bring the world back from the brink of war.

Khrushchev letter to Kennedy. Soviets would ignore blockade. Still did not admit to missiles. War now seemed more likely.

Blockade began. Soviet ships headed directly for Cuba, missiles clearly visible on board some. At 10. 32 am the Soviet ships closest to the blockade stopped.

Khrushchev letter to Kennedy. Admitted to missiles. Claimed they were to defend Cuba. Suggested he would remove them if USA promised not to attack Cuba and lifted the blockade.

Khrushchev sent another letter to Kennedy, before receiving a reply to the previous. Khrushchev demanded US not to attack Cuba, lift blockade and remove missiles from Turkey. Kennedy was not willing to accept the deal as he would have appeared to give in to Soviet pressure and do as they asked.

On the same day a U2 was shot down over Cuba and the pilot killed. Kennedy was advised to launch an immediate attack on Cuba. This was the causus belli (reason for war) that the US needed. Kennedy delayed the decision.

He replied to Khrushchev with an offer to accept the terms of the letter of October 26. He ignored the second letter in his reply. He added a threat to attack Cuba if no reply was received by October 29.

Khrushchev replied, effectively agreeing to Kennedy’s terms. Later, the missiles were removed under UN supervision.

Note: US missiles on Turkey were removed soon after. The Soviet ambassador to Washington, Dobrynin, was told at the time of the crisis that this was likely, but could not be part of the deal.

## Why?

Why did the Soviets put nuclear missiles on Cuba? This is an important question because it was a high risk strategy. It is not easy to answer. It has led to much study of Soviet decision making under Khrushchev. No theory seems to have become dominant yet. This is partly because the Soviet government at the time was even more secretive than most. There is likely to be documentary evidence in Russia that has not yet been released. Some theories:

Khrushchev wanted the missiles as a bargaining counter to extract concessions from the Americans.

The missiles were designed to test the will of the USA and of Kennedy in particular, the young president who had seemed so weak over the Bay of Pigs. If he had backed down the Soviets might have taken advantage elsewhere in the world.

Khrushchev was so concerned about the American advantage in nuclear weapons, he would try anything to close the gap.

Khrushchev’s position in the Soviet was under threat. He needed a bold success to raise his prestige.

The missiles were genuinely meant to defend Cuba. (???) This was certainly the reason Khrushchev gave in his memoirs (Khrushchev Remembers, 1971). However, most memoirs serve as a justification of the writer’s career. In Khrushchev’s case there is even doubt they are genuine! (They were published when he died).

They were a trap. Khrushchev wanted the Americans to be drawn into war. (?????)

## Consequences

Both sides claimed success. The USSR claimed it had acted to preserve peace. Kennedy claimed the same. What do you think? Which side did most to endanger / preserve the world from nuclear destruction?

Both sides – and the people everywhere – believed civilisation was at stake. The superpowers were by this time armed heavily enough to kill hundreds of millions in a day if a conflict escalated to full use of the nuclear arsenals. People knew such a war would probably kill virtually everyone eventually, through radiation sickness from ‘ fallout’ and then from starvation.

In fact, Kennedy gained more credit for acting tough without firing a shot nor backing down. Khrushchev got credit in the communist world for ensuring Cuba’s survival and acting as peacemaker. (Do you agree?)

However, he was deposed in 1964. The Cuban crisis probably helped to weaken him in the politburo.

The crisis seems to have altered the course of the Cold War and reduced the tension. The two governments, as well as their allies and peoples, became more sensitive to the risk of nuclear war. The crisis had been very dangerous and it was important to avoid another one. A permanent ‘ hot line’ telephone link between Soviet leader and US president was set up.

It also showed neither side was prepared to step over the brink. The theory that war would not happen because of ‘ mutually assured destruction’ gained credibility. The crisis seemed to show ‘ MAD’ made sense for both sides, so the expectation of war declined. Each became more confident it could deter the other. The arms race continued, but it was less frantic than before. In 1963 a nuclear Test Ban Treaty was signed, an agreement not to test nuclear warheads in the atmosphere. The aim was to cut pollution, but it also showed a new willingness to co-operate instead of showing off the latest massive device.