Cuban missile crisis

In October 1962, the United States and the Soviet Union were at the brink of war because the Soviets had placed nuclear missiles in Cuba. Events of the preceding three years had led directly to the crisis. In 1959, the pro-U.S. Cuban government of Fulgencio Batista, which had granted major concessions to the United States in sugar, mining, and public utilities enterprises, was overthrown by Fidel Castro. Castro nationalized American companies, canceled elections, and began to promote anti-U.S. revolutions in the rest of Latin America.

When Castro signed a trade agreement with the Soviet Union, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, in March of 1960, directed the Central Intelligence Agency to conduct a covert operation to remove Castro from power and cut off trade to Cuba. When Castro increased his dependence on the Soviet Union, Eisenhower ended diplomatic relations with Cuba. Upon taking office as Eisenhower's successor, President John F. Kennedy ordered the implementation of Eisenhower's order to remove Castro. However, the failed invasion of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs, on April 17, 1961, was a humiliating failure for the new president. Following the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy renewed covert operations to remove Castro and, in 1962, arranged for Cuba to be expelled from the Organization of American States.

Castro sought help from the Soviet Union; in 1962, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev sent Soviet troops and military equipment. In September 1962, Kennedy warned the Soviets not to send any "offensive" weapons that would jeopardize U.S. security. Although Khrushchev assured the United States that the weapons were defensive, the Soviets began construction of intermediate- and medium-range nuclear missile sites, which would have had the capacity to target the United States and kill tens of millions of Americans. Khrushchev would thus gain both a first-strike advantage in the cold war and compensate for a huge discrepancy in deliverable nuclear weapons. In response, Kennedy created a high-level Executive Committee of the National Security Council, which decided that despite a huge U.S. advantage in nuclear armament, the Soviet missiles must be removed. How much this decision was motivated by politics and how much by considerations of national security is an open question. A hawkish proposal to bomb the missile sites was rejected in favor of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara's proposal to create a naval blockade to prevent further shipments. This would demonstrate U.S. resolve but leave the door open for negotiations. A proposal by Soviet expert Charles Bohlen and U.N. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson to begin negotiations without the blockade was rejected.

Kennedy announced the decision on a nationwide television program, ordered the necessary naval
preparations, massed troops in Florida, and warned the Soviets that any missiles fired from Cuba at the United States would be met by an instant all-out retaliation against the Soviet Union. Khrushchev accused Kennedy of bringing the world to the brink of thermonuclear war. Twenty-five Soviet ships continued on course to Cuba, but on October 24, just as they were approaching the boundary line drawn by the United States five hundred miles from Cuba, they halted. As Secretary of State Dean Rusk observed, “We’re eyeball to eyeball, and I think the other fellow just blinked.”

Khrushchev proposed withdrawal of the missiles in exchange for a U.S. pledge never to invade Cuba. However, tension increased. On October 27, a U.S. U-2 plane was shot down over Cuba, Russian diplomats in the United States destroyed sensitive documents, and a U-2 incident occurred in northeastern Siberia. Khrushchev also insisted on the disengagement of U.S. missiles in Turkey as a condition of settlement. In a secret memo, not made public until 1969, Robert Kennedy, the brother of the president, promised that these missiles would be removed.

On October 29, however, Khrushchev accepted the U.S. deal of removal for a no-invasion guarantee and began to dismantle the missiles. After Khrushchev agreed to remove Russian aircraft over Cuba, the United States ended its naval blockade. However, when Castro refused to accept any U.N. inspection of the missile facilities, Kennedy dropped his pledge not to invade Cuba.

Later intelligence indicated that some of the Soviet missiles in Cuba were operational, that the Soviets had forty-two thousand troops in Cuba, far more than the United States had thought, and that the Soviet commanders had been given authority to use the nuclear missiles had the United States invaded. A thermonuclear war had been narrowly averted. As a result of the crisis, Kennedy’s political standing increased vastly. The Soviets began a crash campaign to overcome the missile gap; by the end of the decade, they had achieved rough parity with the United States. The Cuban missile crisis was highly effective in polarizing relations between the United States and Cuba, providing a justification for the embargo of Cuban goods and the U.S. effort to isolate Cuba diplomatically. It also strengthened the anti-Castro position of Cuban refugees in the United States.

To its critics, the Cuban missile crisis showed the dangers of “brinkmanship,” as it brought the world to the edge of nuclear war. Others saw the advantages of standing up to the Soviets and asserting U.S. power. After the Cuban missile crisis, the United States continued to assert itself more aggressively until the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989.


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[Image of map titled "The Quarantine of Cuba and U.S. Invasion Plans, October 1962"]

The plan unveiled: The 101st Airborne was to secure beaches at Mariel for the 1st Armored. The 82nd Airborne was to take airfields near Havana and San Antonio de los Baños. The marines were to land east of Havana. Units would then capture missile sites at San Cristóbal, Segue la Grande, and Remedios. U.S. troops at Guantanamo Bay would be a diversionary force.

[Image of a sign with "¡ ALERTA! " and a soldier with a machine gun]

Alerta. Wikipedia.

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NATIONAL SECURITY ACTION MEMORANDUM 196

TO: The Vice President
    The Secretary of State
    The Secretary of Defense
    The Secretary of the Treasury
    The Attorney General
    The Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff
    The Director of Central Intelligence

SUBJECT Establishment of an Executive Committee of the National Security Council

I hereby establish, for the purpose of effective conduct of the operations of the Executive Branch in the current crisis, an Executive Committee of the National Security Council. This committee will meet, until further notice, daily at 10:00 a.m. in the Cabinet Room. I shall act as Chairman of this committee, and its additional regular members will be as follows: the Vice President, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of Defense, the Secretary of the Treasury, the Attorney General, the Director of Central Intelligence, the Under Secretary of State, the Deputy Secretary of Defense, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Ambassador-at-Large, the Special Counsel, and the Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs.

The first meeting of this committee will be held at the regular hour on Tuesday, October 23rd, at which point further arrangements with respect to its management and operation will be decided.

cc: The Under Secretary of State
    The Deputy Secretary of Defense
    The Ambassador-at-Large
    The Special Counsel
    The Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs
    Mr. O'Donnell
    Mr. Salinger

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