

# Cuban Missile Crisis

The **Cuban Missile Crisis**, also known as the **October Crisis** (Spanish: *Crisis de octubre*), **The Missile Scare**, or the **Caribbean Crisis** (Russian: Карибский кризис, tr. *Karibskiy krizis*), was a 13-day (October 14–28, 1962) confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union over Soviet ballistic missiles deployed in Cuba. It played out on television worldwide and was the closest the Cold War came to escalating into a full-scale nuclear war.

In response to the failed Bay of Pigs Invasion of 1961, and the presence of American Jupiter ballistic missiles in Italy and Turkey against the USSR with Moscow within range, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev decided to agree to Cuba's request to place nuclear missiles in Cuba to deter future harassment of Cuba. An agreement was reached during a secret meeting between Khrushchev and Fidel Castro in July and construction on a number of missile launch facilities started later that summer.

An election was underway in the U.S. and the White House had denied Republican charges that it was ignoring dangerous Soviet missiles 90 miles from Florida. These missile preparations were confirmed when an Air Force U-2 spy plane produced clear photographic evidence of medium-range and intermediate-range ballistic missile facilities. The United States established a military blockade to prevent further missiles from entering Cuba. It announced that they would not permit offensive weapons to be delivered to Cuba and demanded that the weapons already in Cuba be dismantled and returned to the USSR.

After a period of tense negotiations an agreement was reached between Kennedy and Khrushchev. Publicly, the Soviets would dismantle their offensive weapons in Cuba and return them to the Soviet Union, subject to United Nations verification, in exchange for a U.S. public declaration and agreement never to invade Cuba without direct provocation. Secretly, the US also agreed that it would dismantle all U.S.-built Jupiter MRBMs, which were deployed in Turkey and Italy against the Soviet Union but were not known to the public.

When all offensive missiles and Ilyushin Il-28 light bombers had been withdrawn from Cuba, the blockade was formally ended on November 20, 1962. The negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union pointed out the necessity of a quick, clear, and direct communication line between Washington and Moscow. As a result, the Moscow–Washington hotline was established. A series of agreements sharply reduced U.S.-Soviet tensions for the following years.

## 1 Earlier actions by the United States



*Fidel Castro embracing Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, 1961*

The United States was concerned about an expansion of Communism, and a Latin American country allying openly with the USSR was regarded as unacceptable, given the U.S.-Soviet enmity since the end of World War II. Such an involvement would also directly defy the Monroe Doctrine, a U.S. policy which, while limiting the United States' involvement with European colonies and European affairs, held that European powers ought not to have involvement with states in the Western Hemisphere.

The U.S. had been embarrassed publicly by the failed Bay of Pigs Invasion in April 1961, which had been launched under President John F. Kennedy by CIA-trained forces of Cuban exiles. Afterward, former President Eisenhower told Kennedy that “the failure of the Bay of Pigs will embolden the Soviets to do something that they would otherwise not do.”<sup>[1]:10</sup> The half-hearted invasion left Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev and his advisers with the impression that Kennedy was indecisive and, as one Soviet adviser wrote, “too young, intellectual, not prepared well for decision making in crisis situations ... too intelligent and too weak.”<sup>[1]</sup> U.S. covert operations continued in 1961 with the unsuccessful Operation Mongoose.<sup>[2]</sup>

In addition, Khrushchev's impression of Kennedy's weakness was confirmed by the President's soft response during the Berlin Crisis of 1961, particularly the building of the Berlin Wall. Speaking to Soviet officials in the aftermath of the crisis, Khrushchev asserted, “I know for certain that Kennedy doesn't have a strong background, nor,

generally speaking, does he have the courage to stand up to a serious challenge.” He also told his son *Sergei* that on Cuba, Kennedy “would make a fuss, make more of a fuss, and then agree.”<sup>[3]</sup>

In January 1962, General Edward Lansdale described plans to overthrow the Cuban Government in a top-secret report (partially declassified 1989), addressed to President Kennedy and officials involved with Operation Mongoose.<sup>[2]</sup> CIA agents or “pathfinders” from the *Special Activities Division* were to be infiltrated into Cuba to carry out sabotage and organization, including radio broadcasts.<sup>[4]</sup> In February 1962, the U.S. launched an embargo against Cuba,<sup>[5]</sup> and Lansdale presented a 26-page, top-secret timetable for implementation of the overthrow of the Cuban Government, mandating that guerrilla operations begin in August and September, and in the first two weeks of October: “Open revolt and overthrow of the Communist regime.”<sup>[2]</sup>

## 2 Balance of power

When Kennedy ran for president in 1960, one of his key election issues was an alleged “missile gap” with the Soviets leading. In fact, the U.S. led the Soviets by a wide margin that would only increase. In 1961, the Soviets had only four *intercontinental ballistic missiles* (R-7 *Semyorka*). By October 1962, they may have had a few dozen, although some intelligence estimates were as high as 75.<sup>[6]</sup>

The U.S., on the other hand, had 170 ICBMs and was quickly building more. It also had eight *George Washington*- and *Ethan Allen*-class ballistic missile submarines with the capability to launch 16 *Polaris* missiles each, with a range of 1,500 nautical miles (2,800 km).

Khrushchev increased the perception of a missile gap when he loudly boasted to the world that the USSR was building missiles “like sausages” whose numbers and capabilities actually were nowhere close to his assertions. The Soviet Union did have *medium-range ballistic missiles* in quantity, about 700 of them; however, these were very unreliable and inaccurate. The U.S. had a considerable advantage in total number of nuclear warheads (27,000 against 3,600) at the time and in all the technologies needed to deliver them accurately.

The U.S. also led in missile defensive capabilities, Naval and Air power; but the USSR enjoyed a two-to-one advantage in conventional ground forces, more pronounced in field guns and tanks (particularly in the European theater).<sup>[6]</sup>

## 3 Soviet deployment of missiles in Cuba (Operation Anadyr)

See also: *Operation Anadyr*

In May 1962, Soviet Premier *Nikita Khrushchev* was persuaded by the idea of countering the U.S.’ growing lead in developing and deploying strategic missiles by placing Soviet intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Cuba, despite the misgivings of the Soviet Ambassador in Havana, *Alexandr Ivanovich Alexeyev* who argued that Castro would not accept the deployment of these missiles.<sup>[7]</sup> Khrushchev faced a strategic situation where the U.S. was perceived to have a “splendid *first strike*” capability that put the Soviet Union at a huge disadvantage. In 1962, the Soviets had only 20 ICBMs capable of delivering nuclear warheads to the U.S. from inside the Soviet Union.<sup>[8]</sup> The poor accuracy and reliability of these missiles raised serious doubts about their effectiveness. A newer, more reliable generation of ICBMs would only become operational after 1965.<sup>[8]</sup> Therefore, Soviet nuclear capability in 1962 placed less emphasis on ICBMs than on medium and intermediate-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs and IRBMs). These missiles could hit American allies and most of *Alaska* from Soviet territory but not the *contiguous 48 states* of the U.S. Graham Allison, the director of *Harvard University’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, points out, “The Soviet Union could right the nuclear imbalance by deploying new ICBMs on its own soil. In order to meet the threat it faced in 1962, 1963, and 1964, it had very few options. Moving existing nuclear weapons to locations from which they could reach American targets was one.”<sup>[9]</sup>

A second reason Soviet missiles were deployed to Cuba was because Khrushchev wanted to bring West Berlin—the American/British/French-controlled democratic zone within Communist *East Germany*—into the Soviet orbit. The East Germans and Soviets considered western control over a portion of *Berlin* a grave threat to *East Germany*. For this reason, among others, Khrushchev made *West Berlin* the central battlefield of the Cold War. Khrushchev believed that if the U.S. did nothing over the missile deployments in Cuba, he could muscle the West out of Berlin using said missiles as a deterrent to western counter-measures in Berlin. If the U.S. tried to bargain with the Soviets after becoming aware of the missiles, Khrushchev could demand trading the missiles for West Berlin. Since Berlin was strategically more important than Cuba, the trade would be a win for Khrushchev. President Kennedy recognized this: “The advantage is, from Khrushchev’s point of view, he takes a great chance but there are quite some rewards to it.”<sup>[10]</sup>

Khrushchev was also reacting in part to the nuclear threat of obsolescent *Jupiter* intermediate-range ballistic missiles which the U.S. had installed in *Turkey* during April



*More than 100 US-built missiles having the capability to strike Moscow with nuclear warheads were deployed in Italy and Turkey in 1961.*

1962.<sup>[6]</sup>

In early 1962, a group of Soviet military and missile construction specialists accompanied an agricultural delegation to Havana. They obtained a meeting with Cuban leader **Fidel Castro**. The Cuban leadership had a strong expectation that the U.S. would invade Cuba again and they enthusiastically approved the idea of installing nuclear missiles in Cuba. However, according to another source, **Fidel Castro** objected to the missiles deployment that would have made him look like a Soviet puppet, but was persuaded that missiles in Cuba would be an irritant to the U.S. and help the interests of the entire socialist camp.<sup>[11]</sup> Further, the deployment would include short-range tactical weapons (with a range of 40 km, usable only against naval vessels) that would provide a “nuclear umbrella” for attacks upon the island.

By May, Khrushchev and Castro agreed to place strategic nuclear missiles secretly in Cuba. Like Castro, Khrushchev felt that a U.S. invasion of Cuba was imminent, and that to lose Cuba would do great harm to the communist cause, especially in Latin America. He said he wanted to confront the Americans “with more than words ... the logical answer was missiles.”<sup>[12]:29</sup> The Soviets maintained their tight secrecy, writing their plans longhand, which were approved by **Rodion Malinovsky** on July 4 and Khrushchev on July 7.

From the very beginning, the Soviets’ operation entailed elaborate **denial and deception**, known in the USSR as “**maskirovka**”.<sup>[13]</sup> All of the planning and preparation for transporting and deploying the missiles were carried out in the utmost secrecy, with only a very few told the exact nature of the mission. Even the troops detailed for the mission were given misdirection, told they were headed for a cold region and outfitted with ski boots, fleece-lined parkas, and other winter equipment.<sup>[13]</sup> The Soviet code name was **Operation Anadyr**. Anadyr was also the name of a river flowing into the **Bering Sea**, the name of the

capital of **Chukotsky District**, and a bomber base in the far eastern region. All these were meant to conceal the program from both internal and external audiences.<sup>[13]</sup>

Specialists in missile construction under the guise of “machine operators,” “irrigation specialists” and “agricultural specialists” arrived in July.<sup>[13]</sup> A total of 43,000 foreign troops would ultimately be brought in.<sup>[14]</sup> Marshal **Sergei Biryuzov**, chief of the Soviet Rocket Forces, led a survey team that visited Cuba. He told Khrushchev that the missiles would be concealed and camouflaged by the palm trees.<sup>[6]</sup>

The Cuban leadership was further upset when in September the U.S. Congress approved U.S. Joint Resolution 230, which expressed Congress’s resolve to prevent the creation of an externally supported military establishment.<sup>[15][16]</sup> On the same day, the U.S. announced a major military exercise in the Caribbean, **PHIBRIGLEX-62**, which Cuba denounced as a deliberate provocation and proof that the U.S. planned to invade Cuba.<sup>[16][17]</sup>

The Soviet leadership believed, based on their perception of Kennedy’s lack of confidence during the Bay of Pigs Invasion, that he would avoid confrontation and accept the missiles as a *fait accompli*.<sup>[1]:1</sup> On September 11, the Soviet Union publicly warned that a U.S. attack on Cuba or on Soviet ships carrying supplies to the island would mean war.<sup>[2]</sup> The Soviets continued the *Maskirovka* program to conceal their actions in Cuba. They repeatedly denied that the weapons being brought into Cuba were offensive in nature. On September 7, **Soviet Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Dobrynin** assured **United States Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson** that the USSR was supplying only defensive weapons to Cuba. On September 11, the **Telegrafnoe Agentstvo Sovetskogo Soyuza** (Soviet News Agency TASS) announced that the Soviet Union had no need or intention to introduce offensive nuclear missiles into Cuba. On October 13, Dobrynin was questioned by former Undersecretary of State **Chester Bowles** about whether the Soviets plan to put offensive weapons in Cuba. He denied any such plans.<sup>[16]</sup> On October 17, Soviet embassy official **Georgy Bolshakov** brought President Kennedy a personal message from Khrushchev reassuring him that “under no circumstances would surface-to-surface missiles be sent to Cuba.”<sup>[16]:494</sup>

As early as August 1962, the U.S. suspected the Soviets of building missile facilities in Cuba. During that month, its intelligence services gathered information about sightings by ground observers of Russian-built **MiG-21** fighters and **Il-28** light bombers. U-2 spyplanes found **S-75 Dvina** (NATO designation **SA-2**) surface-to-air missile sites at eight different locations. CIA director **John A. McCone** was suspicious. Sending antiaircraft missiles into Cuba, he reasoned, “made sense only if Moscow intended to use them to shield a base for ballistic missiles aimed at the United States.”<sup>[18]</sup> On August 10, he wrote



a memo to President Kennedy in which he guessed that the Soviets were preparing to introduce ballistic missiles into Cuba.<sup>[6]</sup>

With important Congressional elections scheduled for November, the Crisis became enmeshed in American politics. On August 31, Senator **Kenneth Keating** (R-New York), who received his information from Cuban exiles in Florida, warned on the Senate floor that the Soviet Union may be constructing a missile base in Cuba. He charged the Kennedy Administration was covering up a major threat to the U.S.<sup>[19]</sup> Air Force General **Curtis LeMay** presented a pre-invasion bombing plan to Kennedy in September, while spy flights and minor military harassment from U.S. forces at **Guantanamo Bay Naval Base** were the subject of continual Cuban diplomatic complaints to the U.S. government.<sup>[2]</sup>

The first consignment of R-12 missiles arrived on the night of September 8, followed by a second on September 16. The R-12 was an intermediate-range ballistic missile, capable of carrying a **thermonuclear** warhead.<sup>[20]</sup> It was a single-stage, road-transportable, surface-launched, storable liquid propellant fueled missile that could deliver a **megaton-class** nuclear weapon.<sup>[21]</sup> The Soviets were building nine sites—six for R-12 medium-range missiles (NATO designation **SS-4 Sandal**) with an effective range of 2,000 kilometres (1,200 mi) and three for R-14 intermediate-range ballistic missiles (NATO designation **SS-5 Slean**) with a maximum range of 4,500 kilometres (2,800 mi).<sup>[22]</sup>

## 4 Cuba positioning

On October 7, Cuban President **Osvaldo Dorticós** spoke at the **UN General Assembly**: “If ... we are attacked, we will defend ourselves. I repeat, we have sufficient means with which to defend ourselves; we have indeed our inevitable weapons, the weapons, which we would have preferred not to acquire, and which we do not wish to employ.”

## 5 Missiles reported

The missiles in Cuba allowed the Soviets to effectively target the majority of the continental U.S. The planned arsenal was forty launchers. The Cuban populace readily noticed the arrival and deployment of the missiles and hundreds of reports reached Miami. U.S. intelligence received countless reports, many of dubious quality or even laughable, and most of which could be dismissed as describing defensive missiles. Only five reports bothered the analysts. They described large trucks passing through towns at night carrying very long canvas-covered cylindrical objects that could not make turns through towns without backing up and maneuvering. Defensive mis-

siles could make these turns. These reports could not be satisfactorily dismissed.<sup>[23]</sup> There was also a very sensitive source, which had to be protected at all costs: **Oleg Penkovsky**, a double agent in the **GRU** working for **CIA** and **MI6** reported the Soviet plans and even provided details of the missile placements, which were eventually verified by U-2 flights.<sup>[24]</sup>



*A U-2 reconnaissance photograph of Cuba, showing Soviet nuclear missiles, their transports and tents for fueling and maintenance.*

### 5.1 Aerial images find Soviet missiles

Despite the increasing evidence of a military build-up on Cuba, no U-2 flights were made over Cuba from September 5 until October 14. The first problem that caused the pause in reconnaissance flights took place on August 30, when a U-2 operated by the US Air Force's **Strategic Air Command** flew over **Sakhalin Island** in the **Soviet Far East** by mistake. The Soviets lodged a protest and the U.S. apologized. Nine days later, a **Taiwanese**-operated U-2<sup>[25][26]</sup> was lost over western China, probably to a **SAM**. U.S. officials were worried that one of the Cuban or Soviet SAMs in Cuba might shoot down a CIA U-2, initiating another international incident. In a meeting with members of the Committee on Overhead Reconnaissance (COMOR) on 10 September, **US Secretary of State Dean Rusk** and **National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy** heavily restricted further U-2 flights over Cuban airspace. The resulting lack of coverage over the island for the next five weeks became known to historians as the “Photo Gap.”<sup>[27]</sup> During this period, no significant U-2 coverage was achieved over the interior of the island. U.S. officials attempted to use a **Corona photoreconnaissance satellite** to obtain coverage over reported Soviet military deployments, but imagery acquired over western Cuba by a Corona KH-4 mission on 1 October was heavily covered by clouds and haze and failed to provide any usable intelligence.<sup>[28]</sup> At the end of September, Navy reconnaissance aircraft photographed the Soviet ship **Kasimov** with large crates on its deck the size and shape of **Il-28 light bombers**.<sup>[6]</sup>

In September 1962, photo interpreters from the **Defense Intelligence Agency** (DIA) noticed that Cuban surface-to-air missile sites were arranged in a pattern similar to those used by the Soviet Union to protect its **ICBM** bases, leading the wary Agency to lobby for the resumption of U-2 flights over the island.<sup>[29]</sup> Although in the past the flights had been conducted by the CIA, due to pressure from the Defense Department, the authority was transferred to the Air Force.<sup>[6]</sup> Following CIA's unsuccessful mission over the Soviet Union, it was thought that if another U-2 was shot down a cover story involving Air Force flights would be easier to explain than CIA flights.

When the reconnaissance missions were re-authorized on October 8, weather kept the planes from flying. The U.S. first obtained U-2 photographic evidence of the missiles on October 14, when a U-2 flight piloted by Major **Richard Heyser** took 928 pictures on a path selected by **DIA** analysts, capturing images of what turned out to be an SS-4 construction site at **San Cristóbal**, **Pinar del Río Province** (now in **Artemisa Province**), in western Cuba.<sup>[30]</sup>

## 5.2 President notified

On October 15, the CIA's National Photographic Interpretation Center reviewed the U-2 photographs and identified objects that they interpreted as medium range ballistic missiles. That evening, the CIA notified the Department of State and at 8:30 pm EDT, **National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy** elected to wait until morning to tell the President. **Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara** was briefed at midnight. The next morning, Bundy met with Kennedy and showed him the U-2 photographs and briefed him on the CIA's analysis of the images.<sup>[31]</sup> At 6:30 pm EDT, Kennedy convened a meeting of the nine members of the **National Security Council** and five other key advisors,<sup>[32]</sup> in a group he formally named the **Executive Committee of the National Security Council** (EXCOMM) after the fact on October 22 by the National Security Action Memorandum 196.<sup>[33]</sup> Without informing the members of EXCOMM, President Kennedy tape recorded all of their proceedings, and Sheldon M. Stern, head of the Kennedy library has transcribed some of them.<sup>[34][35]</sup>

## 5.3 Responses considered

The U.S. had no plan in place because U.S. intelligence had been convinced that the Soviets would never install nuclear missiles in Cuba. The EXCOMM quickly discussed several possible courses of action, including:<sup>[36]</sup>

1. Do nothing: American vulnerability to Soviet missiles was not new.
2. Diplomacy: Use diplomatic pressure to get the Soviet Union to remove the missiles.



*President Kennedy meets in the Oval Office with General Curtis LeMay.*

3. Secret approach: Offer Castro the choice of splitting with the Russians or being invaded.
4. Invasion: Full force invasion of Cuba and overthrow of Castro.
5. Air strike: Use the US Air Force to attack all known missile sites.
6. Blockade: Use the US Navy to block any missiles from arriving in Cuba.

The **Joint Chiefs of Staff** unanimously agreed that a full-scale attack and invasion was the only solution. They believed that the Soviets would not attempt to stop the US from conquering Cuba: Kennedy was skeptical.

They, no more than we, can let these things go by without doing something. They can't, after all their statements, permit us to take out their missiles, kill a lot of Russians, and then do nothing. If they don't take action in Cuba, they certainly will in Berlin.<sup>[37]</sup>

Kennedy concluded that attacking Cuba by air would signal the Soviets to presume "a clear line" to conquer Berlin. Kennedy also believed that U.S.'s allies would think of the US as "trigger-happy cowboys" who lost Berlin because they could not peacefully resolve the Cuban situation.<sup>[38]:332</sup>

The EXCOMM then discussed the effect on the strategic balance of power, both political and military. The Joint Chiefs of Staff believed that the missiles would seriously alter the military balance, but Secretary of Defense **Robert McNamara** disagreed. He was convinced that the missiles would not affect the strategic balance at all. An extra 40, he reasoned, would make little difference to the overall strategic balance. The U.S. already had approximately 5,000 strategic warheads,<sup>[39]:261</sup> while the Soviet Union had only 300. He concluded that the



*President Kennedy and Secretary of Defense McNamara in an EXCOMM meeting.*

Soviets having 340 would not therefore substantially alter the strategic balance. In 1990, he reiterated that “it made no difference ... The military balance wasn’t changed. I didn’t believe it then, and I don’t believe it now.”<sup>[40]</sup>

The EXCOMM agreed that the missiles would affect the political balance. First, Kennedy had explicitly promised the American people less than a month before the crisis that “if Cuba should possess a capacity to carry out offensive actions against the United States ... the United States would act.”<sup>[41]:674–681</sup> Second, U.S. credibility among their allies, and among the American people, would be damaged if they allowed the Soviet Union to appear to redress the strategic balance by placing missiles in Cuba. Kennedy explained after the crisis that “it would have politically changed the balance of power. It would have appeared to, and appearances contribute to reality.”<sup>[42]</sup>



*President Kennedy meets with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko in the Oval Office (October 18, 1962)*

On October 18, President Kennedy met with Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, **Andrei Gromyko**, who claimed the weapons were for defensive purposes only. Not wanting to expose what he already knew, and wanting to avoid panicking the American public,<sup>[43]</sup> the President did not reveal that he was already aware of the missile build-up.<sup>[44]</sup>

By October 19, frequent U-2 spy flights showed four operational sites. As part of the blockade, the U.S. military was put on high alert to enforce the blockade and to be ready to invade Cuba at a moment’s notice. The **1st Armored Division** was sent to **Georgia**, and five army divisions were alerted for combat operations. The **Strategic Air Command (SAC)** distributed its shorter-ranged **B-47 Stratojet** medium bombers to civilian airports and sent aloft its **B-52 Stratofortress** heavy bombers.<sup>[45]</sup>

## 6 Operational plans

Two Operational Plans (OPLAN) were considered. OPLAN 316 envisioned a full invasion of Cuba by Army and Marine units supported by the Navy following Air Force and naval airstrikes. However, Army units in the U.S. would have had trouble fielding mechanized and logistical assets, while the U.S. Navy could not supply sufficient amphibious shipping to transport even a modest armored contingent from the Army. OPLAN 312, primarily an Air Force and Navy carrier operation, was designed with enough flexibility to do anything from engaging individual missile sites to providing air support for OPLAN 316’s ground forces.<sup>[46]</sup>

## 7 Blockade (“quarantine”)



*A U.S. Navy P-2H Neptune of VP-18 flying over a Soviet cargo ship with crated Il-28s on deck during the Cuban Crisis.<sup>[47]</sup>*

Kennedy met with members of EXCOMM and other top advisers throughout October 21, considering two remaining options: an air strike primarily against the Cuban missile bases, or a naval blockade of Cuba.<sup>[44]</sup> A full-scale invasion was not the administration’s first option. Robert McNamara supported the naval blockade as a strong but limited military action that left the U.S. in control. However, the term “blockade” was problematic. According to international law a blockade is an act of war, but the Kennedy administration did not think



that the USSR would be provoked to attack by a mere blockade.<sup>[48]</sup> Additionally, legal experts at the **State Department** and **Justice Department** concluded that a declaration of war could be avoided so long as another legal justification, based on the **Rio Treaty** for defense of the Western Hemisphere, was obtained via a resolution by a two-thirds vote from the members of the **Organization of American States** (OAS).<sup>[49]</sup>

Admiral Anderson, Chief of Naval Operations wrote a position paper that helped Kennedy to differentiate between what they termed a “quarantine”<sup>[50]</sup> of offensive weapons and a blockade of all materials, claiming that a classic blockade was not the original intention. Since it would take place in international waters, Kennedy obtained the approval of the OAS for military action under the hemispheric defense provisions of the Rio Treaty.

Latin American participation in the quarantine now involved two Argentine destroyers which were to report to the U.S. Commander South Atlantic [COMSOLANT] at Trinidad on November 9. An Argentine submarine and a Marine battalion with lift were available if required. In addition, two Venezuelan destroyers (Destroyers ARV D-11 Nueva Esparta” and “ARV D-21 Zulia”) and one submarine (Caribe) had reported to COMSOLANT, ready for sea by November 2. The Government of Trinidad and Tobago offered the use of **Chaguaramas** Naval Base to warships of any OAS nation for the duration of the “quarantine.” The Dominican Republic had made available one escort ship. Colombia was reported ready to furnish units and had sent military officers to the US to discuss this assistance. The Argentine Air Force informally offered three **SA-16** aircraft in addition to forces already committed to the “quarantine” operation.<sup>[51]</sup>

This initially was to involve a naval blockade against offensive weapons within the framework of the **Organization of American States** and the **Rio Treaty**. Such a blockade might be expanded to cover all types of goods and air transport. The action was to be backed up by surveillance of Cuba. The CNO’s scenario was followed closely in later implementing the “quarantine.”

On October 19, the EXCOMM formed separate working groups to examine the air strike and blockade options, and by the afternoon most support in the EXCOMM shifted to the blockade option. Reservations about the plan continued to be voiced as late as the 21st; however, the paramount one being that once the blockade was put into effect, the Soviets would rush to complete some

of the missiles. Consequently, the U.S. could find itself bombing operational missiles were the blockade to fail to force Khrushchev to remove the missiles already on the island.<sup>[52]</sup>

## 7.1 Speech to the nation



*President Kennedy signs the Proclamation for Interdiction of the Delivery of Offensive Weapons to Cuba at the Oval Office on October 23, 1962.<sup>[53]</sup>*

At 3:00 pm EDT on October 22, President Kennedy formally established the Executive Committee (EXCOMM) with National Security Action Memorandum (NSAM) 196. At 5:00 pm, he met with Congressional leaders who contentiously opposed a blockade and demanded a stronger response. In Moscow, Ambassador **Kohler** briefed Chairman Khrushchev on the pending blockade and Kennedy’s speech to the nation. Ambassadors around the world gave notice to non-**Eastern Bloc** leaders. Before the speech, US delegations met with Canadian Prime Minister **John Diefenbaker**, British Prime Minister **Harold Macmillan**, West German Chancellor **Konrad Adenauer**, and French President **Charles de Gaulle** to brief them on the US intelligence and their proposed response. All were supportive of the US position.<sup>[54]</sup>

On October 22 at 7:00 pm EDT, President Kennedy delivered a nationwide televised address on all of the major networks announcing the discovery of the missiles.

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 upon the Soviet Union.<sup>[55]</sup>

Kennedy described the administration's plan:

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.<sup>[55]</sup>

During the speech a directive went out to all U.S. forces worldwide placing them on DEFCON 3. The heavy cruiser *USS Newport News* was designated flagship for the blockade,<sup>[50]</sup> with the *USS Leary* (DD-879) as *Newport News*'s destroyer escort.<sup>[51]</sup>

## 7.2 Crisis deepens

Уважаемый господин Президент,  
Получил Ваше письмо от 23 октября, ознакомился с ним и отвечаю Вам.

Представьте себе, господин Президент, что мы поставили бы Вам те ультимативные условия, которые Вы поставили нам своей акцией. Как бы Вы реагировали на это? Думаю, что Вы возмутились бы таким шагом с нашей стороны. И это было бы нам понятно.

Поставляя нам эти условия, Вы, господин Президент, бросили нам вызов. Кто Вас просил делать это? По какому праву Вы это сделали? Наши связи с Республикой Куба, как и отношения с другими государствами, независимо от того, какое это государство, касаются только двух стран, между которыми имеются эти отношения. И если уж говорить о карантине, упоминаемом в Вашем письме, то это, как это принято в международной практике, могут устанавливать только государства по договоренности между собой, а не какая-то третья сторона. Существуют, например, карантин на оленьско-китайские товары и продукты. Но в данном случае речь идет совсем не о карантине, а о гораздо более серьезных вещах, и Вы это сами понимаете.

Его Превосходительству  
господину Джону Ф.Кеннеди,  
Президенту Соединенных Штатов Америки  
г.Вашингтон

*Khrushchev's October 24, 1962 letter to President Kennedy stating that the Cuban Missile Crisis blockade "constitute[s] an act of aggression ..."*<sup>[56][57]</sup>

On October 23 at 11:24 am EDT a cable drafted by **George Ball** to the U.S. Ambassador in Turkey and **NATO** notified them that they were considering making an offer to withdraw what the U.S. knew to be nearly obsolete missiles from Italy and Turkey in exchange for the Soviet withdrawal from Cuba. Turkish officials replied that they would "deeply resent" any trade for the US missile's presence in their country.<sup>[58]</sup> Two days later, on the morning of October 25, journalist **Walter Lippmann** proposed the same thing in his syndicated column. Castro reaffirmed Cuba's right to self-defense and said that all of its weapons were defensive and Cuba would not allow an inspection.<sup>[2]</sup>

## 7.3 International response

Three days after Kennedy's speech, the Chinese *People's Daily* announced that "650,000,000 Chinese men and women were standing by the Cuban people."<sup>[54]</sup> In West Germany, newspapers supported the U.S.'s response, contrasting it with the weak American actions in the region during the preceding months. They also expressed some fear that the Soviets might retaliate in Berlin. In France on October 23, the crisis made the front page of all the daily newspapers. The next day, an editorial in *Le Monde* expressed doubt about the authenticity of the CIA's photographic evidence. Two days later, after a visit by a high-ranking CIA agent, they accepted the validity of the photographs. Also in France, in the October 29 issue of *Le Figaro*, Raymond Aron wrote in support of the American response.<sup>[59]</sup>

On October 24, Pope John XXIII sent a message to the Soviet embassy in Rome to be transmitted to the Kremlin, in which he voiced his concern for peace. In this message he stated "We beg all governments not to remain deaf to this cry of humanity. That they do all that is in their power to save peace." With the permission of Kennedy and Khrushchev, this appeal went public on October 25 on radio, asking leaders to do "all in their power to preserve peace" and to "save the world from the horrors of a war". The intervention of Pope John was significant, as on the same day confrontation started to settle down.<sup>[60]</sup> Pope John's message also appeared in *Pravda*, the official Soviet newspaper, on October 26 under the headline, "We beg all rulers not to be deaf to the cry of humanity".<sup>[61]</sup> While Pope John XXIII's role in the crisis is often overlooked, he acted as a third party in the dispute in such a way that it allowed Kennedy and Khrushchev a way to back out without either party acknowledging defeat. His public appeal essentially created a bridge between Washington and Moscow.

## 7.4 Soviet broadcast

At the time, the crisis continued unabated, and on the evening of October 24, the Soviet news agency



TASS broadcast a telegram from Khrushchev to President Kennedy, in which Khrushchev warned that the United States' "outright piracy" would lead to war.<sup>[62]</sup> However, this was followed at 9:24 pm by a telegram from Khrushchev to Kennedy which was received at 10:52 pm EDT, in which Khrushchev stated, "if you weigh the present situation with a cool head without giving way to passion, you will understand that the Soviet Union cannot afford not to decline the despotic demands of the USA" and that the Soviet Union views the blockade as "an act of aggression" and their ships will be instructed to ignore it.<sup>[57]</sup>

## 7.5 US alert level raised



*Allai Stevenson shows aerial photos of Cuban missiles to the United Nations, October 25, 1962.*

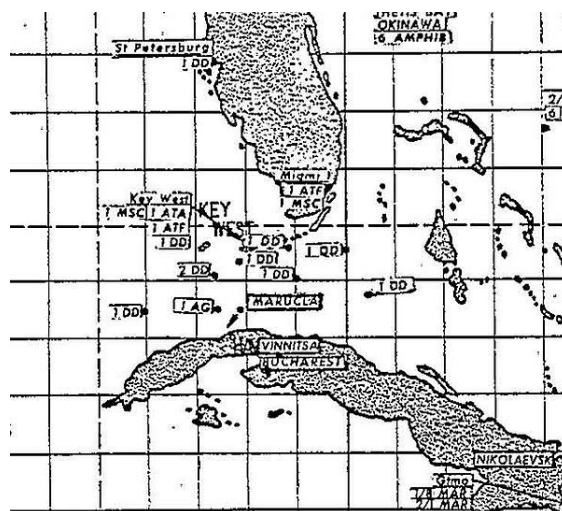
The U.S. requested an emergency meeting of the **United Nations Security Council** on October 25. U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson confronted Soviet Ambassador **Valerian Zorin** in an emergency meeting of the SC challenging him to admit the existence of the missiles. Ambassador Zorin refused to answer. The next day at 10:00 pm EDT, the U.S. raised the readiness level of SAC forces to DEFCON 2. For the only confirmed time in U.S. history, while the **B-52** bombers went on continuous airborne alert, the **B-47** medium bombers were dispersed to various military and civilian airfields, and made ready to take off, fully equipped, on 15 minutes' notice.<sup>[63][64]</sup> One-eighth of SAC's 1,436 bombers were on airborne alert, some 145 intercontinental ballistic missiles stood on ready alert, while **Air Defense Command** (ADC) redeployed 161 nuclear-armed interceptors to 16 dispersal fields within nine hours with one-third maintaining 15-minute alert status.<sup>[46]</sup> Twenty-three nuclear-armed B-52s were sent to orbit points within striking distance of the Soviet Union so that the latter might observe that the U.S. was serious.<sup>[65]</sup> **Jack J. Catton** later estimated that about 80 percent of SAC's planes were ready for launch during the crisis; **David A. Burchinal** recalled that, by contrast,<sup>[66]</sup>

the Russians were so thoroughly stood down, and we knew it. They didn't make any

move. They did not increase their alert; they did not increase any flights, or their air defense posture. They didn't do a thing, they froze in place. We were never further from nuclear war than at the time of Cuba, never further.<sup>[66]</sup>

“By October 22, **Tactical Air Command (TAC)** had 511 fighters plus supporting tankers and reconnaissance aircraft deployed to face Cuba on one-hour alert status. However, TAC and the **Military Air Transport Service** had problems. The concentration of aircraft in Florida strained command and support echelons; which faced critical undermanning in security, armaments, and communications; the absence of initial authorization for war-reserve stocks of conventional munitions forced TAC to scrounge; and the lack of airlift assets to support a major airborne drop necessitated the call-up of 24 Reserve squadrons.”<sup>[46]</sup>

On October 25 at 1:45 am EDT, Kennedy responded to Khrushchev's telegram, stating that the U.S. was forced into action after receiving repeated assurances that no offensive missiles were being placed in Cuba, and that when these assurances proved to be false, the deployment "required the responses I have announced ... I hope that your government will take necessary action to permit a restoration of the earlier situation."



*A declassified map used by the US Navy's Atlantic Fleet showing the position of American and Soviet ships at the height of the crisis.*

## 7.6 Blockade challenged

At 7:15 am EDT on October 25, the USS *Essex* and USS *Gearing* attempted to intercept the *Bucharest* but failed to do so. Fairly certain the tanker did not contain any military material, they allowed it through the blockade. Later that day, at 5:43 pm, the commander of the blockade effort ordered the USS *Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr* to intercept and board the Lebanese freighter *Marucla*. This took

place the next day, and the *Marucla* was cleared through the blockade after its cargo was checked.<sup>[67]</sup>

At 5:00 pm EDT on October 25, William Clements announced that the missiles in Cuba were still actively being worked on. This report was later verified by a CIA report that suggested there had been no slow-down at all. In response, Kennedy issued Security Action Memorandum 199, authorizing the loading of nuclear weapons onto aircraft under the command of **SACEUR** (which had the duty of carrying out first air strikes on the Soviet Union). During the day, the Soviets responded to the blockade by turning back 14 ships presumably carrying offensive weapons.<sup>[64]</sup>

## 7.7 Crisis stalemated

The next morning, October 26, Kennedy informed the EXCOMM that he believed only an invasion would remove the missiles from Cuba. However, he was persuaded to give the matter time and continue with both military and diplomatic pressure. He agreed and ordered the low-level flights over the island to be increased from two per day to once every two hours. He also ordered a crash program to institute a new civil government in Cuba if an invasion went ahead.

At this point, the crisis was ostensibly at a stalemate. The USSR had shown no indication that they would back down and had made several comments to the contrary. The U.S. had no reason to believe otherwise and was in the early stages of preparing for an invasion, along with a nuclear strike on the Soviet Union in case it responded militarily, which was assumed.<sup>[68]</sup>

## 8 Secret negotiations

At 1:00 pm EDT on October 26, **John A. Scali** of **ABC News** had lunch with **Aleksandr Fomin** (alias of spy **Alexander Feklisov**) at Fomin's request. Fomin noted, "War seems about to break out" and asked Scali to use his contacts to talk to his "high-level friends" at the State Department to see if the U.S. would be interested in a diplomatic solution. He suggested that the language of the deal would contain an assurance from the Soviet Union to remove the weapons under UN supervision and that Castro would publicly announce that he would not accept such weapons in the future, in exchange for a public statement by the U.S. that it would never invade Cuba.<sup>[69]</sup> The U.S. responded by asking the **Brazilian** government to pass a message to Castro that the U.S. would be "unlikely to invade" if the missiles were removed.<sup>[58]</sup>

Mr. President, we and you ought not now to pull on the ends of the rope in which you have tied the knot of war, because the more the two of us pull, the tighter that knot will be tied. And a moment may come when that knot will be tied so tight that even he who tied it will not have

the strength to untie it, and then it will be necessary to cut that knot, and what that would mean is not for me to explain to you, because you yourself understand perfectly of what terrible forces our countries dispose.

Consequently, if there is no intention to tighten that knot and thereby to doom the world to the catastrophe of thermonuclear war, then let us not only relax the forces pulling on the ends of the rope, let us take measures to untie that knot. We are ready for this.

Letter From Chairman Khrushchev to President Kennedy, October 26, 1962<sup>[70]</sup>

On October 26 at 6:00 pm EDT, the State Department started receiving a message that appeared to be written personally by Khrushchev. It was Saturday at 2:00 am in Moscow. The long letter took several minutes to arrive, and it took translators additional time to translate and transcribe it.<sup>[58]</sup>

**Robert F. Kennedy** described the letter as "very long and emotional." Khrushchev reiterated the basic outline that had been stated to **John Scali** earlier in the day, "I propose: we, for our part, will declare that our ships bound for Cuba are not carrying any armaments. You will declare that the United States will not invade Cuba with its troops and will not support any other forces which might intend to invade Cuba. Then the necessity of the presence of our military specialists in Cuba will disappear." At 6:45 pm EDT, news of Fomin's offer to Scali was finally heard and was interpreted as a "set up" for the arrival of Khrushchev's letter. The letter was then considered official and accurate, although it was later learned that Fomin was almost certainly operating of his own accord without official backing. Additional study of the letter was ordered and continued into the night.<sup>[58]</sup>

### 8.1 Crisis continues

Direct aggression against Cuba would mean nuclear war. The Americans speak about such aggression as if they did not know or did not want to accept this fact. I have no doubt they would lose such a war. —**Ernesto "Che" Guevara**, October 1962<sup>[71]</sup>

Castro, on the other hand, was convinced that an invasion of Cuba was soon at hand, and on October 26, he sent a telegram to **Khrushchev** that appeared to call for a preemptive nuclear strike on the U.S. However, in a 2010 interview, Castro said of his recommendation for the Soviets to attack America *before* they made any move against Cuba: "After I've seen what I've seen, and knowing what I know now, it wasn't worth it at all."<sup>[72]</sup> Castro also ordered all anti-aircraft weapons in Cuba to fire on any US aircraft,<sup>[73]</sup> whereas in the past they had been ordered only to fire on groups of two or more. At 6:00 am EDT on October 27, the CIA delivered a memo reporting



*S-75 Dvina with V-750V 1D missile (NATO SA-2 Guideline) on a launcher. An installation similar to this one shot down Major Anderson's U-2 over Cuba.*

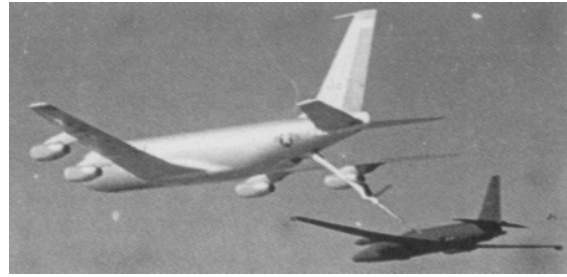
that three of the four missile sites at San Cristobal and the two sites at Sagua la Grande appeared to be fully operational. They also noted that the Cuban military continued to organize for action, although they were under order not to initiate action unless attacked.

At 9:00 am EDT on October 27, **Radio Moscow** began broadcasting a message from Khrushchev. Contrary to the letter of the night before, the message offered a new trade, that the missiles on Cuba would be removed in exchange for the removal of the **Jupiter** missiles from Italy and Turkey. At 10:00 am EDT, the executive committee met again to discuss the situation and came to the conclusion that the change in the message was due to internal debate between Khrushchev and other party officials in the Kremlin.<sup>[74]:300</sup> Kennedy realized that he would be in an “insupportable position if this becomes Khrushchev’s proposal”, because: 1) The missiles in Turkey were not militarily useful and were being removed anyway; and 2) “It’s gonna – to any man at the United Nations or any other rational man, it will look like a very fair trade.” National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy explained why Khrushchev’s public acquiescence could not be considered: “The current threat to peace is not in Turkey, it is in Cuba.”<sup>[75]</sup>

McNamara noted that another tanker, the *Grozny*, was about 600 miles (970 km) out and should be intercepted. He also noted that they had not made the USSR aware of the blockade line and suggested relaying this information to them via **U Thant** at the United Nations.<sup>[76]</sup>

While the meeting progressed, at 11:03 am EDT a new message began to arrive from Khrushchev. The message stated, in part,

“You are disturbed over Cuba. You say that this disturbs you because it is ninety-nine miles by sea from the coast of the United States of America. But ... you have placed destructive missile weapons, which you call offensive, in Italy and Turkey, literally next to us ... I therefore make this proposal: We are willing to remove from Cuba the means which you regard as offensive ... Your representa-



*A Lockheed U-2F, the high altitude reconnaissance type shot down over Cuba, being refueled by a Boeing KC-135Q. The aircraft in 1962 was painted overall gray and carried USAF military markings and national insignia.*

tives will make a declaration to the effect that the United States ... will remove its analogous means from Turkey ... and after that, persons entrusted by the United Nations Security Council could inspect on the spot the fulfillment of the pledges made.”

The executive committee continued to meet through the day.

Throughout the crisis, Turkey had repeatedly stated that it would be upset if the **Jupiter** missiles were removed. Italy’s Prime Minister **Fanfani**, who was also Foreign Minister *ad interim*, offered to allow withdrawal of the missiles deployed in **Apulia** as a bargaining chip. He gave the message to one of his most trusted friends, **Ettore Bernabei**, the general manager of **RAI-TV**, to convey to **Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.** Bernabei was in New York to attend an international conference on satellite TV broadcasting. Unknown to the Soviets, the U.S. regarded the Jupiter missiles as obsolescent and already supplanted by the Polaris nuclear ballistic submarine missiles.<sup>[6]</sup>



*The engine of the Lockheed U-2 shot down over Cuba on display at Museum of the Revolution in Havana.*

On the morning of October 27, a U-2F (the third CIA U-2A, modified for air-to-air refueling) piloted by USAF Major **Rudolf Anderson**,<sup>[77]</sup> departed its forward operating location at **McCoy AFB**, Florida. At approximately 12:00 pm EDT, the aircraft was struck by a S-75 Dvina (NATO designation **SA-2 Guideline**) SAM missile launched from Cuba. The aircraft was shot down and



Anderson was killed. The stress in negotiations between the USSR and the U.S. intensified, and only later was it learned that the decision to fire the missile was made locally by an undetermined Soviet commander acting on his own authority. Later that day, at about 3:41 pm EDT, several U.S. Navy RF-8A *Crusader* aircraft on low-level photoreconnaissance missions were fired upon.

At 4:00 pm EDT, Kennedy recalled members of EXCOMM to the White House and ordered that a message immediately be sent to U Thant asking the Soviets to suspend work on the missiles while negotiations were carried out. During this meeting, General Maxwell Taylor delivered the news that the U-2 had been shot down. Kennedy had earlier claimed he would order an attack on such sites if fired upon, but he decided to not act unless another attack was made. In an interview 40 years later, McNamara said:

We had to send a U-2 over to gain reconnaissance information on whether the Soviet missiles were becoming operational. We believed that if the U-2 was shot down—that the Cubans didn't have capabilities to shoot it down, the Soviets did—we believed if it was shot down, it would be shot down by a Soviet surface-to-air-missile unit, and that it would represent a decision by the Soviets to escalate the conflict. And therefore, before we sent the U-2 out, we agreed that if it was shot down we wouldn't meet, we'd simply attack. It was shot down on Friday. ... Fortunately, we changed our mind, we thought “Well, it might have been an accident, we won't attack.” Later we learned that Khrushchev had reasoned just as we did: we send over the U-2, if it was shot down, he reasoned we would believe it was an intentional escalation. And therefore, he issued orders to Pliyev, the Soviet commander in Cuba, to instruct all of his batteries not to shoot down the U-2.<sup>[note 1][78]</sup>

## 8.2 Drafting the response

Emissaries sent by both Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev agreed to meet at the Yenching Palace Chinese restaurant in the *Cleveland Park* neighborhood of Washington D.C. on the evening of October 27.<sup>[79]</sup> Kennedy suggested that they take Khrushchev's offer to trade away the missiles. Unknown to most members of the EXCOMM, Robert Kennedy had been meeting with the Soviet Ambassador in Washington to discover whether these intentions were genuine. The EXCOMM was generally against the proposal because it would undermine NATO's authority, and the Turkish government had repeatedly stated it was against any such trade.

As the meeting progressed, a new plan emerged and Kennedy was slowly persuaded. The new plan called for

the President to ignore the latest message and instead to return to Khrushchev's earlier one. Kennedy was initially hesitant, feeling that Khrushchev would no longer accept the deal because a new one had been offered, but Llewellyn Thompson argued that he might accept it anyway.<sup>[80]</sup> White House Special Counsel and Adviser Ted Sorensen and Robert Kennedy left the meeting and returned 45 minutes later with a draft letter to this effect. The President made several changes, had it typed, and sent it.

After the EXCOMM meeting, a smaller meeting continued in the *Oval Office*. The group argued that the letter should be underscored with an oral message to Ambassador Dobrynin stating that if the missiles were not withdrawn, military action would be used to remove them. Dean Rusk added one proviso, that no part of the language of the deal would mention Turkey, but there would be an understanding that the missiles would be removed “voluntarily” in the immediate aftermath. The President agreed, and the message was sent.



October 29, 1962 EXCOMM meeting held in the White House Cabinet Room. President Kennedy, Robert McNamara and Dean Rusk.

At Dean Rusk's request, Fomin and Scali met again. Scali asked why the two letters from Khrushchev were so different, and Fomin claimed it was because of “poor communications.” Scali replied that the claim was not credible and shouted that he thought it was a “stinking double cross.” He went on to claim that an invasion was only hours away, at which point Fomin stated that a response to the US message was expected from Khrushchev shortly, and he urged Scali to tell the State Department that no treachery was intended. Scali said that he did not think anyone would believe him, but he agreed to deliver the message. The two went their separate ways, and Scali immediately typed out a memo for the EXCOMM.

Within the U.S. establishment, it was well understood that ignoring the second offer and returning to the first put Khrushchev in a terrible position. Military preparations continued, and all active duty Air Force personnel were recalled to their bases for possible action. Robert Kennedy later recalled the mood, “We had not abandoned all hope, but what hope there was now rested

with Khrushchev's revising his course within the next few hours. It was a hope, not an expectation. The expectation was military confrontation by Tuesday, and possibly tomorrow ..."

At 8:05 pm EDT, the letter drafted earlier in the day was delivered. The message read, "As I read your letter, the key elements of your proposals—which seem generally acceptable as I understand them—are as follows: 1) You would agree to remove these weapons systems from Cuba under appropriate United Nations observation and supervision; and undertake, with suitable safe-guards, to halt the further introduction of such weapon systems into Cuba. 2) We, on our part, would agree—upon the establishment of adequate arrangements through the United Nations, to ensure the carrying out and continuation of these commitments (a) to remove promptly the quarantine measures now in effect and (b) to give assurances against the invasion of Cuba." The letter was also released directly to the press to ensure it could not be "delayed."

With the letter delivered, a deal was on the table. However, as Robert Kennedy noted, there was little expectation it would be accepted. At 9:00 pm EDT, the EXCOMM met again to review the actions for the following day. Plans were drawn up for air strikes on the missile sites as well as other economic targets, notably petroleum storage. McNamara stated that they had to "have two things ready: a government for Cuba, because we're going to need one; and secondly, plans for how to respond to the Soviet Union in Europe, because sure as hell they're going to do something there."

At 12:12 am EDT, on October 27, the U.S. informed its NATO allies that "the situation is growing shorter ... the United States may find it necessary within a very short time in its interest and that of its fellow nations in the Western Hemisphere to take whatever military action may be necessary." To add to the concern, at 6 am the CIA reported that all missiles in Cuba were ready for action.



*A US Navy HSS-1 Seabat helicopter hovers over Soviet submarine B-59, forced to the surface by US Naval forces in the Caribbean near Cuba (October 28–29, 1962)*

Later that same day, what the White House later called "Black Saturday," the U.S. Navy dropped a series of "signaling depth charges" (practice depth charges the size of hand grenades<sup>[81]</sup>) on a Soviet submarine (B-59) at the blockade line, unaware that it was armed with a nuclear-tipped torpedo with orders that allowed it to be used if the submarine was "hulled" (a hole in the hull from depth charges or surface fire).<sup>[82]</sup> The decision to launch these required agreement from all three officers on board, but one of them, **Vasili Arkhipov**, objected and so the launch was narrowly averted.

On the same day a U.S. U-2 spy plane made an accidental, unauthorized ninety-minute overflight of the Soviet Union's far eastern coast.<sup>[83]</sup> The Soviets responded by scrambling MiG fighters from **Wrangel Island**; in turn the Americans launched F-102 fighters armed with nuclear air-to-air missiles over the Bering Sea.<sup>[84]</sup>

On October 27, Khrushchev also received a letter from Castro – what is now known as the Armageddon Letter (dated Oct. 26) – interpreted as urging the use of nuclear force in the event of an attack on Cuba.<sup>[85]</sup> "I believe the imperialists' aggressiveness is extremely dangerous and if they actually carry out the brutal act of invading Cuba in violation of international law and morality, that would be the moment to eliminate such danger forever through an act of clear legitimate defense, however harsh and terrible the solution would be," Castro wrote.<sup>[86]</sup>

## 9 Crisis ends

On October 27, after much deliberation between the Soviet Union and Kennedy's cabinet, Kennedy secretly agreed to remove all missiles set in southern Italy and in Turkey, the latter on the border of the Soviet Union, in exchange for Khrushchev removing all missiles in Cuba.<sup>[87]</sup> There is some dispute as to whether removing the missiles from Italy was part of the secret agreement, although Khrushchev wrote in his memoirs that it was; nevertheless, when the crisis had ended McNamara gave the order to dismantle the missiles in both Italy and Turkey.<sup>[88]</sup>

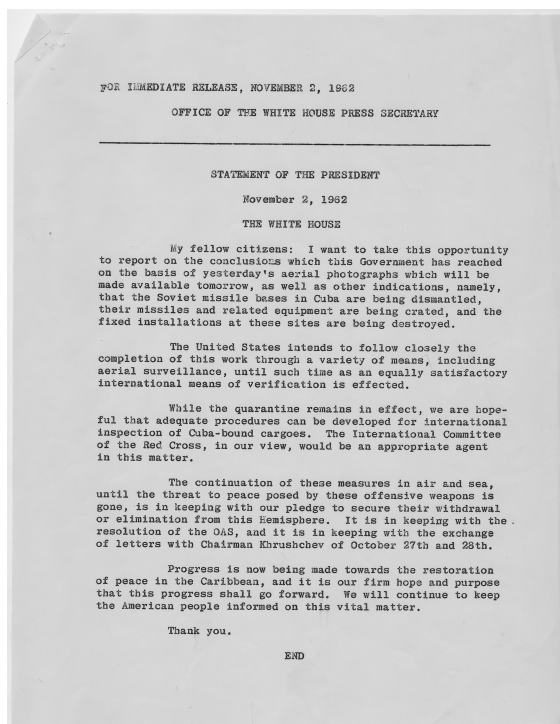
At 9:00 am EST, on October 28, a new message from Khrushchev was broadcast on Radio Moscow. Khrushchev stated that, "the Soviet government, in addition to previously issued instructions on the cessation of further work at the building sites for the weapons, has issued a new order on the dismantling of the weapons which you describe as 'offensive' and their crating and return to the Soviet Union."

Kennedy immediately responded, issuing a statement calling the letter "an important and constructive contribution to peace." He continued this with a formal letter:

I consider my letter to you of October twenty-seventh and your reply of today as firm undertakings on the part of both our govern-

ments which should be promptly carried out ... The US will make a statement in the framework of the Security Council in reference to Cuba as follows: it will declare that the United States of America will respect the inviolability of Cuban borders, its sovereignty, that it take the pledge not to interfere in internal affairs, not to intrude themselves and not to permit our territory to be used as a bridgehead for the invasion of Cuba, and will restrain those who would plan to carry an aggression against Cuba, either from US territory or from the territory of other countries neighboring to Cuba.<sup>[89]:103</sup>

Kennedy's planned statement would also contain suggestions he had received from his adviser, **Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.**, in a "Memorandum for the President" describing the "Post Mortem on Cuba."<sup>[90]</sup>



*Removal of Missiles in Cuba November 11, 1962 - NARA - 193868*

The US continued the blockade, and in the following days, aerial reconnaissance proved that the Soviets were making progress in removing the missile systems. The 42 missiles and their support equipment were loaded onto eight Soviet ships. On November 2, 1962, President Kennedy addressed the U.S. via radio and television broadcasts regarding the dismantlement process of the Soviet **R-12** missile bases located in the Caribbean region.<sup>[91]</sup> The ships left Cuba from November 5–9. The U.S. made a final visual check as each of the ships passed the blockade line. Further diplomatic efforts were required to remove the Soviet **IL-28** bombers, and they were loaded on three Soviet ships on December 5 and 6.

Concurrent with the Soviet commitment on the **IL-28**'s, the U.S. Government announced the end of the blockade effective at 6:45 pm EST on November 20, 1962.<sup>[45]</sup>

At the time when the Kennedy administration thought that the Cuban missile crisis was resolved, nuclear tactical rockets stayed in Cuba since they were not part of the Kennedy-Khrushchev understandings. However, the Soviets changed their minds, fearing possible future Cuban militant steps, and on November 22, 1962, the Soviet **Deputy Prime Minister Anastas Mikoyan** told Castro that those rockets with the nuclear warheads were being removed too.<sup>[11]</sup>

In his negotiations with the Soviet Ambassador **Anatoly Dobrynin**, Robert Kennedy informally proposed that the **Jupiter** missiles in **Turkey** would be removed "within a short time after this crisis was over."<sup>[92]:222</sup> The last US missiles were disassembled by April 24, 1963, and were flown out of Turkey soon after.<sup>[93]</sup>

The practical effect of this Kennedy-Khrushchev Pact was that it effectively strengthened Castro's position in Cuba, guaranteeing that the U.S. would not invade Cuba. It is possible that Khrushchev only placed the missiles in Cuba to get Kennedy to remove the missiles from Italy and Turkey and that the Soviets had no intention of resorting to nuclear war if they were out-gunned by the U.S.<sup>[94]</sup> Because the withdrawal of the **Jupiter** missiles from NATO bases in Southern Italy and Turkey was not made public at the time, Khrushchev appeared to have lost the conflict and become weakened. The perception was that Kennedy had won the contest between the super-powers and Khrushchev had been humiliated. This is not entirely the case as both Kennedy and Khrushchev took every step to avoid full conflict despite the pressures of their governments. Khrushchev held power for another two years.<sup>[89]:102–105</sup>

## 9.1 Aftermath



*The nuclear-armed Jupiter intermediate-range ballistic missile. The U.S. secretly agreed to withdraw these missiles from Italy and Turkey.*



The compromise embarrassed Khrushchev and the Soviet Union because the withdrawal of U.S. missiles from Italy and Turkey was a secret deal between Kennedy and Khrushchev. Khrushchev went to Kennedy thinking that the crisis was getting out of hand. The Soviets were seen as retreating from circumstances that they had started. Khrushchev's fall from power two years later was in part because of the *Politburo* embarrassment at both Khrushchev's eventual concessions to the U.S. and his ineptitude in precipitating the crisis in the first place. According to Dobrynin, the top Soviet leadership took the Cuban outcome as "a blow to its prestige bordering on humiliation."<sup>[95]</sup>

Cuba perceived the outcome as a partial betrayal by the Soviets, given that decisions on how to resolve the crisis had been made exclusively by Kennedy and Khrushchev. Castro was especially upset that certain issues of interest to Cuba, such as the status of the U.S. Naval Base in Guantánamo, were not addressed. This caused Cuban–Soviet relations to deteriorate for years to come.<sup>[96]:278</sup> On the other hand, Cuba continued to be protected from invasion.

Although General Curtis LeMay told the President that he considered the resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis the "greatest defeat in our history," his was a minority position.<sup>[38]:335</sup> He had pressed for an immediate invasion of Cuba as soon as the crisis began, and still favored invading Cuba even after the Soviets had withdrawn their missiles.<sup>[97]</sup> 25 years later, LeMay still believed that "We could have gotten not only the missiles out of Cuba, we could have gotten the Communists out of Cuba at that time."<sup>[66]</sup>

After the crisis the U.S. and the Soviet Union created the *Moscow–Washington hotline*, a direct communications link between Moscow and Washington, D.C. The purpose was to have a way that the leaders of the two Cold War countries could communicate directly to solve such a crisis. The world-wide US Forces DEFCON 3 status was returned to DEFCON 4 on November 20, 1962. U-2 pilot Major Anderson's body was returned to the U.S. and he was buried with full military honors in South Carolina. He was the first recipient of the newly created *Air Force Cross*, which was awarded posthumously.

Although Anderson was the only combatant fatality during the crisis, 11 crew members of three reconnaissance Boeing *RB-47 Stratojets* of the 55th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing were also killed in crashes during the period between September 27 and November 11, 1962.<sup>[98]</sup> Seven crew died when a *MATS* Boeing *C-135B Strato-lifter* delivering ammunition to Guantanamo Bay Naval Base stalled and crashed on approach on October 23.<sup>[99]</sup>

Critics including Seymour Melman<sup>[100]</sup> and Seymour Hersh<sup>[101]</sup> suggested that the Cuban Missile Crisis encouraged U.S. use of military means, such as in the *Vietnam War*. This Soviet–American confrontation was synchronous with the *Sino-Indian War*, dating from the

U.S.'s military blockade of Cuba; historians speculate that the Chinese attack against India for disputed land was meant to coincide with the Cuban Missile Crisis.<sup>[102]</sup>

## 9.2 Post-crisis revelations

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., a historian and adviser to President Kennedy, told *National Public Radio* in an interview on October 16, 2002, that Castro did not want the missiles, but that Khrushchev had pressured Castro to accept them. Castro was not completely happy with the idea but the Cuban National Directorate of the Revolution accepted them to protect Cuba against U.S. attack, and to aid its ally, the Soviet Union.<sup>[96]:272</sup> Schlesinger believed that when the missiles were withdrawn, Castro was angrier with Khrushchev than he was with Kennedy because Khrushchev had not consulted Castro before deciding to remove them.<sup>[note 2]</sup> Although Castro was infuriated by Khrushchev, he planned on striking the United States with remaining missiles immediately after the blockade was lifted.<sup>[96]:311</sup>

In early 1992, it was confirmed that Soviet forces in Cuba had, by the time the crisis broke, received tactical nuclear warheads for their artillery rockets and *Il-28 bombers*.<sup>[103]</sup> Castro stated that he would have recommended their use if the U.S. invaded despite knowing Cuba would be destroyed.<sup>[103]</sup>

Arguably the most dangerous moment in the crisis was only recognized during the Cuban Missile Crisis Havana conference in October 2002. Attended by many of the veterans of the crisis, they all learned that on October 27, 1962, the *USS Beale* had tracked and dropped signaling depth charges (the size of hand grenades) on the *B-59*, a Soviet Project 641 (NATO designation *Foxtrot*) submarine which, unknown to the US, was armed with a 15-kiloton nuclear torpedo. Running out of air, the Soviet submarine was surrounded by American warships and desperately needed to surface. An argument broke out among three officers on the *B-59*, including submarine captain Valentin Savitsky, political officer Ivan Semonovich Maslennikov, and Deputy brigade commander Captain 2nd rank (U.S. Navy Commander rank equivalent) Vasili Arkhipov. An exhausted Savitsky became furious and ordered that the nuclear torpedo on board be made combat ready. Accounts differ about whether Commander Arkhipov convinced Savitsky not to make the attack, or whether Savitsky himself finally concluded that the only reasonable choice left open to him was to come to the surface.<sup>[104]:303, 317</sup> During the conference Robert McNamara stated that nuclear war had come much closer than people had thought. Thomas Blanton, director of the National Security Archive, said, "A guy called Vasili Arkhipov saved the world."

Fifty years after the crisis, Graham Allison wrote:

Fifty years ago, the Cuban missile crisis

brought the world to the brink of nuclear disaster. During the standoff, US President John F. Kennedy thought the chance of escalation to war was “between 1 in 3 and even,” and what we have learned in later decades has done nothing to lengthen those odds. We now know, for example, that in addition to nuclear-armed ballistic missiles, the Soviet Union had deployed 100 tactical nuclear weapons to Cuba, and the local Soviet commander there could have launched these weapons without additional codes or commands from Moscow. The US air strike and invasion that were scheduled for the third week of the confrontation would likely have triggered a nuclear response against American ships and troops, and perhaps even Miami. The resulting war might have led to the deaths of 100 million Americans and over 100 million Russians.<sup>[105][106]</sup>

BBC journalist Joe Matthews published on October 13, 2012, the story behind the 100 tactical nuclear warheads mentioned by Graham Allison in the excerpt above.<sup>[107]</sup> Khrushchev feared that Castro’s hurt pride and widespread Cuban indignation over the concessions he had made to Kennedy might lead to a breakdown of the agreement between the Soviet Union and the U.S. In order to prevent this Khrushchev decided to make Cuba a special offer. The offer was to give Cuba more than 100 tactical nuclear weapons that had been shipped to Cuba along with the long-range missiles, but which crucially had passed completely under the radar of U.S. intelligence. Khrushchev concluded that because the Americans had not listed the missiles on their list of demands, the Soviet Union’s interests would be well served by keeping them in Cuba.<sup>[107]</sup>

Anastas Mikoyan was tasked with the negotiations with Castro over the missile transfer deal designed to prevent a breakdown in the relations between Cuba and the Soviet Union. While in Havana, Mikoyan witnessed the mood swings and paranoia of Castro, who was convinced that Moscow had made the agreement with the U.S. at the expense of Cuba’s defense. Mikoyan, on his own initiative, decided that Castro and his military not be given control of weapons with an explosive force equal to 100 Hiroshima-sized bombs under any circumstances. He defused the seemingly intractable situation, which risked re-escalating the crisis, on November 22, 1962. During a tense, four-hour meeting, Mikoyan convinced Castro that despite Moscow’s desire to help, it would be in breach of an unpublished Soviet law (which didn’t actually exist) to transfer the missiles permanently into Cuban hands and provide them with an independent nuclear deterrent. Castro was forced to give way and – much to the relief of Khrushchev and the whole Soviet government – the tactical nuclear weapons were crated and returned by sea to the Soviet Union during December 1962.<sup>[107]</sup>

## 10 See also

- [Bomber gap](#)
- [Cuba–Soviet Union relations](#)
- [Norwegian rocket incident](#)
- [Nuclear disarmament](#)
- [Soviet Navy](#)

### 10.1 Media

(Listed chronologically)

- *Thirteen Days*, Robert F. Kennedy’s account of the crisis, released in 1969
- *Topaz*, 1969 film by Alfred Hitchcock based on the 1967 novel by Leon Uris, set during the run-up to the crisis
- *The Missiles of October*, 1974 TV docudrama about the crisis
- *The World Next Door*, 1990 novel by Brad Ferguson, set in this period
- *Quantum Leap*, 1991 TV Show, (Season 3 Episode, Nuclear Family – October 26, 1962), Sam must deal with the panic associated with the Cuban Missile Crisis as a Florida fallout shelter salesman.
- *Matinee*, 1993 film set in Key West, Florida during the Cuban Missile Crisis
- The short film *Symposium on Intelligence and the Cuban Missile Crisis 1962* is available for free download at the [Internet Archive](#)
- *seaQuest 2032*, 1995 TV Show, (Season 3 Episode, “Second Chance”), *seaQuest* inadvertently travels back to 1962 where their presence accidentally interferes with the Cuban Missile Crisis
- *Blast from the Past* (film), 1999 American romantic comedy film, set in this period
- *Resurrection Day*, 1999 alternate history novel written by Brendan DuBois, set in this period
- *Thirteen Days* (film), 2000 docudrama directed by Roger Donaldson about the crisis
- *The Fog of War*, 2003 American documentary film about the life and times of former US Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara directed by Errol Morris, which won that years’ Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature.

- *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater*, 2004 video game directed by Hideo Kojima, features a fictional conflict inspired by the Cuban Missile Crisis
- “Meditations in an Emergency”, the last episode of season 2 of the television series *Mad Men* takes place during the crisis
- *Ur* (novella), a 2009 short novel by Stephen King released for the *Amazon Kindle*, is about three men who discover through a magic Kindle that in another “Ur”, the Cuban Missile Crisis escalated into a nuclear war and ended that “Ur”.
- *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, 2010 video game, set during and after the Cuban Missile Crisis.
- *The Kennedys* (TV miniseries), 2011 production chronicling the lives of the Kennedy family, including a dramatization of the crisis
- *X-Men: First Class*, 2011 superhero film set during the Cuban Missile Crisis
- *Castro’s Bomb*, 2011 alternate history ebook written by Robert Conroy that depicts Castro taking control of Soviet nuclear weapons on Cuba. A fierce battle of Guantanamo Bay is among the many plots within the novel.
- *What If...? Armageddon 1962*, 2013 mockumentary, Lyndon B. Johnson, not Kennedy (a real would-be assassin had succeeded), is President in October 1962, and his handling of the crisis brings about a nuclear exchange.

## 11 Notes

- [1] McNamara mistakenly dates the shooting down of USAF Major Rudolf Anderson’s U-2 on October 26.
- [2] In his biography, Castro does not compare his feelings for either leader at that moment, however, he makes it clear that he was angry with Khrushchev for failing to consult with him. (Ramonet 1978)

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- Document-Britain's Cuban
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- The short film *Symposium on Intelligence and the Cuban Missile Crisis 1962* (1992) is available for free download at the Internet Archive
- The Woodrow Wilson Center's Digital Archive has a collection of primary source archival documents on the Cuban Missile Crisis.
- EDSITEment lesson plan Cuban Missile Crisis
- EDSITEment Cuban Missile Crisis Interactive
- Cuban Missile Crisis: Three Men Go To War Documentary produced by PBS
- *The Armageddon Letters*, a transmedia storytelling of the crisis with animated short films and other digital content
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## 14 External links

- “Cuban Missile Crisis”, 2012, Harvard Kennedy School, Belfer Center's 50th anniversary of the crisis – commemorative website
- Cuban Missile Crisis: Операция Анадырь (Operation Anadyr) on Flickr
- Cuban Missile Crisis and the Fallout from the Dean Peter Krogh Foreign Affairs Digital Archives
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## 15 Text and image sources, contributors, and licenses

### 15.1 Text

- Cuban Missile Crisis** *Source:* [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuban\\_Missile\\_Crisis?oldid=667086652](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuban_Missile_Crisis?oldid=667086652) *Contributors:* TwoOneTwo, Kpjas, Derek Ross, WojPob, Mav, The Anome, Taw, Jeronimo, Guppie, Ed Poor, Enchanter, Karen Johnson, William Avery, Maury Markowitz, Mswake, AdamRetchless, Hotlorp, Nknight, Leandrod, Stevertigo, Edward, Ubiquity, Nommonomanac, D, Michael Hardy, TimShell, Kwertii, MartinHarper, Tannin, Ixfd64, Delirium, (. 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