**The Cuban Missile Crisis**

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The Cuban Missile Crisis was one of the few times that the ‘rules’ of the [Cold War](https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/coldwar.htm)were nearly forgotten. [Berlin](https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/berlin_april_1945.htm), [Korea](https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/korea.htm), [Hungary](https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/hungarian_uprising_1956.htm) and [Suez](https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/causes_suez-crisis-1956.htm) – the ‘rules’ had been followed. But in Cuba this broke down and the Cuban Missile Crisis was the only time when [‘hot war’](https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/what%20was%20the%20cold%20war.htm) could have broken out.

In the 1950’s Cuba was lead by a right-wing dictator called Fulgencio Batista. He dealt with opponents with extreme harshness and while a few prospered under his regime, many Cubans were very poor. He was not tolerant of communists and received the support of the Americans. Batista’s sole support within Cuba came from the army which was equipped by the Americans.

For some years, Havana, the capital of Cuba, had been the play ground of the rich from America. They would come to the island at the weekend to gamble – illegal in all parts of America except for Las Vegas at this time. Havana was considered more convenient for those living in the southern states of America. Large sums of money were spent but most was creamed off by Batista and his henchmen. Over $200 million was actually invested in Cuba itself. For all the money coming into Cuba, the poor remained very poor.

Some young Cubans, who had read about socialism and what it offered the poor, reacted against Batista’s corruption and oppression. Their first attempt to overthrow the government was a failure and the small group of rebels fled to the Sierra Mastra – a remote area of Cuba. Here they sharpened their tactics and used the most valuable weapon they had; educating the poor in their ways. They used the tactics of Mao Tse Tung by actually helping out the poverty stricken peasants on their land. These people had been used to abuse for years and here were young educated people actually helping them for free.

It was only a matter of time before the ‘message’ spread to other areas of Cuba and by 1959, the rebels lead by **Fidel Castro** felt strong enough to overthrow the government of Batista. This they easily achieved as they were aided by popular support.

Castro’s first task was to punish those who had abused the poor. Those found guilty were executed. He then nationalised all American firms in Cuba so that their wealth would be invested in Cuba itself rather than leave the island and go to multi-nationals in America. The money made from this measure was primarily spent on a national health system so that all medical treatment was free and on education. Castro also introduced major land reforms.

Some Cubans fled and went to live in Florida. These Cuban exiles were treated by some Americans as heroes and brought with them stories that outraged the American press. Most were false or exaggerated but this was ignored. America reacted by refusing to do any trade with Cuba whatsoever. This trade embargo would have bankrupted the island as her biggest money earner was exporting sugar to America. Up to this time, there is little evidence that Castro or Cuba had any real intention of teaming up with communist Russia. In 1960, Castro referred to himself as a socialist – not a communist.

However, the trade embargo brought the two together as Russia stepped in to buy Cuba’s sugar and other exports. The actions of America appear to have driven Castro into the support offered by Russia.

Now with a supporter of communism only 50 miles from Florida, the new American president – J F Kennedy – decided to give support to the anti-Castro Cubans who had gone to Florida. With CIA funding, a group of armed Cuban exiles tried to land in Cuba at the **Bay of Pigs** in 1961 with the sole intention of overthrowing the Castro government. It proved a fiasco – jeeps landed without fuel; no maps of the island being issued; Cuban exiles firing on Cuban exiles. But to Castro, this episode showed him where America stood in relations to Cuba. Kennedy did not apologise for America’s involvement in this event

After the fiasco of the Bay of Pigs episode, Cuba obviously felt threatened by her massively powerful neighbour. Castro started to look for a closer relationship with Russia who could offer her protection.

In Sept 1962, anti-Castro Cuban refugees reported to the CIA that there was a build-up of Russian bases in Cuba.

On **October 16th 1962**, a U2 spy plane took high level photographs over Cuba and the resulting photographic prints revealed what was obviously a base for missiles. These were later identified as being inter-mediate range missiles capable of carrying a nuclear payload.

On **October 17th 1962** the CIA reported to the president that the 16 to 32 missiles identified could kill 80 million Americans as they had a range of 2000 miles with a flight time of just 17 minutes. While this was happening USA Intelligence reported that over 20 Russian ships were heading for Cuba with crates on board that obviously contained more missiles. They were not difficult to detect as they were being carried on deck in full view of US observer planes.

On **October 25th 1962** more U2 photographs showed that the bases would be fully operational in a few days – at the latest by the end of October.

The threat to USA was very obvious. On October 27th the matter was made worse when a U2 was shot down by a Russian missile and the pilot killed.

In total, the Russians sent to Cuba 42 medium range missiles and 24 intermediate range missiles – which had a capability of 3500 miles. 22,000 Russian troops and technicians accompanied the missiles.

What should Kennedy do ?

He had already made a major mistake with the Bay of Pigs affair – now he could afford no such errors as the consequences would be disastrous for everyone.

He had essentially five choices…………

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| **1** | **He could do nothing and ignore the missiles. This would have been political suicide and if the Russians had seen this as weakness on his part, they could have taken advantage of it.** |
| **2** | **He could order a full scale military invasion of Cuba. This could lead to heavy US casualties and that would be politically damaging. It would almost certainly involve Russian casualties which could escalate the problem. The American chiefs-of-staff were not convinced that it would be successful either especially as the offending missile bases were in remote areas and most were well inland.** |
| **3** | **He could order an air strike against the missile bases only. The problem again would be Russian casualties and the Air Force was not sure it could deliver pin-point bombing raids on what were relatively small targets.** |
| **4** | **He could call on the Russians to remove the missiles explaining the damage their presence was doing to Russian/American relations. However, the Russians were highly unlikely to listen to a ‘polite’ request especially as they even refused to recognise the existence of the missiles at the United Nations emergency meeting on the matter.** |
| **5** | **He could put a naval blockade around the island – quarantine it – and not allow any more Russian ships to enter Cuba. This would still leave missiles on Cuba but the negotiations would continue in the background while publically Kennedy would be seen to be doing something specific.** |

Following American protests, Khruschev, the Russian leader, sent Kennedy two letters both of which sent conflicting messages.

One letter said that the missiles would be withdrawn if Kennedy promised not to invade Cuba.

The other was more threatening claiming that as USA had bases actually in Turkey, why should not the USSR have bases in Cuba especially as the people of Cuba wanted them ? Khruschev said that if USA removed her missiles from Turkey then USSR would remove them from Cuba. These messages left Kennedy confused.

Kennedy decided to act on Khruschev`s first letter and offered the following :

USSR was to remove its missiles from Cuba and USA was to end Cuba`s quarantine and to give out a promise not to invade Cuba.

If the USSR did not respond by October 29th, USA would launch a military invasion of Cuba. On October 28th, Khruschev replied that the USSR would remove the missiles. Within 2 months they were gone. The Cuban Missile Crisis was over but it had taken the world to the brink of nuclear war.

The end result of the crisis was seen as a huge success for Kennedy but contributed to the downfall of Khrushchev in Russia. The one positive thing to come out of the crisis was the creation of a hot-line between Moscow and Washington to allow for easier communication between the two nations leaders at a time of crisis.

This is one of the few examples of the [Cold War](https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/coldwar.htm) where the two principle countries actually got involved themselves against the other. Up to 1962, other nations fought out the [Cold War](https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/coldwar.htm) on their behalf (USA + China in [Korea](https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/korean_war.htm); USA + North Vietnamese in the [Vietnam War](https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/vietnam_war.htm) etc.) as each knew that a conflict between the two would have the potential to be horrific. The lessons learned from Cuba ensured that neither would push each to the brink again and that the ‘rules’ of the [Cold War](https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/coldwar.htm) would be adhered to.

 Just one year later in 1963, both nations signed the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. This treaty stated that neither would explode nuclear bombs during testing in the atmosphere. This was a popular treaty in America and a sign that something positive had come out of the Cuban Crisis – that of a greater respect for each other.