

## Introduction: October 16, 1962

On October 16, 1962, President John F. Kennedy confronted an earth-shattering revelation: the Soviet Union had placed missiles capable of carrying nuclear weapons on the island of Cuba, just ninety miles from the United States.

Tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States had been high since the late 1940s. For every U.S. president since Truman, this ideological standoff—known as the Cold War—had shaped foreign and domestic policy. Kennedy had worried for months about Soviet intentions toward West Berlin and in Southeast Asia, but this was much closer to home. Kennedy realized that, if launched, these missiles could hit the United States in minutes. The Cold War seemed about to boil over.

Cuba presented a thorny problem for the president. Cuba's leader, Fidel Castro, welcomed in the United States with open arms just a few years before, had recently aligned himself with the Soviet Union.

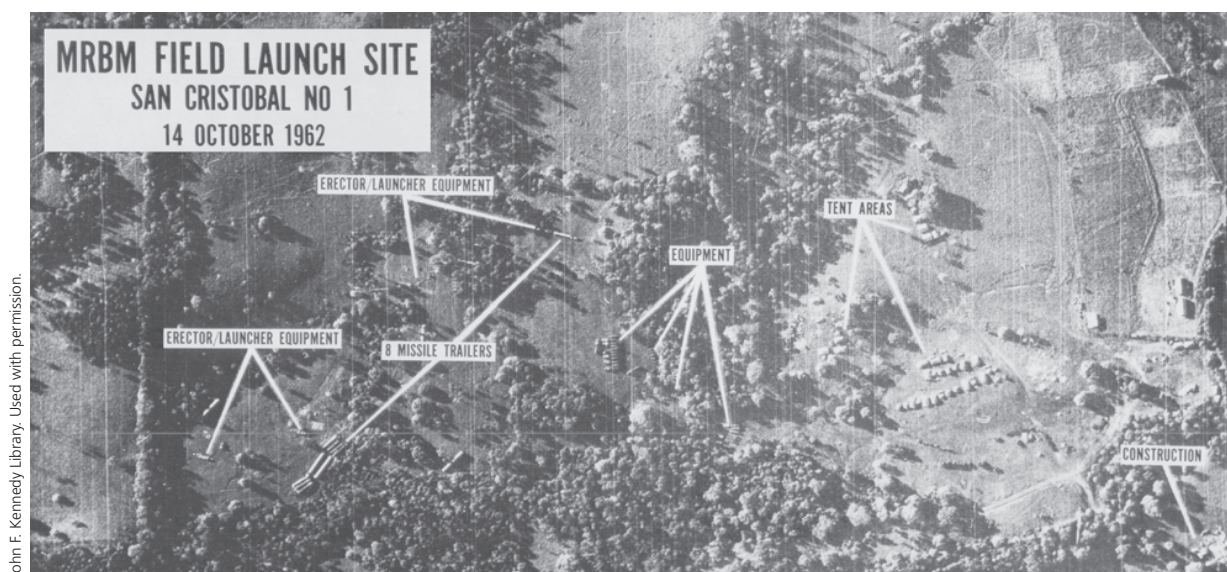
Many Americans felt that Castro's revolution was a rejection of the U.S. effort to bring American skills and values to the region. The island had become a flashpoint for U.S. anxiety about the world. In an attempt to overthrow Castro, Kennedy had authorized

a CIA-sponsored invasion of Cuba in 1961. Known as the Bay of Pigs invasion, it was a disastrous failure.

The president had met with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev the previous year in an effort to improve relations between the two nuclear powers but with little success. Khrushchev, convinced that the Soviet Union was a growing power and emboldened by advances in Soviet rocket technology, saw little reason for compromise.

Nonetheless, Khrushchev had promised to do nothing that might affect the upcoming U.S. elections. Furthermore, he had promised not to place offensive weapons in Cuba. Now Kennedy wondered what Khrushchev was doing and how he should respond.

In these readings, you will explore the circumstances that brought the United States to the brink of nuclear war in 1962. You will explore the history of U.S. relations with Cuba—the country to challenge U.S. domination of the Caribbean and Central America most boldly. You will then grapple with the same question President Kennedy pondered: how should the United States respond to the Soviet missiles in Cuba? An epilogue reviews the outcome of the missile crisis.



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U.S. experts first learned of Soviet missile installations in Cuba by examining this reconnaissance photograph.