

October 1962: The Moment of Decision

On October 14, 1962, an American U-2 reconnaissance aircraft flew over the province of San Cristobal in Cuba on a routine mission to gather data. The pictures the aircraft took of the ground, however, disclosed developments that were far from routine. The photos revealed Soviet efforts to install approximately forty nuclear missiles, each capable of devastating an American city.

Since Cuban leader Fidel Castro's first appeals to Moscow in 1960, U.S. officials had repeatedly warned the Soviets against attempting to put missiles in Cuba. The Soviets had assured the United States that they had no intention of giving the Cubans nuclear missiles. They pledged that Cuba would receive only non-nuclear weapons to defend the island from attack.

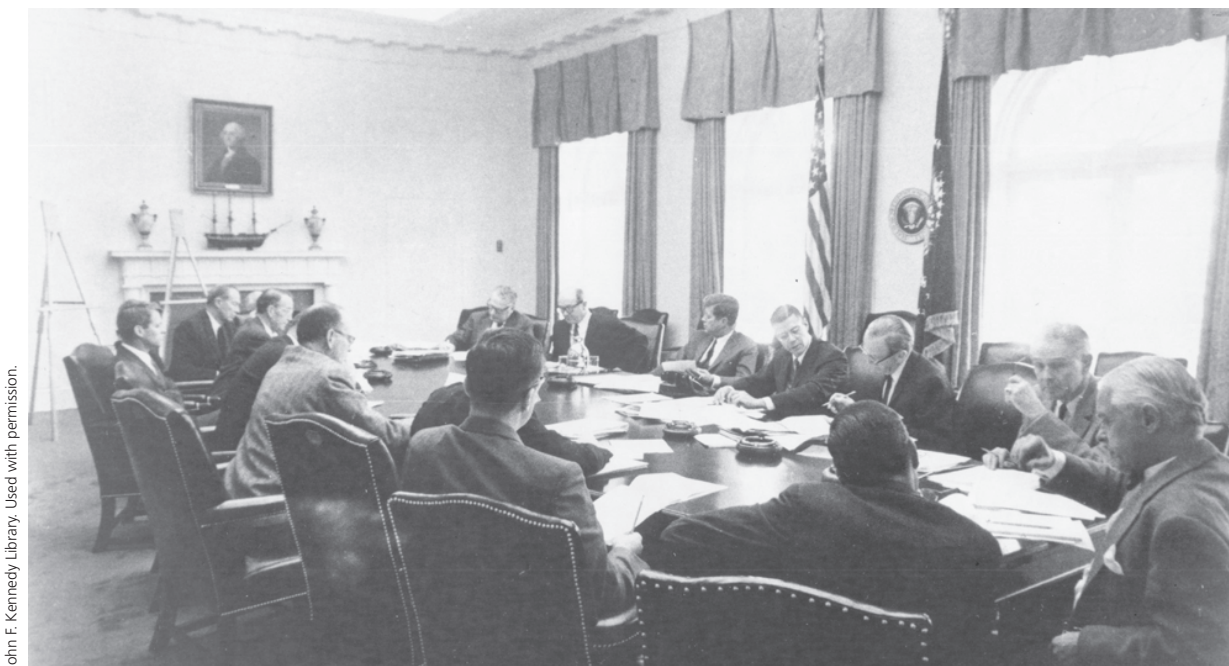
“There is no need for the Soviet Union to shift its weapons for the repulsion of aggression, for a retaliatory blow, to any other country, for instance Cuba. Our nuclear weapons are so

powerful in their explosive force and the Soviet Union has such powerful rockets to carry these nuclear warheads, that there is no need to search for sites for them beyond the boundaries of the Soviet Union.”

—TASS [Official press agency of the USSR]
September 11, 1962

The discovery of evidence that nuclear missiles had been sent to Cuba forced U.S. leaders to respond. The crisis that began when the reconnaissance photos were examined on October 15 was the most dangerous confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States of the fifteen-year-old Cold War.

Today, it is known to Americans as “the Cuban missile crisis,” to Soviets as “the Caribbean crisis,” and to Cubans as “the October crisis.” At no other time in history was U.S. policy in the Caribbean and Central America so dangerously entangled with U.S.-Soviet relations.



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President Kennedy leads a session of ExComm during the missile crisis.

Kennedy's Critical Concerns

West Berlin and the Crisis

In 1958, the Soviet Union demanded a resolution to the divided status of Berlin. The Soviets argued that Berlin was in their occupation zone of Germany and should fall completely under their control. This prompted hundreds of thousands of East Germans to flee to the West through Berlin. To stem the flow, the Soviets put up a wall in August 1961 between the two halves of the city to keep East Germans from fleeing to West Germany.

During the missile crisis, many U.S. policymakers feared that Berlin again would become a point of conflict. They thought that the Soviets might demand that the United States leave Berlin in exchange for removing their missiles from Cuba. Another possibility was that the Soviets would counter a U.S. attack on Cuba with an attack on West Berlin, all the more likely considering that Soviet forces already surrounded the city. Such a move could have resulted in nuclear conflict because the United States had pledged to use nuclear weapons to defend West Germany and other NATO countries.

Jupiter Missiles

At the time of the missile crisis, the Soviet Union had many more troops and non-nuclear weapons in Europe than the United States and its NATO allies. The United States, however, had a greater nuclear capacity and depended on nuclear weapons to deter the Soviets from attacking U.S. allies. The United States had installed Jupiter missiles in Turkey to protect the southern European members of NATO. By 1962, these missiles were outmoded and vulnerable to Soviet attack. In response, the United States had developed the Polaris submarine, which carried nuclear missiles. Traveling deep underwater, the submarine was very difficult to destroy. President Kennedy made plans in 1961 to add a Polaris submarine to the U.S. Mediterranean fleet and had scheduled the removal of the old Jupiter missiles.



Berlin, Germany October 1961: U.S. and Soviet tanks stare each other down across Checkpoint Charlie (a crossing point between the U.S. and Soviet sectors.) The United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France each occupied sectors of Berlin after defeating Germany in World War II.

AP Photo/Kreusch. Used with permission.

What did U.S. leaders think Soviet intentions were?

When U.S. leaders discovered that the Soviets were installing nuclear missiles in Cuba, they were stunned. No one was sure of Khrushchev or Castro's intentions. Would the nuclear missiles be used to threaten Cuba's

Latin American neighbors, or even intimidate the United States? Did the communist leaders believe that the United States would not oppose their plan? In October 1962, Americans did not know the answers to these questions.

Theodore Sorensen, an adviser to Kennedy, remembers that the president and his inner

circle simply did not know what Khrushchev's motives were.

“The only honest answer I have is, ‘I don’t know now, and I didn’t know then.’ None of us knew. We could only speculate about what Khrushchev was up to.”

—Theodore Sorensen

Khrushchev's motives aside, the White House was shocked that the Soviets had ignored U.S. warnings against putting missiles in Cuba. President Kennedy was especially indignant at the secrecy surrounding the Soviet operation. Kennedy administration officials recognized that members of Congress and the American media would press for a strong U.S. response.

Why was the Kennedy administration concerned about the missiles?

In the White House, there was little disagreement that nuclear missiles in Cuba would pose a grave threat to U.S. security. For the first time, American territory would be highly vulnerable to Soviet nuclear attack. From the U.S. perspective, the question was not whether

the missiles should be removed but how.

President Kennedy and his advisers were particularly concerned about the operational status of the missiles in Cuba. The original U-2 reconnaissance photos had shown that the missiles and their silos were not yet ready for use. Kennedy, however, was uncertain of the progress being made on the missile bases. As far as the president and his advisers were concerned, they were maneuvering in a minefield.

Initially, President Kennedy and his advisers decided to keep their knowledge of the missiles secret from the Soviets and the American public. On October 16, the president called together his closest and most trusted advisers to help him manage the crisis. This group was the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, or “ExComm.”

President Kennedy and ExComm met to consider the options for removing the Soviet missiles from Cuba. Over the next four days, the discussion produced three distinct choices for U.S. action, ranging from the purely diplomatic to a full-scale military assault. Each of the three strategies had supporters within ExComm and President Kennedy weighed each carefully.