



The Cold War

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President John F. Kennedy, October 29, 1962.

October 22-28, 1962: Cuban Missile Crisis

At the height of the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union risked nuclear confrontation in an event known as the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Locale: Washington, D.C.; Moscow, Soviet Union; Cuba

Categories: Diplomacy and international relations; military history; government and politics

Key Figures

McGeorge Bundy (1919-1996), special assistant to President Kennedy

Fidel Castro (b. 1926 or 1927), revolutionary leader of Cuba

Anatoly Fyodorovich Dobrynin (b. 1919), Soviet ambassador to the United States

Alexander Feklisov (Alexander Fomin; b. 1914), official at the Soviet embassy in Washington, D.C.

Kenneth B. Keating (1900-1975), senator from New York

John F. Kennedy (1917-1963), president of the United States, 1961-1963

Robert F. Kennedy (1925-1968), U.S. attorney general

Nikita S. Khrushchev (1894-1971), premier of the Soviet Union and first secretary of the Communist Party

Robert McNamara (b. 1916), U.S. secretary of defense

Dean Rusk (1909-1994), U.S. secretary of state

John Scali (1918-1995), diplomatic correspondent with the American Broadcasting Company

Summary of Event

When Fidel Castro's revolutionary July 26 Movement assumed power in Cuba in 1959, it marked the end of U.S. political and economic dominance over the island. Ever since the late nineteenth century, the United States, supported by loyal Cuban

politicians, had enjoyed control over all Cuba's commerce and industry. Castro, however, refused to adhere to U.S. interests, and as a result, the United States attempted to overthrow Castro's government through the use of covert military operations and an economic blockade.

In 1960, President Dwight D. Eisenhower and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) began organizing and training anti-Castro Cuban exiles for a potential invasion. When President John F. Kennedy entered the White House in 1961, he agreed to continue this program, and in April, more than fourteen hundred commandos landed at the Bay of Pigs. U.S. experts believed that the people would rise up and revolt against Castro during this assault, but Castro easily quashed this rebellion. Afterward, Kennedy hatched several assassination plots against Castro, and he sanctioned the CIA to conduct sabotage raids upon Cuban sugarcane fields, railroad bridges, and oil tanks through Project MONGOOSE.

All of these attacks, however, backfired. Threatened with continuous military invasions and the loss of trade, Castro turned toward the Soviet Union for support. He declared himself a Marxist-Leninist in 1961, and, afterward, Soviet influence substantially increased. By 1962, the Soviet Union had stationed several military advisers in Cuba, and Kennedy feared that communist influence ultimately could undermine U.S. hegemony in Latin America if this relationship continued to grow.

In October, 1962, Senator Kenneth B. Keating of New York startled the United States by alleging that offensive missile bases were under construction in Cuba. Keating did not reveal the source of his information, but a flight by a U.S. U-2 reconnaissance airplane on October 14 substantiated his charges. Long-range nuclear missiles, which had begun arriving in Cuban ports from Russia in September, were being installed at San Cristobal on the western part of the island. An international crisis of potentially catastrophic proportions threatened the safety of the world.

After President Kennedy viewed the U-2 photos on October 16, he called his key military and political advisers to the White House. The initial discussion centered on the issue of whether the missiles were fully armed and ready to fire. After concluding that the United States still had time before the Soviets attained nuclear readiness on Cuba, the president and his executive committee (Ex Comm) discussed various options. General Maxwell Taylor of the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommended an immediate air strike. Others, including Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and McGeorge Bundy, the president's special assistant for national security affairs, suggested that the president resort to diplomacy rather than war.

By Thursday, October 18, a consensus had emerged from the discussions, and the next day, the president indicated that he favored a naval blockade as the first step. He also decided that he would announce his decision to the U.S. people on the evening of Monday, October 22. At 5:00 p.m., he briefed congressional leaders. An hour later, Soviet ambassador Anatoly Fyodorovich Dobrynin was ushered into the office of Secretary of State Dean Rusk, where he was handed a copy of Kennedy's speech. At 7:00 p.m., the president spoke over nationwide television and radio.

The president then outlined the initial steps the United States would take to deal with the situation: a quarantine on offensive military equipment being shipped to Cuba;