

The Cuban Missile Crisis, October 1962

By U.S. State Department, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.30.16

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TOP: A briefing is given to President John F. Kennedy (center) at the Cape Canaveral Missile Test Annex in Florida, September 11, 1962, at the height of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Also seen are Vice President Lyndon Johnson (second from left) and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara (second from right). Photo: NASA. BOTTOM: Distances of major cities from Cuba from a newspaper during the crisis. Map courtesy of Getty Images.

Editor's Note: The United States and the Soviet Union fought together against Germany during World War II. But in 1947, they became enemies in a Cold War. This was not a "hot" war where weapons were fired at each other. It was a "cold" war filled with threats and challenges. The Soviet Union was communist and tried to spread communism around the world. Under Soviet communism, the government owned everything and people had fewer

rights. Capitalism in the United States allowed for owning private property and democracy gave people more rights. The United States and the Soviet Union competed for more power in countries all over the world including in Latin America — leading to a showdown in Cuba.

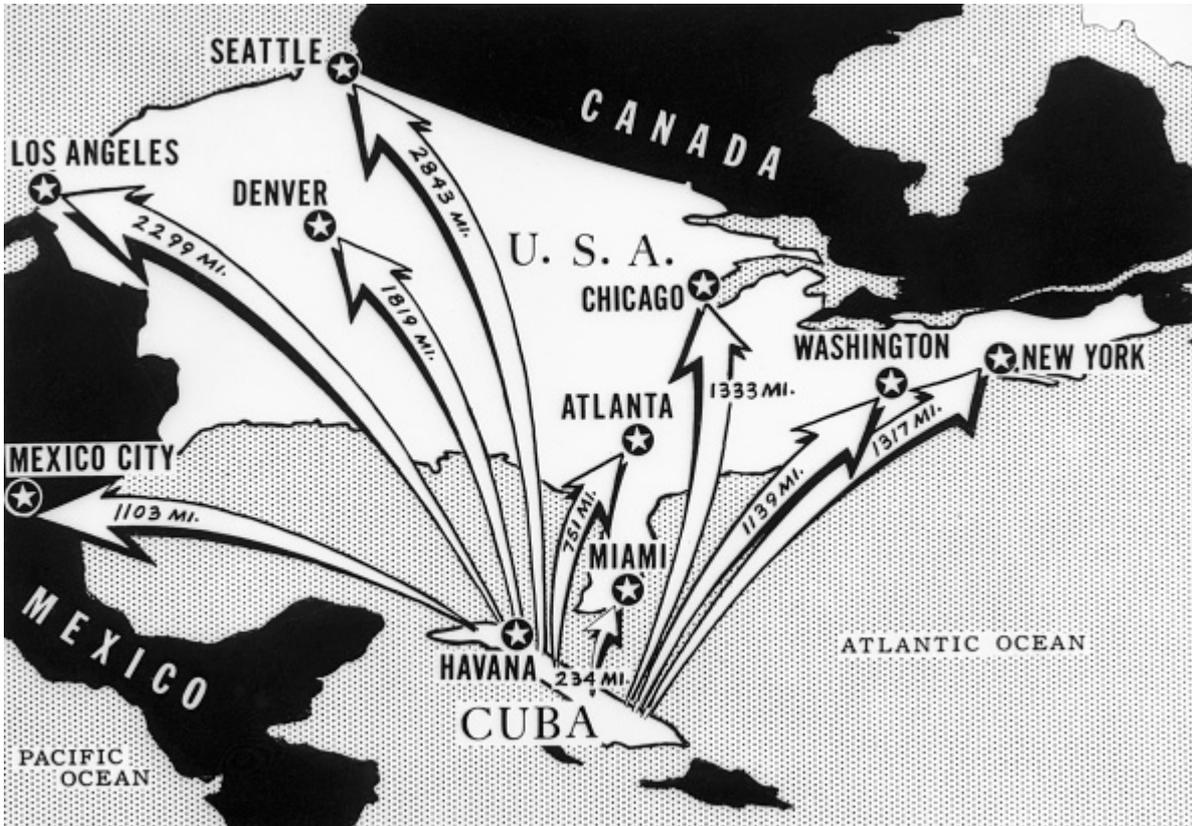
Closest to nuclear war

The Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 was the moment in the Cold War when the United States and the Soviet Union came closest to nuclear war. The crisis was unique in several ways. There were many miscalculations and secret communications and miscommunications. However, the final decisions came mostly from leaders at the White House and at the Kremlin in Moscow.

In April 1962, the U.S had tried to invade Cuba during the Bay of Pigs invasion. It failed, and did not drive Cuban premier Fidel Castro from power in Cuba. Afterward, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev reached a secret agreement with Castro. Khrushchev decided to place Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba to stop any future invasion attempt. Construction began, and the U.S. soon discovered that Soviet bombers and other weapons were being brought into Cuba. On September 4, 1962, President Kennedy issued a public warning against these actions. Five weeks later, on October 14, a U.S. U-2 spy aircraft flying above Cuba took pictures clearly showing that ballistic nuclear missiles sites were being built. The pictures were brought to the White House the next day and the Cuban Missile Crisis began.

Send warnings to Cuba

President Kennedy had meetings at the White House. Some of his advisers wanted an air strike to destroy the missile sites, followed by a U.S. invasion of Cuba. Other Kennedy advisers wanted just to send warnings to Cuba and the Soviet Union. The president decided to order that Soviet ships would not be allowed to bring weapons to Cuba.



On October 22, Kennedy sent a letter to Khrushchev demanding that all Soviet weapons be taken out of Cuba.

The president also went on television that evening to inform Americans of the developments in Cuba. The message sounded like the 1823 Monroe Doctrine that warned countries to stay out of North and South America: "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."

Took a dramatic turn

On October 24, Khrushchev answered Kennedy and said that Soviet ships would keep coming to Cuba. However, on October 24 and 25, some Soviet ships turned back from entering Cuba. Others were stopped by U.S. Navy ships and searched, but no weapons were found. Meanwhile, more U-2 flights over Cuba showed the Soviet missile sites were almost ready. The U.S. was moving closer to war.

On October 26, however, the crisis took a dramatic turn. ABC News correspondent John Scali reported to the White House that a Soviet agent told him that the Soviets would remove their missiles from Cuba if the U.S. promised not to invade the island. That night Khrushchev sent Kennedy a message. saying that he was worried about a nuclear war. It was like the solution Scali had reported. Khrushchev wrote, "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."

However, the next day, October 27, Khrushchev sent another message, this time demanding that the U.S. remove U.S. missiles from Turkey. That same day, a U.S. U-2 jet was shot down over Cuba and the pilot was killed. Kennedy and his advisers now prepared for an attack on Cuba. That night Kennedy decided to ignore the second message from Khrushchev and only respond to the first one. He proposed steps for the removal of Soviet missiles from Cuba under supervision of the United Nations. He also promised that the United States would not attack Cuba.

The crisis was over

Attorney General Robert Kennedy then met secretly with the Soviet ambassador to the United States. He said the United States was planning to remove U.S. missiles from Turkey. The next morning, October 28, Khrushchev announced that Soviet missiles would be removed from Cuba.

The crisis was over, and U.S. missiles were removed from Turkey in 1963.

The Cuban missile crisis strengthened Kennedy's image around the world. It also led to two other important changes that had an effect on the Cold War. First, because Kennedy and Khrushchev and their people had trouble clearly understanding what each other wanted during the crisis, a direct telephone link between the White House and the Kremlin was established; it became known as the "Hotline." Second, having been so close to a nuclear war, both superpowers began to talk about reducing the number of nuclear weapons.

Quiz

- 1 Which of the following excerpts from the article BEST explains the main idea about the Cuban Missile Crisis?
- (A) The Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 was the moment in the Cold War when the United States and the Soviet Union came closest to nuclear war. The crisis was unique in several ways.
 - (B) In April 1962, the U.S had tried to invade Cuba during the Bay of Pigs invasion. It failed, and did not drive Cuban premier Fidel Castro from power in Cuba.
 - (C) Other Kennedy advisers wanted just to send warnings to Cuba and the Soviet Union. The president decided to order that Soviet ships would not be allowed to bring weapons to Cuba.
 - (D) He proposed steps for the removal of Soviet missiles from Cuba under supervision of the United Nations. He also promised that the United States would not attack Cuba.

- 2 Read the first paragraph of the section "Took a dramatic turn."

On October 24, Khrushchev answered Kennedy and said that Soviet ships would keep coming to Cuba. However, on October 24 and 25, some Soviet ships turned back from entering Cuba. Others were stopped by U.S. Navy ships and searched, but no weapons were found. Meanwhile, more U-2 flights over Cuba showed the Soviet missile sites were almost ready. The U.S. was moving closer to war.

How does this paragraph reflect a CENTRAL idea of the article?

- (A) it shows how the Soviet Union could not be trusted to follow through on their promises
- (B) it shows why nuclear war is needed to solve disputes between leaders
- (C) it shows the mounting tension caused by miscommunication and miscalculation
- (D) it shows the way the Soviet Union responded to Kennedy's efforts to avoid nuclear war

- 3 Based on the article, which statement BEST expresses the way Khrushchev and Kennedy felt about nuclear weapons?
- (A) They are a necessary part of war and production should continue.
 - (B) They should never be produced again and all existing weapons should be destroyed.
 - (C) They should be used on other countries that possess nuclear weapons.
 - (D) They are a drastic measure and production of nuclear weapons should be reduced.
- 4 Why is ABC News correspondent John Scali mentioned in the article?
- (A) He shows the important role the media played in resolving the Cuban Missile Crisis.
 - (B) He gives an important example of how communication between the United States and the Soviet Union was not clear.
 - (C) He was an important messenger to the president and conveyed Khrushchev's views on nuclear war.
 - (D) He was responsible for improving communication between the Soviets and the United States during the crisis.