

The Cuban Missile Crisis: Considering Its Place in Cold War History



THE CHOICES PROGRAM

Explore the Past... Shape the Future

History and Current Issues for the Classroom

WATSON INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
BROWN UNIVERSITY WWW.CHOICES.EDU

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The Choices for the 21st Century Education Program develops curricula on current and historical international issues and offers workshops, institutes, and in-service programs for high school teachers. Course materials place special emphasis on the importance of educating students in their participatory role as citizens.

The Choices for the 21st Century Education Program is a program of the Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies at Brown University.

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The Watson Institute for International Studies was established at Brown University in 1986 to serve as a forum for students, faculty, visiting scholars, and policy practitioners who are committed to analyzing contemporary global problems and developing initiatives to address them.

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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 Harry S. 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 Cuba 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, had recently aligned himself with the Soviet Union, even though he was welcomed in the United States with open arms just a few years before.

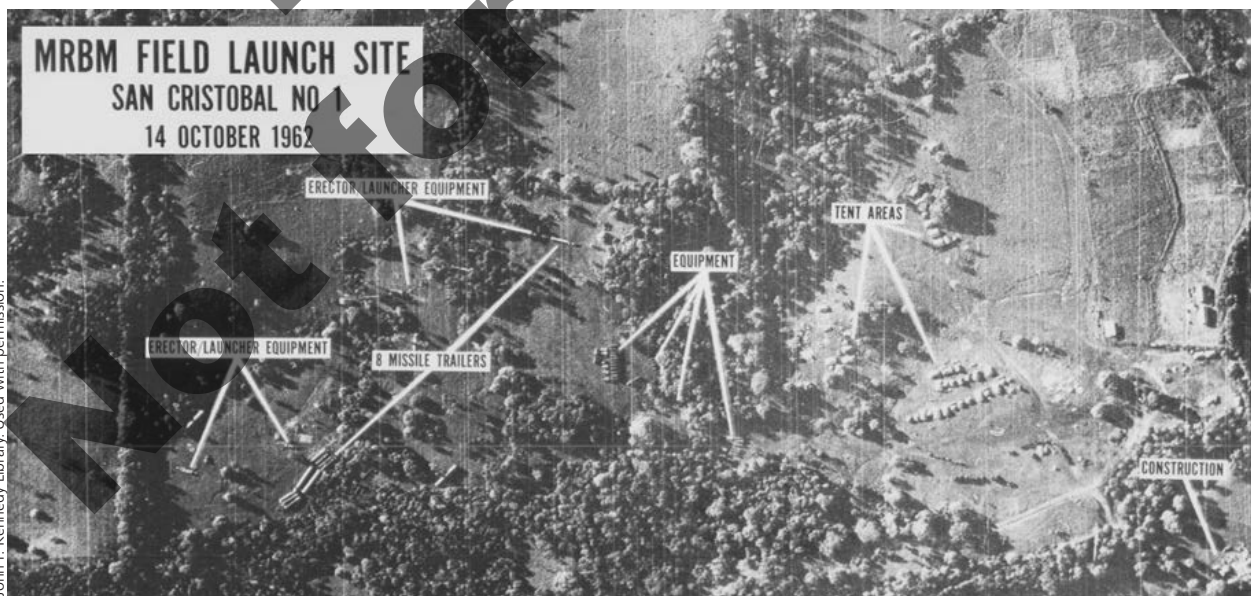
Many Americans felt that Castro's revolution was a rejection of the U.S. effort to bring American skills and values to the region. The island had become a flashpoint for U.S. anxiety about the world. In an attempt to

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.

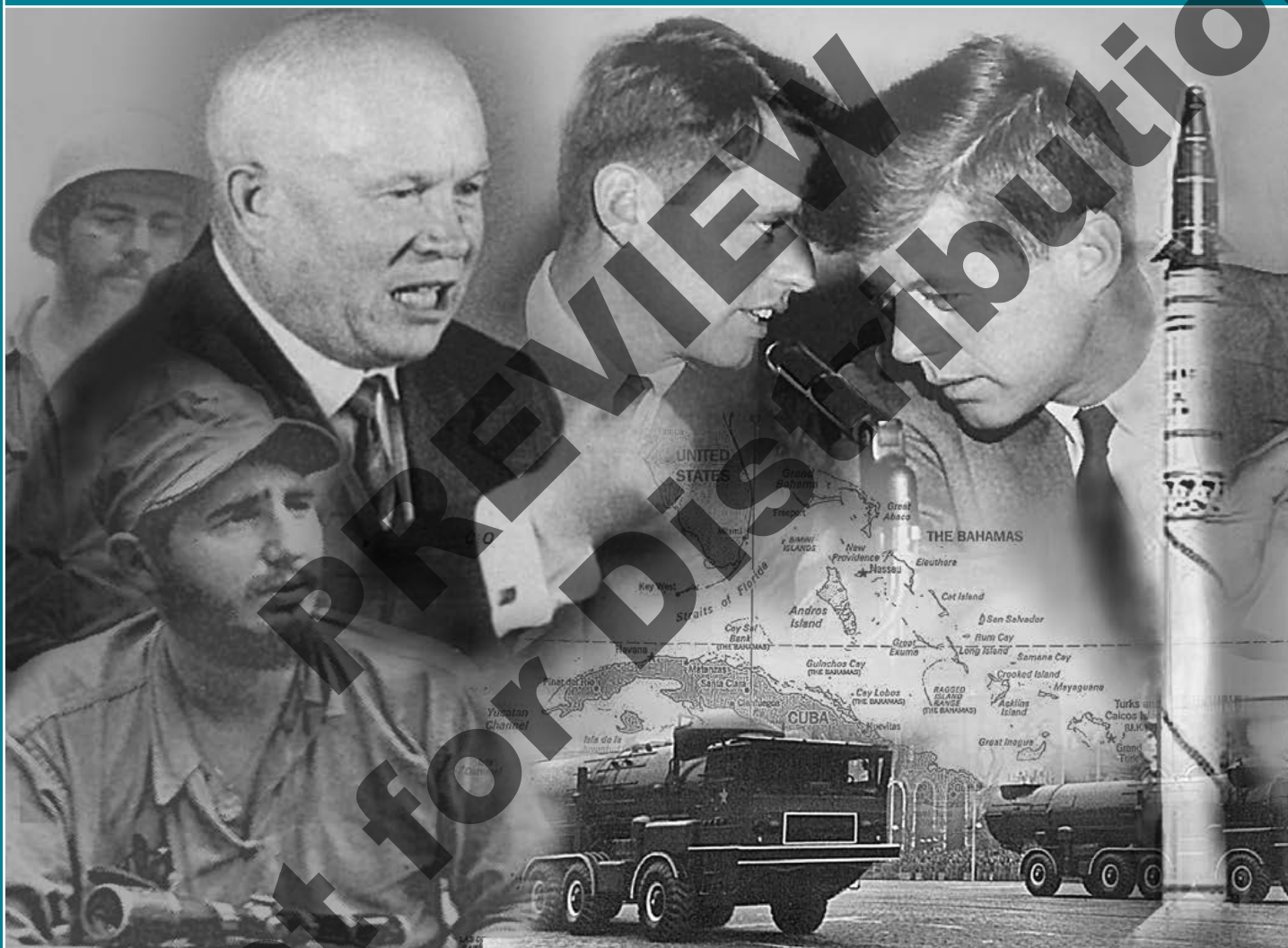
Nonetheless, Khrushchev had promised not to do anything that might affect the upcoming U.S. elections. Furthermore, he had promised not to place offensive weapons in Cuba. Now Kennedy wondered what Khrushchev was doing and how he should respond.

In these readings, you will explore the circumstances that brought the United States to the brink of nuclear war in 1962. You will grapple with the same question President Kennedy pondered: how should the United States respond to the Soviet missiles in Cuba? Finally, you will explore what happened in the crisis and what the United States has learned since.



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

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Retracing the Path to October 1962

Objectives:

Students will: Identify the tensions in U.S.-Soviet-Cuban relations that contributed to the Cuban missile crisis.

Explore the differences in perspective that divided U.S., Soviet, and Cuban leaders up to 1962.

Required Reading:

Students should have read Part I in the student text, and completed “Study Guide—Part I” in the Teacher Resource Book or “Advanced Study Guide—Part I.”

Handouts:

“U.S.-Soviet-Cuban Relations—Discussion Questions”

In the Classroom:

1. Forming Small Groups—Divide the class into groups of four or five students. Assign to each group the role of the United States, Cuba, or the Soviet Union. (In classes of more than fifteen students, each country may be represented by two groups.) Distribute “U.S.-Soviet-Cuban Relations—Discussion Questions.” Emphasize that students should respond to the questions from the perspective of their assigned country in early October 1962.

2. Clarifying Positions—After the groups have answered the discussion questions, ask them to share their responses with the entire class. Note the differences in interpretation among the three countries. For example, how does each country view the U.S. reaction to the revolution in Cuba? What was the driving force behind the warming relationship between Moscow and Havana? Should U.S. leaders have taken a more conciliatory approach to Castro? Was a collision between the United States and Castro’s Cuba unavoidable?

3. Extra Challenge—Ask students to design posters to represent their assigned perspective.

Note:

Video clips of scholars discussing topics related to this lesson are available at <www.choices.edu/cmc>.

Homework:

Students should read “October 1962: The Moment of Decision” and “Options in Brief” in the student text.