

Aftermath

Throughout the Cuban Missile Crisis, the fear of nuclear war hung over the heads of both U.S. and Soviet leaders. President Kennedy said he believed that there was a 30 to 50 percent chance that the missile crisis would lead to a nuclear war.

In order to avoid a nuclear exchange, Khrushchev turned his back on his Cuban ally and came to terms with his Cold War rival. By doing so, the Soviet leader risked both his ties with Cuba and his country's reputation as a global superpower.

After the missile crisis, the United States and the Soviet Union established a hotline to ease communication between leaders in times of crisis. The arrangement featured teletype machines installed in both the Kremlin and the White House. Leaders reportedly used the hotline dozens of times. The hotline reduced the risk of a misunderstanding resulting in deadly conflict.

The missile crisis also impressed Kennedy and Khrushchev with the dangers of making nuclear threats. Having come so close to the horror of a nuclear war, leaders on both sides recognized the need to embark on a new path to prevent nuclear confrontation in the future. The ideological conflict would continue, but while they remained in power Khrushchev and Kennedy worked to diminish the tensions between the two nations.

“If we cannot now end our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is the fact that we all inhabit this planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal.... Confident and unafraid, we labor on—not toward a strategy of annihilation, but toward a strategy of peace.”

—President John F. Kennedy,
American University Speech, 1963

What We Know Now: “One Hell of a Gamble”

With the end of the Cold War, key participants in the 1962 crisis from the United States, the former Soviet Union, and Cuba met on several occasions to review the events. Because of these discussions and the declassification of secret U.S., Soviet, and Cuban documents, we now know much more about the missile crisis.

During the crisis, both Kennedy and Khrushchev worried that events could spiral out of control into a nuclear war. Newly discovered evidence suggests that their fears were justified.

According to the head of operational planning for the Soviet General Staff in 1962, General Anatoly Gribkov, nuclear warheads had indeed reached Cuba in the weeks before the missile crisis erupted. The Soviet warheads (as many as 162 of them) were for use on short-range, tactical nuclear missiles. The most powerful tactical missiles on the island were capable of striking targets up to one hundred miles away. Although the U.S. mainland was beyond the range of the missiles, they could have been used with devastating results against American troops invading Cuba. At a 1992 meeting in Havana, Gribkov said that the missiles could have been launched by the Soviet commander in Cuba without authorization from Moscow.

“It horrifies me to think what would have happened in the event of an invasion of Cuba!... It would have been an absolute disaster for the world.... No one should believe that a U.S. force could have been attacked by tactical nuclear warheads without responding with nuclear warheads. And where would it have ended? In utter disaster.”

—Kennedy's Secretary of
Defense Robert S. McNamara

Kennedy, who had been under considerable pressure from the military and members of Congress to invade Cuba, had feared an invasion could provoke a nuclear response. Gribkov's revelation proved his worries were well-founded.

“If we go into Cuba we have to realize that we are taking a chance that these missiles, which are ready to fire, won't be fired.... The fact is that that is one hell of a gamble.”

—President John F. Kennedy, October 22, 1962