

October 1962: Kennedy Discovers the Missiles

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 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 nonnuclear 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 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 has the world come so close to nuclear war.

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 Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev or Fidel 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.

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.

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. 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.

On October 20, President Kennedy decided on a blockade of Cuba by the U.S. Navy to prevent further shipments of military supplies to the island. The president decided to use the word “quarantine” instead of the word “blockade” because international law considered a blockade to be an act of war. This option allowed the president to steer a middle course among ExComm’s varied options.

Cuban President Fidel Castro was convinced that the United States was going to attack Cuba. On October 26, 1962, he wrote a letter to Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev.