

2.10 Cuban Missile Crisis

Conceptual understanding

Key question

→ Why did Khrushchev want to place missiles in Cuba in 1962?

Key concept

→ Significance

The Cuban Missile Crisis was the direct outcome of Soviet feelings that the USA had nuclear superiority and feared the USA would overthrow the Cuban regime unless there was a sufficient deterrent. The result was that in October 1962 the use of nuclear weapons seemed like a real possibility and the resolution of the crisis transpired through direct dialogue between Soviet premier Khrushchev and US president Kennedy.

Causes

In 1959, Fidel Castro came to power in Cuba, launching an initially undefined revolution. It was evident that he was seeking to replace the rampant corruption of the Cuban government and economic dependence on the USA, but beyond that he was deliberately vague as to his exact ideological programme. Like Nasser, Castro sought to exploit the east-west rivalry and to advance his cause domestically by railing against US imperialism.

Eisenhower was infuriated by the success of Castro and his decision to nationalize American industries. Castro came to power with two clear promises to his people: to improve the social welfare of the population and to rid Cuba of the neo-imperial dominance of the USA. He tried to stay away from US interests but his social and economic programmes were quickly depleting the Cuban government's financial reserves and he needed money. Thus, the decision was made to accept Soviet oil at below-market prices. The USA responded by refusing to refine the oil, so the Cuban government responded by nationalizing all American-owned refineries. Nationalization of other foreign-owned entities quickly followed, mostly affecting the US business interests that had dominated Cuba since its independence. Eisenhower authorized the training of anti-Castro exiles to attempt to overthrow the Cuban regime and Kennedy inherited this plan when he took office.

The Bay of Pigs

Of all the countries in the region, Cuba consumed the most of President Kennedy's time. From Eisenhower, he inherited an unresolved situation in the Caribbean: Cuban exiles were being trained to overthrow the regime of Fidel Castro. Kennedy's decision-making led to a foreign policy debacle that had further-reaching consequences than anyone could have imagined. During the 1960 election campaign, Kennedy took a tough position against Castro and accused the Eisenhower government of not doing enough to combat Castro. He promised Cuban exiles in the USA that he would take every opportunity to combat communism in the region and restore Cuba as a democracy.

Kennedy was ambivalent about the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-directed plan that had been created by Eisenhower and Dulles. According to the plan, the exiles would launch an amphibious invasion of Cuba that would lead to an uprising on the island as it was assumed that many Cubans rejected Castro's rule. With US air support, the exiles would take a beach-head, and a government-in-arms would ask for further assistance from the USA. The USA would recognize this government and assist it in stabilizing the country and overthrowing Castro.

The plan relied on stealth, a bit of luck and the support of the Cuban population. The exiles had been planning the invasion for over a year, and it is estimated that the US government spent close to \$5 million on the project. However, intelligence gathered by the CIA revealed that, despite the propaganda levelled against the Castro regime, most Cubans would not support an armed insurrection. The exiles were largely hated enemies of the Cubans who remained and it was foolhardy to expect them to support the return of those who had exploited the previous system.

Kennedy himself was unsure as to how to proceed. He promised to be hard on communism and to support the exiles yet the plan was highly flawed. A State Department memo argued for the cancellation of the invasion on legal grounds stating that such an action would violate US commitments to the Organization of American States. At a press conference on 12 April 1961, Kennedy said, "I want to say that there will not be, under any conditions, an intervention in Cuba by the United States Armed Forces. This government will do everything it possibly can ... I think it can meet its responsibilities, to make sure that there are no Americans involved in any actions inside Cuba ... The basic issue in Cuba is not one between the United States and Cuba. It is between the Cubans themselves."

Despite the internal debates on the morality and legality of US support for an invasion, an invasion took place. It was a disaster; at the last moment, Kennedy decided that the USA would not provide air support to the invading force, leaving them vulnerable to the Cuban air force, and the exiles lacked supplies. Casualties amounted to the death of 200 rebel forces and a further 1197 were captured by the Cuban army. The Cuban people did not rise. For the USA, it was a public relations disaster. US involvement was not covert and thus the administration was guilty not only of violating international law, but also of failing in its attempted coup. Castro, for his part, claimed the success of his revolution over the US operation. But Castro was also shaken by the attempt and went so far as to request assistance from the Soviets in the defence of Cuba. This, in turn, led to the Cuban Missile Crisis and to the decision to install nuclear weapons in Cuba.



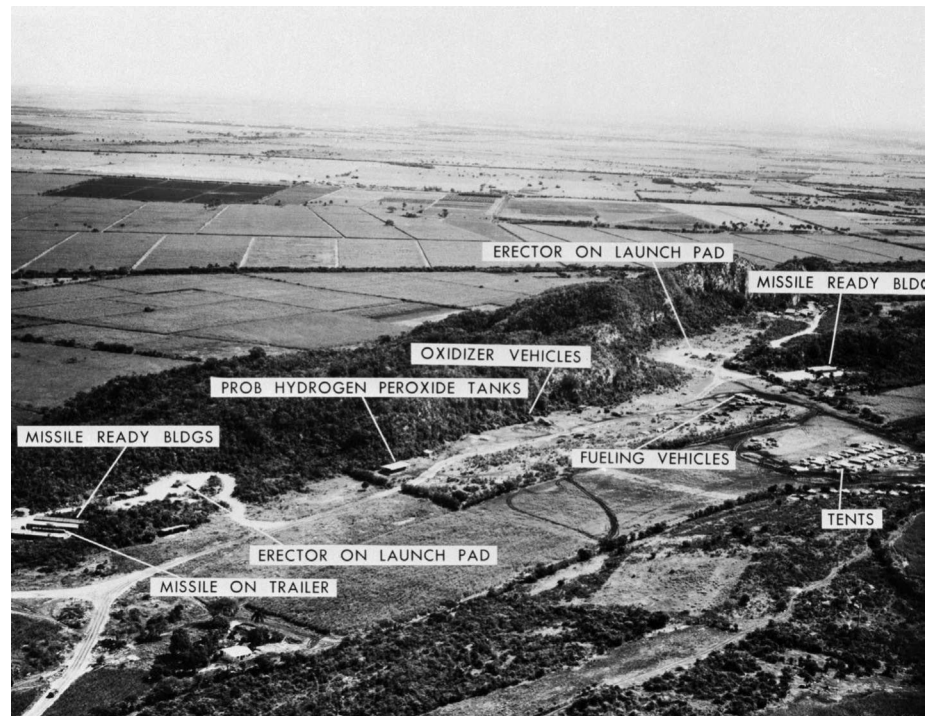
▲ UN delegates examining photographic information on Soviet missiles in Cuba in the UN Security Council

The Cuban Missile Crisis

The Soviets had long been vulnerable to potential medium-range nuclear attacks as the USA had weapons deployed in Britain, Italy and most notably – in Turkey, where medium-range Jupiter missiles had been placed in the 1950s. Plus, the Soviets wanted to help extend the revolution that began in Cuba into the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean, and to ensure the continuation of Castro's regime. Thus, in the summer of 1962, the installation of medium-range nuclear weapons in Cuba began. Throughout the summer, US intelligence operatives in Cuba reported increased Soviet activity in Cuba and the location of Soviet material in Cuba, but they were largely ignored by Washington. However, in October, an American U-2 spy plane flying over Cuba photographed sites that were easily identified as ballistic missile sites and the President was notified.

On 16 October 1962, President Kennedy was informed that a U-2 spy plane had taken photos of medium-range ballistic missile sites in Cuba. For nearly a week Kennedy deliberated with his advisors on possible courses of action before making any concrete decisions. On 22 October, Kennedy gave a televised address to the American public informing them of the installations and announced that a quarantine was placed on Cuba and that any violation of the quarantine would be seen as a hostile action that would force the USA to retaliate; on the following day the OAS approved the quarantine. This reified the policy of brinkmanship in an instant, and the ideas of massive retaliation and mutual assured destruction became potential realities. At the same time, the Soviets dispatched a ship heading to Cuba; the USA would consider this an act of war. Subsequent negotiations and compromises, however, resulted in Khrushchev ordering the ship to turn around, and the crisis was averted.

The Soviets agreed to dismantle and remove the weapons under UN supervision. For his part, Kennedy promised that the USA would not try another invasion on Cuba; it was also secretly agreed to dismantle and remove its nuclear weapons in Turkey.

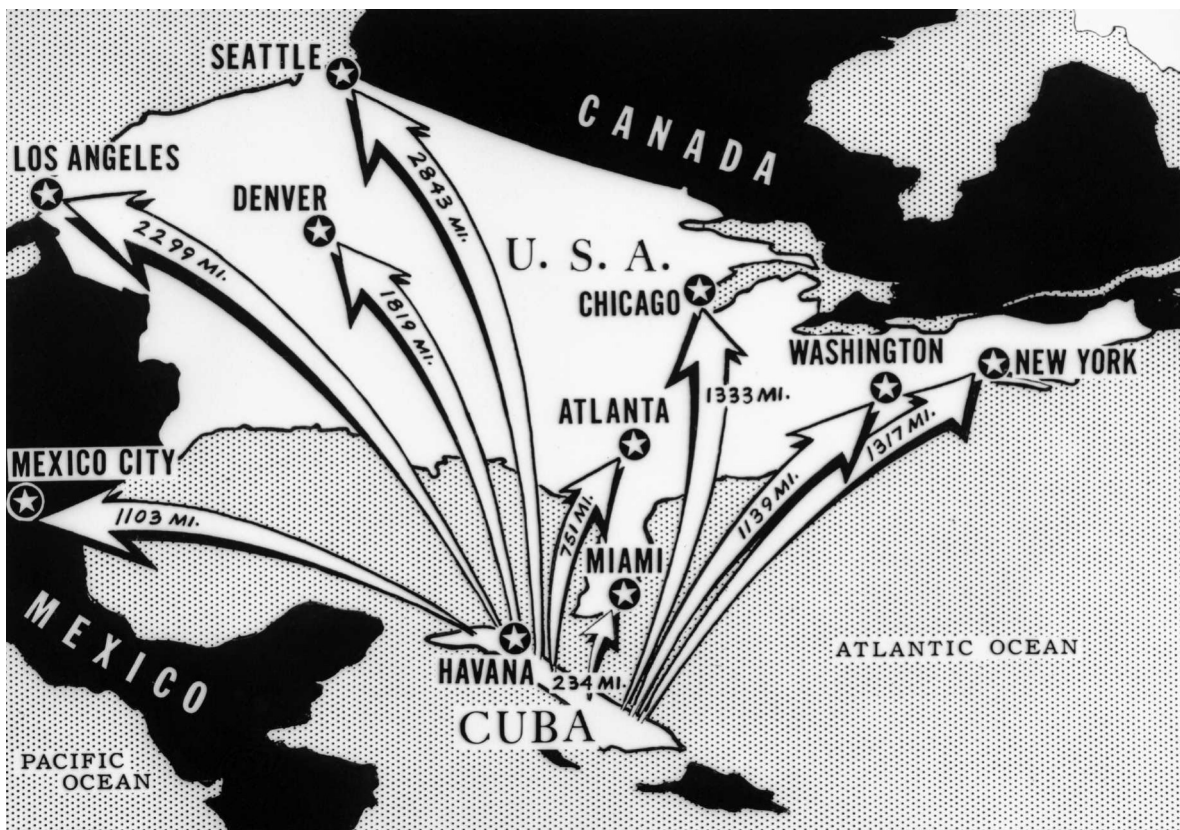


▲ Aerial view of the Cuban missile launch site, 24 October 1962

Impact and significance

The implications for the Cold War were immense as many citizens were confronted with the possibility of nuclear war, and while Castro was left out of much of the decision-making process, his regime remained unharmed and able to develop. In the future, Cuba would become a centre for revolutionary and guerrilla activity in the region and around the globe. This did not end US activities in Cuba; the USA continued its boycott on Cuban goods, not allowing trade or travel with Cuba. Additionally, it kept its embassy closed although there were unofficial American advisors in Cuba. Covert operations also continued. It was later revealed that the CIA had made several failed assassination attempts on Castro that have passed into legend: exploding cigars and poison-infused shaving cream were two reported methods used in the attempts.

On the one hand, the Missile Crisis reflects the implementation of the policy of brinkmanship. On the other, it reflects the determination of Kennedy and Khrushchev to avoid nuclear confrontation. In Cuba the notion of peaceful coexistence trumped brinkmanship, and war was averted. The superpowers, with the concept of mutual assured destruction firmly entrenched, found that nuclear deterrence was far stronger than the idea of nuclear war. Conventional warfare and proxy wars remained the methods by which the Cold War was fought.



- ▲ The distance of US cities from Cuba, highlighting the potential striking distance of Soviet medium-range intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) placed in Cuba – they could hit all but Seattle

Source skills

In their own words: Kennedy and Khrushchev

“The 1930s taught us a clear lesson: aggressive conduct, if allowed to go unchecked and unchallenged ultimately leads to war. This nation is opposed to war. We are also true to our word. Our unswerving objective, therefore, must be to prevent the use of these missiles against this or any other country, and to secure their withdrawal or elimination from the Western Hemisphere.”

Kennedy's “Quarantine speech”, televised 22 October 1962

“They talk about who won and who lost. Human reason won. Mankind won.”

Khrushchev, quoted in the *London Observer*, 11 November 1962

Questions

- 1 Why does Kennedy refer to the 1930s? What message is he presenting to the US public?
- 2 What is the intention of Khrushchev's quotation?
- 3 Is the content of these two quotations consistent?