

This Day in History... October 16, 1962

Cuban Missile Crisis Begins

On October 16, 1962, President John F. Kennedy learned that the Soviet Union was building nuclear missile sites in Cuba. The discovery began thirteen days of tense negotiations and military alert that brought the United States and the Soviet Union dangerously close to nuclear war.

The crisis grew from years of conflict between the United States and Cuba. In April 1961, a force of Cuban exiles trained and supported by the CIA invaded Cuba at the Bay of Pigs. The invasion failed within days, and Fidel Castro's government emerged stronger. The United States continued efforts to undermine Castro, including a covert program known as Operation Mongoose. Castro feared another invasion and sought Soviet protection.

In July 1962, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev and Castro secretly agreed to place Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba. The missiles could threaten targets in the southeastern United States from a location only about 90 miles from Florida. The Soviets also hoped to strengthen their position in the Cold War and balance US missiles stationed in Turkey, within range of the Soviet Union. Construction of missile sites began later that summer.

US intelligence had detected a growing Soviet military presence in Cuba, but bad weather interrupted high-altitude surveillance flights. On October 14, an American U-2 reconnaissance plane photographed suspected missile sites. Analysts studied the images the next day and identified Soviet medium-range ballistic missiles under construction. On the morning of October 16, National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy showed Kennedy the evidence. The sites were not fully operational, but the missiles could soon carry nuclear warheads to US cities and military bases. The photographs showed launch areas and Soviet construction activity.

Kennedy met with senior advisers, later known as the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, or ExComm. Some military leaders urged an air strike followed by an invasion of Cuba. Kennedy feared an attack could kill Soviet personnel and trigger retaliation against US forces or allies. A conflict between the nuclear powers could quickly escalate beyond anyone's control.

On October 22, Kennedy announced a naval "quarantine" of Cuba. He chose that term instead of "blockade," which could be treated as an act of war. The quarantine would stop ships carrying offensive weapons from reaching the island. US forces prepared for further action, while Kennedy demanded that the Soviet Union dismantle and remove the missiles. The interception area was set far enough from Cuba to give ships time to turn away. The quarantine took effect on October 24.

For several days, Soviet ships approached the quarantine area. Some slowed or changed course, and US ships did not fire. Meanwhile, work continued at the missile sites. On October 27, a Soviet surface-to-air missile shot down a U-2 plane over Cuba, killing its pilot, Major Rudolf Anderson. That same day, Khrushchev sent Kennedy a public message proposing that the Soviet Union remove its missiles in exchange for a US pledge not to invade Cuba. A second message raised the issue of American Jupiter missiles in Turkey.

Kennedy accepted the first proposal publicly. He pledged that the United States would not invade Cuba if the Soviet missiles were removed. In private, Attorney General Robert Kennedy also told the Soviet ambassador that the United States would remove its Jupiter missiles from Turkey within months, but that this part of the understanding could not be made public. On October 28, Khrushchev announced that the Soviet Union would dismantle and remove the missiles. The crisis eased, though the United States kept the quarantine in place until the Soviet bombers were also withdrawn in November.

The settlement avoided an immediate military clash, but it did not end the Cold War or resolve the rivalry over Cuba. Soon afterward, Washington and Moscow established a direct communication link, as both governments sought ways to reduce the risk of another crisis spiraling toward nuclear war.



President Kennedy helped avoid war in the wake of the Cuban Missile Crisis.



Less than a year later, the United States, Soviet Union, and Britain signed the Limited Test Ban Treaty, banning nuclear tests in the atmosphere, outer space, and underwater.

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