



The Cuban Missile Crisis

This is a transcript of the [The Cuban Missile Crisis](https://www.mrallsophistory.com) podcast from www.mrallsophistory.com

In 1962 the world came closer than it had come before to a 'hot war' in the nuclear age. Cuba, a small island about 90 miles from the coast of Florida in the USA, was the focus of the world's attention for 13 nerve-racking days in October.

America had been a great friend to Cuba in the 1950s. The United States supported the right-wing dictator, Batista, by supplying weapons to his military. Cuba's main export, sugar, was almost exclusively sold to America, and the richest members of American society used to visit Cuba to gamble. The problem was that despite all the millions of dollars pouring into Cuba, very little of it actually made its way to the poorest members of Cuban society since Batista and his friends were corrupt and took much of it for themselves. This was too much for Fidel Castro, a socialist rebel who mounted a campaign to topple Batista's corrupt government and return Cuba to the people.

Castro's first task was to punish those who had abused the poor. Those found guilty were executed. He then nationalised all American firms in Cuba so that their wealth would be invested in Cuba itself rather than leave the island and go to foreign countries. The money made from this measure was primarily spent on a national health system so that all medical treatment was free, and on education. Castro also introduced major land reforms.

Some Cubans left the island and went to live in Florida. These Cuban exiles were treated by some Americans as heroes, and told stories that outraged the American press. Even though many of the stories were false or exaggerated, the American press didn't care. Trade between America and Cuba dried up, threatening to bankrupt Cuba. Cuba needed to find a new customer for its sugar exports: step forward the Soviet Union. Even though Castro hadn't defined himself as a communist, America's trade embargo had the effect of driving Castro into the arms of the USSR.

The emergence of a pro-communist Cuba was an enormous threat to the new American President - J F Kennedy. He funded an attempt by anti-Castro Cubans to try to land in Cuba at the Bay of Pigs in 1961. They aimed to overthrow Castro's government but failed due to poor organization. The Bay of Pigs invasion proved to Castro that America opposed his government, resulting in Cuba seeking a closer relationship with the USSR in order to gain Soviet protection against the enormously powerful USA.

From October 16th, 1962, things got worse. An American U2 spy plane took photographs of Cuba that revealed a missile base. American experts agreed that the missiles were capable of creating a nuclear attack on the USA.

The following day, Kennedy was told that missiles were capable of killing 80 million Americans. They could fly 2000 miles in just 17 minutes. To make matters worse, American Intelligence reported that more than 20 more Russian ships were sailing to Cuba with more missiles. Kennedy had already made a major mistake with the Bay of Pigs affair. He had to be successful in his response to the Cuban missiles. Kennedy's advisers, known as ExComm, gave him five possible options:

1	Do nothing. This was not a sensible option because it would make Kennedy look weak, and the missiles would still be threatening America.
2	Order a full scale military invasion of Cuba. This was dangerous as it may lead to a full war with USSR, possibly involving the use of nuclear weapons. It could also lead to lots of American casualties and couldn't be a guaranteed success.
3	Order an air strike against the missile bases only. The problem again would be Russian casualties and the Air Force was not sure it could deliver pin-point bombing raids on what were relatively small targets.
4	Ask the Russians to remove the missiles. However, it was unlikely that the Russians would listen to a 'polite' request especially as they denied the existence of the missiles at an emergency meeting of the United Nations!
5	Put a naval blockade around the island. This would isolate Cuba and stop future Russian ships entering. The missiles would still be on Cuba, but Kennedy would be seen to be doing something while negotiations continued in the background.

Kennedy chose to blockade Cuba. Tensions rose as Khrushchev, the Soviet leader, vowed to ignore the blockade and continue to deliver supplies to Cuba. More U2 photographs on October 25th 1962 showed that the missiles on Cuba would be ready to fire within a few days. Tensions rose even further when, two days later on October 27th, an American pilot was killed when his U2 plane was shot down by a Russian missile.

By this time Khrushchev had sent Kennedy two telegrams that offered to remove the missiles. The problem was, the two telegrams offered conflicting deals! One letter said that the missiles would be withdrawn if Kennedy promised not to invade Cuba. The other was more threatening. It argued that, as USA had missile bases in Turkey, the USSR should be able to have bases in Cuba. Khrushchev said that if USA removed her missiles from Turkey then USSR would remove them from Cuba.

Kennedy, after deliberating with his advisers, chose to accept Khrushchev's offer but insisted that the agreement to remove missiles from Turkey was to be kept secret. Within 2 months the missiles were gone. The Cuban Missile Crisis was over but it had taken the world to the brink of nuclear war.



Did either side win? Khrushchev could claim a victory in that Cuba, a Communist country, remained unharmed just a few miles from the coast of America. In addition, the American missiles were removed from Turkey. Kennedy, meanwhile, had successfully negotiated the removal of the missiles from Cuba and had successfully contained the Communist threat. Many historians, though, see it as a win-win situation. Following the crisis a hot-line was installed between Moscow and Washington to allow for easier communication between the two nations leaders at a time of crisis. Just one year later in 1963, both nations signed the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. This treaty stated that neither would explode nuclear bombs during testing in the atmosphere.