



U.S. ARMY

15 YEARS  
Issue 2

# RESOLVING HORROR: RESOLUTION OF THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

“We [are] facing a great trouble.” These were the words purportedly spoken by President John F. Kennedy to his brother, Robert F. Kennedy on the morning of Tuesday, 16 OCT 1962. It has widely been popularized as the closest the world had ever been to destruction, or as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. wrote, the day that “the world came closest to blowing itself up.” What ensued was 13 days of tension, fear, and diplomacy in what is now known as the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Many know the history and the situation surrounding the crisis, but fewer understand it and the underlying causes. The common story is that the placement of nuclear weapons by the United States in Italy and Turkey prompted an aggressive and in-kind response from the Soviet Union in Cuba. There’s a bit more to it than this, however, and it finds itself nested in the spirit of the October season: fear.

In 1961, Fidel Castro, frustrated with the lack of support from Moscow during the Bay of Pigs Invasion, ousted several key pro-Soviet personnel from Cuba’s government. Instead, Castro began to show favoritism towards China. Not only did this alarm Moscow as a potential loss of a key strategic ally, it also potentially heralded a shift to a tri-polar world during an already apparent downward spiral in the Soviet bloc. Moscow also grew concerned that disruption in the Cuban government could signal U.S. intervention.

In addition to this concern, the Soviets were becoming increasingly aware of the blocs lagging of weapons development, specifically strategic and ballistic missile systems. Nikita Khrushchev was specifically concerned over the West’s ability to strategically emplace weapon systems for containment as well. The ability to inflict long-range damage on the continental United States (CONUS) was limited, at best, for the Soviets. Therefore, demands from Casto, coupled with growing concern within Moscow about the socioeconomic situation in Cuba framed what seemed to be the perfect circumstance for emplacement of shorter-range missile systems that could hit CONUS.

The reaction was significantly pointed from the Americans, but what ensued was perhaps one of the most brilliant strokes of diplomacy that has been seen on the international scale. Aside from the Soviet Ambassador lying to U.S. officials regarding the intent of the Soviet buildup in Cuba, most exchanges were amicable according to Robert F. Kennedy’s memoir; albeit stressful.

A naval blockade to prevent stockpiles from delivery to Cuba was chosen as the best solution while diplomatic channels were used from 22 OCT. While a blockade was technically an act of war, Kennedy did not believe Khrushchev would interpret it as such. Khrushchev, however, did see it as an act of aggression, and wired Kennedy on 24 OCT in a letter conveying his concern.

The stress peaked on 27 OCT, when a U-2 spy plane was shot down by a Soviet SA-2 fired from Cuba. RF-8A Crusaders were also fired on that day. However, despite Kennedy stating this was a red line, he decided to not act unless another attack occurred. It was determined that the SA-2 was operated by the Cuban military, not the Soviets. Former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara later stated in his memoir that Khrushchev had “instructed all of his batteries not to shoot down [any] U-2 [spy planes].”

Late in the evening on 27 OCT, knowing that he had lost control of the situation and was aware the Soviets were on the brink of eliminating up to half of the world, Khrushchev accepted Kennedy’s terms. While the agreement had been made to remove missiles from Turkey in exchange, the U.S. employed the tactic of “trust-but-verify.” Reconnaissance flyovers and the naval blockade continued to ensure that the Soviets were dismantling their weapons and that medium range bombers were removed.

Khrushchev was deeply concerned about Castro’s willingness to launch attacks without orders, and as a result he removed any system capable of nuclear capacity in this drawdown. This completed on 20 NOV 1962, and the blockade was then lifted.

The slow nature of diplomatic channels used resulted in the establishment of a hotline system being installed between the Kremlin and the White House. The infamous “red phone” nuclear hotline facilitated methods of rapid de-escalation of conflicts between the two superpowers. The Cuban Missile Crisis was over.

## KEY TAKEAWAY’S FROM THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS

The Cuban Missile Crisis was a particularly volatile moment in the Cold War with tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. However, the deep concern that the Soviets had against the concept of a tri-polar world with China being the third power is of particular interest. In addition, the Soviet emphasis on regional allies to project power is of consequence to routine operations today.

Misunderstandings to intentions have led to many disasters in history, and the Cuban Missile Crisis may have been no different. The United States had operated under the policy of containment of communist forces. The so-called “domino theory” that was developed out of the contemporary conflict in Southeast Asia was in its infancy, thus leading to the American excursion with Cuba in 1961. Likewise, miscalculations by the Soviets resulted in fractures developing in their relationship with Cuba. This coupled with a poor understanding of intent by the Cubans could have potentially resulted in a much more different and harrowing tale of those 13 days in October.

Nevertheless, the shuttle to victory in this exchange that could have “ended the world” was diplomacy and communication. While this specific example highlights how significant strategic emplacement, command-and-control, and commanders intent can really be.



## NOVEMBER TRIVIA

1. What was the alleged “missile gap” that was purported by Kennedy between the United States and the Soviet Union?
2. Who was the pilot of the U-2 spy plane that was shot down over Soviet territory in May 1960?
3. What was the highest Defense Condition (DEFCON) level issued during the Cuban Missile Crisis?

## LAST MONTH’S ANSWERS

1. What was the role of Kadena meant to be during the execution of Operation *DOWNFALL* in World War II?  
The primary staging point
2. In what year was Fort Leavenworth constructed?  
1827
3. What famous African-American unit was formed at Fort Leavenworth in 1866?  
10th Cavalry Regiment (Buffalo Soldiers)



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