

THIRTEEN DAYS – OCTOBER 16-23, 1962

On Tuesday morning, October 16, 1962, shortly after 9:00, President Kennedy called and asked me to come to the White House. He said only that we were facing great trouble. Shortly afterward, in his office, he told me that a U-2 had just finished a photographic mission and that the Intelligence Community has become convinced that Russia was placing missiles and atomic weapons in Cuba.¹

Robert Kennedy

On October 16, Kennedy Learned That His Most Serious Problem Was Not Berlin, Not The Quest For Racial Justice, Not The November Election. It Was Nuclear Weapons In Cuba.

A. AS SEEN BY THE US

October 16, 1962

- The U-2 flight confirmed the presence of surface-to-surface ballistic missiles capable of reaching most of the Eastern US. When Kennedy received this information at the start of the day, he was irate that Khrushchev had lied, having told him the Soviets would not put offensive weapons in Cuba and that he would not do anything to disturb the US elections.
- Later, at a 11:50 am meeting, the top foreign policy and security advisors, Bobby Kennedy, McGeorge Bundy, Robert McNamara, Dean Rusk and General Marshall Carter (substituting for John Mc Cone) met with the President. **Carter announced that a medium-range ballistic missile, about 65 feet long, had been discovered. It was known that MRBM's were 67' long and had a range of 630 miles; IRBM's were 73' long and had a range of 1,100 miles,** (the distance to Washington, D.C.) One missile had been photographed at a launch site, and in reply to his question, JFK was told it would likely take 2-3 hours to get it ready to launch.
- Kennedy repeatedly asked (during this and subsequent meetings) about Khrushchev's motives. He wanted to understand his adversary's thoughts. ²
- The U-2 flights revealed that there were at least 16 Soviet ballistic missiles in Cuba near launch pads that were under construction. It was unlikely that nuclear warheads were already installed. ³
- Kennedy authorized additional U-2 flights. The committee agreed that the Soviet missiles needed to be removed, but didn't decide whether to first seek a military or a diplomatic solution. Options under consideration were:

1. A surgical strike to destroy the ballistic missiles
 2. A general strike against all missiles and Soviet forces in Cuba
 3. A general airstrike followed by a blockade
 4. Diplomacy
 5. An invasion of Cuba
- By the end of the meeting, JFK preferred a surgical or general strike; he didn't think they had the two weeks that would be needed to prepare for an invasion. He felt he needed to show strength and respond to Khrushchev before Congress learned of the presence of ballistic missiles. The State Department, Department of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff opposed a surgical strike.
 - For JFK, the missiles were a political concern of equal weight to the military. His advisors believed that missiles in Cuba didn't actually change the military balance. But his primary concern was that his September 4 statement had said the US would not allow offensive weapons in Cuba, so inaction now would be seen as weakness.
 - According to Robert Kennedy, at the conclusion of this first meeting, 11 favored a blockade, 9 (including the two Kennedys) wanted a military strike.
 - Following a White House luncheon for Libya's crown prince that was also attended by UN Ambassador Adlai Stevenson, Kennedy invited Stevenson to the family quarters. While showing the U-2 photos, Kennedy remarked "I suppose the alternatives are to go in by air and wipe them out, or take other steps to render the weapons inoperable." Stevenson counseled they should first try a peaceful solution. He pointed out the possible Soviet reactions to strikes against Cuba, and noted that "the judgments of history rarely coincide with the tempers of the moment." He further suggested that before taking military action, the existence of any military base should be negotiable. Stevenson followed up with a memo the following day that focused on the role that world opinion would play once the crisis became public.⁴ [Read Stevenson's memo](#)

October 18, 1962

- The CIA told JFK they believed launch sites were for IRBMs because of their longer launch pads. Their orientation was towards the center of the U.S. IRBM's could potentially reach U.S. sites within the arc from Houston to Washington, D.C. These were offensive, not defensive weapons.

October 19, 1962

- Before traveling to Illinois for campaign appearances, Kennedy met with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Only the Chairman, General Taylor, had been included in Kennedy's advisory group. Kennedy expressed his concern that a US attack on Cuba would lead to the Soviets taking Berlin, and then to use of nuclear force. He was also concerned that a blockade of Cuba would be met with a Soviet blockade of Berlin.
- The long-held view of the Joint Chiefs had been that an invasion of Cuba was necessary, and that with the discovery of offensive weapons, it was absolutely necessary. As the President's preference had evolved to be a blockade, the Chiefs, led by Air Force Chief of Staff General Curtis LeMay advocated for at least an air strike on Soviet installations, hoping it would lead to an invasion. LeMay's position was the opposite of Kennedy's: he thought that if the US showed weakness on Cuba, the Soviets would become more aggressive on Berlin. However, the Chiefs' doubt about the success of a blockade, on top of his own, led Kennedy to defer making a decision and to allow his advisors, led by Robert Kennedy, to continue deliberating the response.

October 20, 1962

- Robert Kennedy asked JFK to return from campaigning. The CIA reported that in addition to the presence of IRBMs in Cuba, 8 MRBMs were now ready to be fired. This fact increased the chance that a US strike on Cuba would be met with a nuclear response ... and lead to nuclear war. JFK decided to enact a naval blockade and be prepared to undertake an air strike on the missiles and missile sites. The US would demand that the Soviets remove their missiles.

October 22 Morning

- President Kennedy called former President Eisenhower. Eisenhower said he thought that only a blockade or full-scale invasion of Cuba would work, and he would support whatever course Kennedy chose.⁵
- U.S. Navy ships evacuated 2,810 women, children and other non-combatants from Guantanamo, taking them to Norfolk, Virginia.

October 22 6 PM

- Soviet Ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin, was called to the office of Secretary of State Dean Rusk and was given a copy of the forthcoming speech. Seeking to avoid misunderstandings, in a personal letter to Khrushchev, Kennedy warned that the US was determined that the Soviet threat to the Western hemisphere be

removed. Dobrynin was surprised as he had not known of the missile deployment, and denied it.

October 22 7 PM

- After informing congressional leadership of the crisis and his plan for a blockade, Kennedy announced it to the nation on a televised speech. He said the purpose of the limited blockade was to prevent offensive military equipment from being shipped to Cuba. Other goods would not be blocked.

B. AS SEEN BY THE USSR

Oct 22, 1962 Moscow time

- Upon reading US newspaper reports of a crisis atmosphere in the capitol, and learning of Kennedy's scheduled 7 PM address to the nation. Khrushchev called the party Presidium to the Kremlin. Malinovsky advised calm, saying that the US was unlikely to strike immediately and that it was unlikely the USSR would need to put their missile forces on high alert. Khrushchev said their objective was to restrain US actions against Cuba; they did not want a war. But Khrushchev felt certain the US would invade Cuba.
- If the US attacked Cuba, the Presidium considered 2 options: 1) to make a radio announcement of the existence of a defense treaty with Cuba – to serve as a deterrent to US escalation; or 2) to “declare the conflict a US-Cuban affair in which the USSR had no legal or military involvement.” The existing equipment would belong to Cuba, and Cuba would respond to the US invasion. Khrushchev favored this second scenario.
- Only Presidium member Anastas Mikoyan objected, believing the US had already accepted Soviet missiles in Cuba, but would panic at the thought of nuclear weapons in the hands of Fidel Castro and would undertake a massive assault on the island (that would result in the death of Soviet troops).
- The group finally decided to put their troops in Cuba on full alert, to prepare to defend Cuba militarily and if necessary, to use tactical weapons but not nuclear weapons. They decided not to issue orders to the forces on the island until they heard Kennedy's speech.

Oct 23, 1962 Moscow time

- The Presidium was relieved when they received a copy of Kennedy's speech announcing a **blockade, not an invasion.**

Oct 23 10 AM Moscow time

- After breaking for sleep, the group reconvened. General Pliev was ordered to establish a reliable radio connection with Moscow. There would be no further consideration of allowing Pliev the authority to use tactical nuclear weapons.
- **The Presidium decided to turn around all vessels** with weapons to avoid the US having access to them. Orders to that effect were issued that morning, Moscow time. Civilian vessels with technical equipment would continue on to Cuba. This decision would not be declared immediately to the US. Despite this agreement, the ship carrying the second load of nuclear warheads, the Aleksandrovsk, was ordered to remain on course, as were four Soviet subs armed with nuclear missiles.
- The Presidium ignored Kennedy's demand for the removal of nuclear weapons. Khrushchev's reply included a request that the US show prudence and avoid actions that could lead to catastrophic consequences.

C. AS SEEN BY THE US

October 23, 1962

- JFK's informal group of advisors became the official Executive Committee of the National Security Council, ExComm. They had to decide how to implement the blockade; how they would respond if a U-2 was shot down; what to do if the Soviets took action against West Berlin.
- McCone reported that the Soviet missiles were not seen in the latest U-2 photos, possibly due to extensive camouflage. P 174 Twenty-three of the twenty-four SAM sites and four of the ten MRBM sites were operational. ⁶
- JFK ordered that Soviet ships that had turned around not be searched.
- The Organization of American States unanimously approved the blockade, allowing the US to formally declare a blockade.
- Late in the day, Robert Kennedy asked Dobrynin what orders the captains of ships headed for Cuba had. Dobrynin, who had not known of the missile

emplacements, did not know of the ships' orders. Kennedy informed him that the US intended to stop Soviet ships.

D. AS SEEN BY THE USSR

October 23, 1962

- Khrushchev's dilemma – if he allowed the US to inspect his ships in international or Cuban waters, he would look weak, but a military confrontation could well result in the use of nuclear weapons.
- He decided to accelerate the five ships that could reach Cuba before the blockade and turn back those that could not. The Aleksandrovsk was routed to the nearest Cuban port, La Isabela, rather than its objective of Mariel as the Soviets had intercepted information that the US was searching for a ship carrying nuclear warheads and American planes had twice overflown the port of Mariel on the afternoon of October 23rd.

October 24, 1962 morning, Moscow time

- Khrushchev received Kennedy's letter announcing that the blockade would go into effect at 14:00 hours GMT on October 24 (10 am EST on October 24.)

Notes:

The Soviet Union sought to address the imbalance in nuclear weaponry by installing such weapons in Cuba. According to Richard Reeves writing in *President Kennedy*, the United States had approximately five thousand deliverable nuclear weapons. U.S. intelligence estimated that the Soviets had three hundred deliverable weapons. The U.S. estimate of the number of Soviet intercontinental missiles targeted at the United States was now seventy-five. Those missiles had relatively primitive guidance systems, and analysts on both sides doubted they could even come close to their presumed targets. The Soviets also had ninety-seven short-range missiles on submarines that had to surface before they could launch, and 155 heavy bombers.

The U.S. had 156 ICBMs, 144 Polaris missiles that could be fired from submarines without surfacing, and 1,300 bombers all nuclear-armed and a third of them in the air at all times.

The USSR successfully delivered a large nuclear arsenal to Cuba before the quarantine went into effect: 36 R-12 MRBMs and their warheads; 24 warheads for R-14 IRBMs (these missiles were not delivered due to the quarantine); 80 2-20 kiloton warheads for winged rockets (cruise missiles); 12 2-kiloton warheads for tactical artillery for attacking invaders; 6 warheads for surface to sea missiles; and 6 8-12 kiloton bombers for the 6 IL-28 bombers that had been delivered in crates.

In addition, they had deployed an air defense system of SAMs capable of striking aircraft at 70,000 feet. They also had 40 MiG-21 and 6 MiG-15 fighter aircraft, as well as helicopters, gunboats, tanks and artillery. (Sherwin, 200)

Pages on this site describing events of the Cuban Missile Crises are based primarily on: Serhii Plokhii, *Nuclear Folly: A History of the Cuban Missile Crisis*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York. 2021.

¹ Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days* W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1971. p.19.

² Richard Reeves, *President Kennedy: Profile in Power*, Simon & Schuster, New York. 1993. p. 223

³Ibid., p. 372

⁴ Martin J. Sherwin, *Gambling with Armageddon*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York. 2020. pp. 241-2

⁵Reeves,p. 392.

⁶ Reeves, p. 398.

SOURCES: <https://www.jfkthelastspeech.org/cuban-missile-crisis-october-16-1962/>