

CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS CHRONOLOGY OCTOBER 24, 1962 - CONCLUSION

A. AS SEEN BY THE US

October 24 10 AM EST

- The ExComm meeting began with a report from the CIA that of the 22 Soviet ships enroute to Cuba, 7 had received urgent messages at 1:00 AM Moscow time on October 23. All 22 received additional messages at 2:30 AM EST on October 24. The CIA did not know the content of the messages.
- JFK had decided the night before that the quarantine line would be 500 miles off the shores of Cuba.
- The ExComm identified two Soviet ships as targets for boarding: the Gagarin and the Kimovsk, and it was presumed they were nearing the quarantine line and being escorted by submarines. Although the ship's declared cargo was "technical equipment," that was presumed to be a deception. In reply to JFK's query, he was informed that the aircraft carrier Essex, carrying anti-submarine helicopters would handle the interception. How could they get the submarines to surface? Warning depth charges? JFK agreed to force the subs to surface. (With that decision he believed he no longer had control over what would transpire, wrote his brother Robert Kennedy, in retrospect.)
- As the meeting continued, they received word that the Soviet ships, including the Gagarin and the Kimovsk, that actually were carrying nuclear weapons, had turned away from Cuba. So, JFK had made the order to stop Soviet ships, an aggressive and risky step, not knowing they had already turned back. With the new information, the order to intercept the ships was recalled.
- "Neither Kennedy nor the members of the ExComm had access to the latest information supplied by Navy surveillance planes. It took hours for that information to get to the White House, forcing the president and his aides to make their decisions in virtual darkness. When McNamara first mentioned the dry cargo ship Kimovsk in the ExComm discussion on October 23, the Kimovsk was spotted 300 miles east of the future quarantine line drawn 500 nautical miles from the eastern tip of Cuba."
-

October 25

- Low-flying flights of eight planes flew over Cuba morning and afternoon to supplement the U-2 photography.
- All six Soviet submarines in the area or moving towards Cuba were followed and harassed and at times forced to surface in the presence of US military ships.
- The US had 25 destroyers, two cruisers, several submarines, and several carriers in Caribbean waters surrounding Cuba.

October 26

- A Soviet-chartered freighter was stopped at the quarantine line and searched for contraband military supplies. None were found and the ship was allowed to proceed to Cuba.
- Photographic evidence shows accelerated construction of the missile sites and the uncrating of Soviet IL-28 bombers at Cuban airfields. ¹
- Low-level flights were increased to every two hours. ²
- A rambling letter arrived from Khrushchev stating that despite ideological differences, he wanted to compete peacefully, not by military means.

B. AS SEEN BY THE USSR

October 24, 1962

- Khrushchev's official reply to Kennedy's request to turn back his ships accused him of hatred for the Cubans, an election stunt, and an unlawful violation of international waters and air space that pushed the world towards nuclear war. He declared the Soviets would protect their rights.
- Khrushchev's personal reply to Kennedy said that the nuclear weapons were operational and under Soviet control; they were rigged to go off in the event of an attack on Cuba.

October 25, 1962

- Kennedy's reply to the official letter stated the US's intent to go ahead with the blockade, and he regretted the deterioration in their relationship. Khrushchev interpreted this to mean that the US was preparing for war with both Cuba and the USSR. He believed war was imminent: the US had raised DEFCON (the Defense Readiness Condition) to level 2, just short of level 1-open warfare.

Khrushchev recalled the personal letter he had addressed to Kennedy, fearing it would make things worse.

- In addition, Soviet radar tracked US bombers, armed with nuclear weapons as they made repeated approaches to the Soviet border, then abruptly turned away. Khrushchev learned of this provocation a day or two later.

October 25, 1962

- By the time Khrushchev met with the Presidium, he had decided to remove the missiles, or at least some of them. He cast the outcome as a victory, having strengthened Cuba and preventing an American attack.

October 26, 1962

- Khrushchev had a letter delivered to the US embassy in Moscow, at 5 PM local time, telling Kennedy he would remove military specialists from Cuba if the US would promise to not invade Cuba. The White House received the letter at 9:15 pm ET. In speaking of peaceful competition, he echoed the “noble rivalry” that Robert Frost proposed in their meeting of September 7.³

“WE, HOWEVER, WANT TO LIVE AND DO NOT AT ALL WANT TO DESTROY YOUR COUNTRY. WE WANT SOMETHING QUITE DIFFERENT: TO COMPETE WITH YOUR COUNTRY ON A PEACEFUL BASIS. WE QUARREL WITH YOU, WE HAVE DIFFERENCES ON IDEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS. BUT OUR VIEW OF THE WORLD CONSISTS IN THIS, THAT IDEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS, AS WELL AS ECONOMIC PROBLEMS, SHOULD BE SOLVED NOT BY MILITARY MEANS, THEY MUST BE SOLVED ON THE BASIS OF PEACEFUL COMPETITION, I.E., AS THIS IS UNDERSTOOD IN CAPITALIST SOCIETY, ON THE BASIS OF COMPETITION.”⁴ – NIKITA KHRUSHCHEV

October 26 – in Cuba

- Castro received intelligence that the US was planning to invade; the increasing number of American overflights supported that view. He put the army on highest alert.
- Castro announced Cuba would fire on American aircraft that violated Cuban airspace and asked Soviet General Pliyev to disperse his missiles. Later Pliyev reported that he would also use anti-aircraft weapons if Soviet installations were attacked.

- Castro wrote to Khrushchev warning that the US might also use nuclear weapons against the USSR and reasoned that as a measure of self-defense, Khrushchev should strike first.⁵ [Read Castro's telegram.](#)

October 27, 1962

- With the Presidium's concurrence, Khrushchev letter to Kennedy included the offer:

“WE ARE WILLING TO REMOVE FROM CUBA THE MEANS THAT YOU REGARD AS OFFENSIVE. WE ARE WILLING TO CARRY THIS OUT AND TO MAKE THIS PLEDGE IN THE UNITED NATIONS. YOUR REPRESENTATIVES WILL MAKE A DECLARATION TO THE EFFECT THAT THE UNITED STATES, FOR ITS PART, CONSIDERING THE UNEASINESS AND ANXIETY OF THE SOVIET STATE, WILL REMOVE ITS ANALOGOUS MEANS FROM TURKEY.”

Khrushchev further proposed signing the nuclear test ban treaty that he knew Kennedy wanted, and said the two deals could be negotiated and approved simultaneously. Because Khrushchev feared an invasion of Cuba, rather than wait for translation and telegraph transmission of his proposal to Kennedy, the Presidium decided to broadcast the letter on Soviet radio. It was 5 PM Moscow time. ⁶

C. AS SEEN BY THE US

October 27, 1962

- **Kennedy wanted to accept Khrushchev's idea but the EXComm rejected it.** He considered it the only hope for a peaceful resolution of the crisis. Not only that, but Kennedy felt the missiles did not add to US or European security; on the contrary, they were targets in a confrontation between the East and West. The ExComm had previously considered such an exchange, and it had indeed been suggested in the American press by the Washington Post columnist, Walter Lippman. But the members of the ExComm, to a man, rejected the proposal, as it would signal the NATO allies that the US would not protect them.
- **The Chiefs of Staff were preparing to recommend a massive airstrike on Cuba** on October 27th or 28th, to be followed by an invasion.
- **A U-2 plane strayed over the Soviet Union** on a routine 7-hour mission over the North Pole to collect air samples to monitor for Soviet nuclear tests. The pilot

had lost his way, because magnetic compasses were useless near the Pole; he had to rely on a sextant and star charts. In addition, he had been instructed to maintain radio silence. Despite the appearance of Soviet MiGs as well as nuclear-armed US F-102's, the U-2 that was now empty of fuel landed safely on a remote airstrip.

- Cubans shot at low-flying US reconnaissance planes, forcing some to turn back. McNamara believed that if that continued, they would have to shoot back.
- **A U-2 overflying Cuba was shot down** by a surface-to-air missile and the pilot killed. Soviet troops had been expecting an invasion that morning, but when it didn't come after a sleepless night, General Pliev, as well as others, went to sleep. When commanders of the anti-aircraft missile units asked for permission to fire on the U-2, Pliev couldn't be reached. Pliev had ordered that American planes could not be shot at without his direct orders. General Grechko, Pliev's deputy in charge of air defense, gave the order to shoot down the plane. They expected American retaliation.
- The US had to respond – would it destroy the missile site that had shot down the plane? But it was dark as the group considered its response, and immediate retaliation was impossible in the dark. A further complication – the Chiefs of Staff rejected the idea of a retaliatory strike against the SAM missiles, as they believed that some nuclear missiles were already operational in Cuba, and a strike might provoke a nuclear response from the Soviets. Instead, the Chiefs wanted an all-out attack on Cuba.
- Robert Kennedy and Ted Sorensen drafted a letter for the president to send to Khrushchev. In it, he offered negotiations if the Soviet missiles were removed under UN supervision. When that was accomplished, the US would end the blockade and neither the US nor its Latin American allies would invade Cuba.
- **Robert Kennedy's secret negotiation:** Later that evening, Kennedy asked select members of the ExComm to join him in the Oval Office. Among those excluded were Vice President Johnson, General Taylor and John McCone. He wanted Robert Kennedy to secretly and orally negotiate the missile swap. Dean Rusk proposed that Robert tell Dobrynin that if the USSR accepted the President's proposal, the missiles would be removed from Turkey, but that would not be publicly announced.

- **When Robert Kennedy met with Dobrynin, he indicated that the deal would be honored only if it remained secret.** He said it would take 4-5 months to remove the missiles from Turkey. He asked for Khrushchev's reply by the next day, and provided a direct number to the White House for him to deliver it. He told Dobrynin he was going to see his brother.

LATE IN THE EVENING, THE USS CONY SPOTTED A SOVIET SUBMARINE IT HAD BEEN TRACKING AS IT SURFACED IN THE BERMUDA TRIANGLE TO RECHARGE ITS BATTERIES. WHILE THE CONY AND OTHER US SHIPS WATCHED THE SUB, A NAVY PILOT FLEW OVER AND DROPPED SEVERAL LOUD INCENDIARY DEVICES TO ACTIVATE HIS PHOTOELECTRIC CAMERA LENSES. THE SUB CAPTAIN BELIEVED HE WAS UNDER ATTACK, AND GAVE THE ORDER TO PREPARE THE NUCLEAR TORPEDO. AS THE SIGNAL OFFICER DESCENDED FROM THE BRIDGE, HE GOT STUCK WITH HIS SEARCHLIGHT IN THE SHAFT OF THE CONNING TOWER, DELAYING THE COMMANDER. AT THE SAME TIME, THE CONY'S CAPTAIN SIGNED AN APOLOGY FOR THE PLANE'S AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR. THE APOLOGY WAS RECOGNIZED IN THAT MOMENT OF DELAY, AND THE ORDER WAS GIVEN TO STOP PREPARATIONS FOR FIRING.

Soviet Submarine, B-59, Kimovsk

11 PM ET, October 27

- As the military was preparing for war, new instructions were issued that nuclear weapons were not to be used if engagement was only with Cuba. If the Chinese or Soviets were also involved, nuclear weapons could be used.

AGREEMENT – WAR IS AVERTED

D. AS SEEN BY THE USSR

October 28, 1962

- The Presidium was already meeting to confirm Khrushchev's decision to dismantle the missile installations in Cuba when Kennedy's proposal given by Robert Kennedy to Dobrynin arrived. Khrushchev ordered his foreign minister to immediately communicate to Dobrynin that Kennedy's proposal was acceptable,
- Then a telegram arrived from Castro who said he had reliable information that the US would invade Cuba in a few hours. Castro proposed that the USSR make a first strike on the USA with nuclear weapons. Khrushchev urged patience, announcing the US guaranteed it would not invade Cuba.

- Khrushchev needed to assure Kennedy that the Soviets were accepting his proposal, and was working under the belief that Kennedy would be making an address to the nation at 5 PM – perhaps announcing military action. Thus, once again, Khrushchev took the step of having his letter to Kennedy broadcast via radio. In the letter he stated he had given orders “to dismantle the arms which you described as offensive, and to crate and return them to the Soviet Union.”⁷

CONCLUSION OF THE CRISIS

October 29, 1962

- US reconnaissance flights over Cuba were cancelled for the day to avoid accidents.

November 2, 1962

- President Kennedy addressed the nation, reporting that aerial photos taken on November 1 showed that Soviet launch sites were being dismantled and missiles crated. He said that aerial surveillance and the quarantine would continue until the threat was removed.⁸

November 20, 1962

- The United States ended its quarantine after the Soviets removed their IL-28 bombers from Cuba. Missiles had already been dismantled.

April 1963

- U.S. Jupiter missiles were removed from Turkey.⁹

August 5, 1963

- The United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union signed the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty in Moscow. Over the next two months, President Kennedy convinced a fearful public and a divided Senate to support the treaty. The Senate approved the treaty on September 23, 1963, by an 80-19 margin. Kennedy signed the ratified treaty on October 7, 1963.¹⁰

August 30, 1963:

- The US and USSR established a hotline to facilitate future communications between the two leaders.¹¹

REFLECTIONS OF NIKITA KHRUSHCHEV

Khrushchev was removed from power October 14, 1964, losing both his role as First Secretary of the Communist Party and the position of Premier of the Soviet Union, at least in part because of internal and international perception that he failed in the Cuban Missile Crisis.¹²

In his memoirs, he reflected on the Cuban Missile Crisis: the Soviet Union's lesser military capability, the poor work of Biryuzov's team in scouting for missile sites in Cuba, Castro's fiery nature, and the success of the Soviet's strategy and objectives in the Cuban action. He believed the Soviet's won the conflict. By secretly installing missiles in Cuba that threatened the United States and then agreeing to remove those missiles if the U.S. agreed not to invade Cuba, they had secured the sovereignty of a new Communist country in the Western Hemisphere, without the cost of war.

Of his dealings with President Kennedy he wrote: "It seemed as though the two most powerful countries in the world were about to butt heads. It seemed as though a military denouement was unavoidable. We actually had our strategic missiles ready to be launched, while the United States had surrounded the island of Cuba with naval vessels and had concentrated its infantry and air force. But we showed that if we were guided by rational aims and the desire not to allow a war to happen, the disputed questions could be resolved by compromise. Reason prevailed. That's why in my memory the very best recollections remain about the late U.S. president. He showed soberness of mind; he didn't allow himself to be frightened, nor did he allow himself to become intoxicated with the military might of the United States; he didn't decide to go for broke. It doesn't take great intelligence, as I have said, to start a war. But he displayed civic courage, the courage of a statesman. He was not afraid of being condemned from the right. And peace won out."¹³

Notes

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. 59.

² Ibid., p. 64.

³ Note the contrast between Khrushchev's apparent appreciation for Frost's humanity, and President Kennedy's anguish over Frost's statement to the press (on his return from the Soviet Union) that Khrushchev thought the U.S. too liberal to fight. At this point, Kennedy needed Khrushchev to understand the strength of the U.S.'s resolve, both on Cuba and Berlin.

⁴ <https://microsites.jfklibrary.org/cmc/oct26/doc4.html>

⁵ Sometime after the Crisis had concluded, Khrushchev asked Castro why he wanted to start a war with the U.S., making a preemptive nuclear strike. Castro denied that, but his interpreter remembered and Castro's telegram to Khrushchev was found. Khrushchev concluded that "Castro had lost his bearings [back then]. In those days, you know, Fidel was very fiery. We understood that he hadn't even thought about the obvious consequences of his proposal, which placed the world on the brink of destruction." See Sergei Khrushchev, *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev Volume 3 Statesman 1953-1964*. The Pennsylvania State University Press. University Park, PA. 2007. p 148.

⁶ <https://microsites.jfklibrary.org/cmc/oct27/doc4.html>

⁷ <https://microsites.jfklibrary.org/cmc/oct28/doc1.html>

⁸ <https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKWHA/1962/JFKWHA-143-004/JFKWHA-143-00>

⁹ <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/cuban-missile-crisis>

¹⁰ <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/cuban-missile-crisis>

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuban_Missile_Crisis. The first implementation was a teletype.

¹² Khrushchev's rivals in the Communist party deposed him largely due to his erratic and cantankerous behavior, regarded by the party as a tremendous embarrassment on the international stage. The failures in agriculture, the quarrel with China, and the humiliating resolution of the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis added to the growing resentment of Khrushchev." Source:

https://dailyhistory.org/Why_was_Nikita_Khrushchev_deposed_as_the_leader_of_the_USSR¹³ Sergei Khrushchev, *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev Volume 3: Statesman 1953-1964*. The Pennsylvania State University Press. University Park, PA. p 356.

¹⁴ McNamara, et al reported in

<http://choo.fis.utoronto.ca/fis/courses/lis2149/cuban/McNamara.html>

Khrushchev honored Kennedy's request to keep secret his promise to remove U.S. missiles from Turkey, understanding the pressure on him to keep the missiles in place.

¹⁵Richard E. Neustadt and Graham T. Allison writing in the Afterword to Robert Kennedy's *Thirteen Days*.

SOURCE: <https://www.jfkthelastspeech.org/cuban-missile-crisis-october-24-1962/>