

The USA and events in Cuba, 1959–62

Cuba

In 1898 the Americans helped the Cubans to win independence from Spain. From that time, the USA played a major part in Cuban affairs. The Americans built a huge naval base at Guantanamo and American companies invested heavily in Cuban industry. American companies had large stakes in most Cuban companies, particularly in mining and agriculture. In 1934 the Americans helped the Cuban military officer Fulgencio Batista to establish himself in power. His government became increasingly corrupt and repressive, and many Cubans saw him as a symbol of the American control of Cuba.

In 1959 Batista was overthrown by Fidel Castro. The new leader proposed reforms to improve the economy of Cuba and in particular to end corruption in government and the exploitation of the Cuban peasants and sugar mill workers. Castro began appointing communists to his government and signed a trade agreement with the Soviet Union in which Cuban sugar would be swapped for machinery, oil and economic aid.

Not surprisingly, the USA was extremely concerned to see an island that was only about 150 kilometres away from its southern coast adopting what looked like communist policies and establishing such friendly relations with the Soviet Union. It decided to take action to bring Castro into line. In the summer of 1960, the USA stopped buying Cuban sugar and later in the year it banned all trade with Cuba. Then, in January 1961, it broke off diplomatic relations with Cuba.

The Americans hoped that these measures would starve Castro into submission. But they seem to have pushed him closer to the Soviet Union. The Americans were aware that among the 'aid' that Castro was receiving from the Soviet Union were weapons. Consequently, in April 1961 the new American president, J. F. Kennedy, decided to support an invasion by the 'Cuban exiles'. These were a group of Cubans who had fled the country when Castro took over. They wanted a return to the days of Batista.

SOURCE B



Fidel Castro.

SOURCE C

What is the reason for all this silliness in Congress and in the American press about the Soviet presence in Cuba? The Soviet Union does not need to shift its weapons to any other country. Our nuclear rockets are so powerful that the Soviet Union has no need to search for sites beyond the boundaries of the Soviet Union.

A public statement made by Khrushchev in September 1962.



The Bay of Pigs

The exiles received military training, weapons and transport from the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and aimed to launch an attack on the coast of Cuba at the Bay of Pigs. They intended to establish a base for guerrilla activities against Castro and were confident that the Cuban people would support them. But the Bay of Pigs invasion was a disaster. A force of 1400 exiles landed in Cuba, but found themselves facing over 20,000 Cuban troops. There was no popular uprising to support the invasion, and those exiles who were not killed were quickly taken captive. Even though Kennedy was able to claim that there was no direct American government involvement in the invasion, Castro and Khrushchev knew that it had been planned by the CIA. Kennedy had been humiliated.

Consequences of the invasion

The Bay of Pigs invasion convinced Castro that he needed more support from the Soviet Union to defend himself against possible American attacks. In September 1961, Khrushchev publicly announced that he would provide arms to Cuba. Within months Castro had an army with the latest military equipment, such as tanks and missiles, and large numbers of 'technicians' to help train his troops.

The USA was alarmed at what was happening in Cuba. In July 1961, Castro had nationalised all American industries and in December he had announced that he himself was a communist. Now he had a well-trained army with many of the most up-to-date modern weapons.

What the Americans were most concerned about was nuclear weapons. Khrushchev did not give Castro nuclear weapons, but his friendship with the Cuban leader meant that there was every chance that he might try to station nuclear weapons on the island. In September 1962, President Kennedy warned the Soviet Union that he would not allow Cuba to become a base for Soviet nuclear missiles. Khrushchev assured Kennedy that he had no intentions of doing so. In fact, however, he had decided as early as May that if weapons could be stationed on Cuba without detection, that was what he would do.

The Bay of Pigs.

SOURCE D

- Spread false pictures of Castro looking fat sat at a table full of food beside two voluptuous women. The caption would say, 'My ration is different'.
- Prepare to blame Castro if the 1962 Mercury manned space flight carrying John Glenn crashed.
- Prepare a poisoned scuba diving suit as a gift for Castro.
- Blow up a US warship in Guantanamo Bay and blame Cuba.
- Start a terror campaign against Cuban exiles and blame it on Castro, e.g. sink a boatload of refugees on the way to Florida (real or simulated).

Ideas from the American Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1962 on how to discredit Castro. None of them was carried out.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Why were the Americans so concerned about what happened in Cuba?
- 2 Do you agree that the Bay of Pigs incident was a disaster for the USA?

SOURCE E

A photograph of the missile sites in Cuba with labels added by the American government.

Missiles discovered

On 14 October 1962, an American U-2 spy plane flew over Cuba and took pictures of what looked like missile sites being built. Some were near completion and would be ready to fire missiles in just seven days. Even more worrying was the news that a fleet of Soviet ships was sailing to Cuba – presumably carrying more missiles for the new sites.

Kennedy was now in a very difficult position. He could not allow the Soviet Union to station nuclear weapons on Cuba, as that would place virtually the whole of the USA within range of nuclear missiles. But how could he stop it? Since Khrushchev denied that there were nuclear missiles on Cuba and thought that Kennedy was a weak leader, he would hardly respond to American demands to remove them. Other measures, such as invading Cuba or bombing the missile sites, would have dire consequences. At the very least, the Soviet Union would be likely to invade West Berlin. Much more likely would be the outbreak of a general war between the USA and the Soviet Union with the chance of nuclear weapons being used.

SOURCE F

The 1930s taught us a clear lesson. Aggressive conduct, if allowed to go unchecked and unchallenged, ultimately leads to war. We will not prematurely or unnecessarily risk the costs of world-wide nuclear war in which the fruits of victory would be ashes in our mouths, but neither will we shrink from that risk at any time it must be faced.

President Kennedy broadcasting to the American people on 22 October 1962.

Kennedy and his advisers meet for thirteen days and nights from 16 October. Source G shows how difficult some of their discussions were. By 22 October, Kennedy had decided to place a blockade around Cuba to stop the Soviet fleet landing its missiles. The USA would also prepare troops ready for an invasion of the island, if necessary. That day, Kennedy broadcast the news of his planned blockade on American television (Source F) and called on Khrushchev to remove the missiles from Cuba.

The next day (23 October), Khrushchev replied that there were no nuclear missiles on Cuba and that the Soviet Union would ignore the blockade, which it called an act of piracy. The world now held its breath. Soviet ships were sailing towards an American blockade. If they ignored it, they would be fired on and war would be certain to follow.

SOURCE G**Tuesday 16 October**

The group discusses whether the USA could be under threat from Cuba. President Kennedy seems to think that the threat is not really increased.

General Maxwell Taylor: I'd like to stress this last point, Mr President. We are very vulnerable to a conventional bombing attack in the Florida area.

Douglas Dillon: What if the planes carry a nuclear weapon?

The President: Well if they carry a nuclear weapon...

Rusk: We could just be utterly wrong – but we've never really believed that Khrushchev would start a nuclear war over Cuba.

Bundy: What is the impact on the balance of power of these missiles?

The President: What difference does it make? They've got enough to blow us up now anyway. This is a political struggle as much as military.

Thursday 18 October

The group discusses what it would be like to start a nuclear war.

Robert Kennedy: I think George Ball has a hell of a good point.

The President: What?

Robert Kennedy: I think it's the whole question of, you know, assuming that you do survive all this. What kind of country you are.

Ball: Yes, imagine having to live the rest of your life knowing what you have done.

Robert Kennedy: It's a hell of a burden to carry.

Unknown to the people involved in the discussions about Cuba, President Kennedy taped most of the talks. They provide some interesting insights into thinking at the time.

Friday 19 October

The military chiefs show that they support tough action.

General Le May: If we don't do anything to Cuba, then they're going to push on Berlin and push real hard because they have got us on the run ... This is almost as bad as the appeasement at Munich ... I just don't see any other solution except direct military action right now. A blockade would be considered by a lot of our friends and neutrals as being a pretty weak response to this. And I'm sure a lot of our own citizens would feel that way too.

Monday 22 October

The President discovers that American nuclear weapons could be fired without him knowing – and he does not like it!

The President: We may be attacking the Cubans and a reprisal may come. I don't want these nuclear weapons firing without our knowing it. Can we take care of it?

Nitze: The Chiefs will object to new orders because it will change their existing instructions. A Soviet nuclear attack requires the immediate execution of the European Defense Plan.

The President: What's the European Defense Plan?

Nitze: Nuclear war.

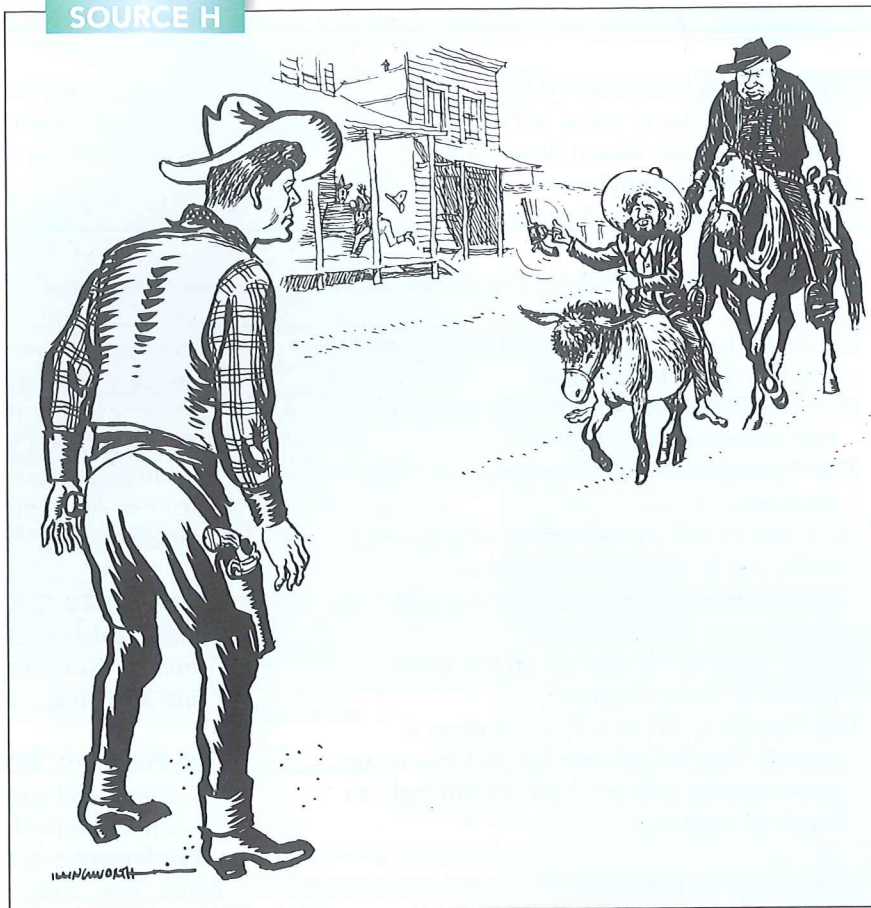
The President: No ... What we've got to do is to make sure that these fellows don't fire off weapons and put the United States under attack. I don't think we ought to accept the Chiefs' word on that one, Paul.

Who's who?

Political advisers: Robert Kennedy (the president's brother), Robert McNamara (Secretary of State for Defense), Paul Nitze (Assistant Secretary of State for Defense), Douglas Dillon (Treasury Secretary), Dean Rusk (Secretary of State), George Ball (Under Secretary of State), McGeorge Bundy (president's aide).

Military advisers: General Maxwell Taylor (Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff), General Curtis Le May (Air Force Chief of Staff).

A cartoon published in the *Daily Express* in October 1962. President Kennedy and Khrushchev are seen as gunslingers waiting to see who will draw his gun first. Castro is seen riding on a donkey.



On 24 October 1962, a group of Soviet ships reached the American blockade. One oil tanker was allowed through without being searched. The other ships turned back. President Kennedy's brother, Robert, said that in the eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation 'Khrushchev just blinked'. Nuclear warfare had been avoided.

The Soviet ships had turned around, but the crisis was not over. The Soviet Union still had missiles on the island which had to be moved. Then, on 26 October, Khrushchev sent Kennedy a letter suggesting that, if the Americans lifted the blockade and promised not to invade Cuba, the nuclear weapons would be removed. This was excellent news for Kennedy and was the first time that the Soviet Union had admitted that it had nuclear weapons on Cuba. But before the USA could reply, things took a turn for the worse.

On 27 October, a second letter arrived from Khrushchev. It said that Soviet missiles on Cuba were no more of a threat to the USA than American missiles in Turkey were to the Soviet Union. Khrushchev said that he would remove the Cuban missiles if the USA removed its missiles in Turkey.

The Americans had considered removing the missiles in Turkey, but felt strongly that they could

not be seen to do so because the Soviet Union had demanded it. Then on the same day a U-2 spy plane was shot down over Cuba. Some of Kennedy's advisers wanted him to take military action. Instead he decided to ignore Khrushchev's second letter and respond to the first. Kennedy sent a letter saying that he agreed to the terms set out in the letter of 26 October, but that if the missiles were not removed, an attack would follow.

On the same day, Robert Kennedy went to visit the Soviet ambassador in Washington and told him that the Americans would consider removing missiles in Turkey 'within a short time'. On 28 October, Khrushchev sent a message saying that the missiles on Cuba would be dismantled. The crisis was over.

Consequences of the crisis

Although Khrushchev had thought that Kennedy was a weak president, the American leader had emerged from the crisis as the victor – especially as the deal on the missiles in Turkey was kept



American cities that could be reached by missiles fired from Cuba.

quiet. Khrushchev claimed that the crisis was a victory for the Soviet Union and that the independence of communist Cuba had been guaranteed. In reality, some leading Soviet politicians were angry that their country had been forced to back down. This played a significant part in Khrushchev's dismissal in 1964.

The two sides had learned from the crisis that confrontation between them threatened world peace. So steps were taken to reduce the threat of nuclear war. A direct 'hot-line' phone link was set up between Washington and the Kremlin, and a Nuclear Test Ban Treaty was signed in 1963. Although the two sides had nearly gone to war, the crisis had helped to thaw the Cold War just a little.

SOURCE I

We sent the Americans a note saying that we agreed to remove our missiles and bombers on condition that the President gives us assurances that there would be no invasion of Cuba. Finally Kennedy gave in and agreed to make a statement giving us such an assurance. It was a great victory for us, a spectacular success without having to fire a single shot.

Extracts from Khrushchev's memoirs, written in the late 1960s.

The Cuban missile crisis – a summary

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| 14 October | Soviet missile sites spotted. |
| 16 October | President Kennedy informed. |
| 22 October | Blockade set up. Kennedy broadcasts to nation. |
| 23 October | Khrushchev calls blockade 'piracy'. |
| 24 October | Soviet ships agree to turn round. |
| 26 October | Khrushchev's first letter arrives. |
| 27 October | Khrushchev's second letter arrives. US plane shot down. Kennedy responds to first letter. Robert Kennedy visits Soviet ambassador. |
| 28 October | Khrushchev agrees to remove weapons. |

QUESTIONS

- 1 How big a threat was the Cuban missile crisis to world peace?
- 2 What could a historian studying the Cuban missile crisis learn from Source G?
- 3 How reliable is Source I for a historian studying the consequences of the Cuban missile crisis?