

# Thirteen Days: John F. Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis

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At 8:45 AM on October 16, 1962, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy alerted President Kennedy that a major international crisis was at hand. Two days earlier a United States military surveillance aircraft had taken hundreds of aerial photographs of Cuba. CIA analysts, working around the clock, had deciphered in the pictures conclusive evidence that a Soviet missile base was under construction near San Cristobal, Cuba, just 90 miles from the coast of Florida. The most dangerous encounter in the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union had begun.

The question facing President Kennedy that morning was how to get the missiles out of Cuba. For, as Kennedy, his advisors, and the leadership of both parties in Congress believed there was no alternative but to secure the removal of the missiles.

## **Monday, October 15**

Nuclear missile sites were discovered on the 15th when Richard Heyser, a U-2 pilot, flew his plane from Texas to Orlando via Cuba. When he landed, a one star general took the film to the photography lab. After analyzing the pictures, military intelligence found what they thought were surface-to-air missile sites. However, when they measured the missiles they found that they were much larger. The SA-4 was 25 feet long, while the missiles in the photographs were 60 to 65 feet long. They looked at specifications of the SS-4 nuclear missile and confirmed that it was what they saw. They then realized that it was going to involve the president. For more information on recon during the crisis go to the Recon Room.

The missiles and supplies were transported to Cuba in many ways but all of them secret. The troops were transported by civilian ships. A cruise liner carried some troops acting like tourists while others were transported in the holds of other ships. The missiles were carried in pieces by various merchant ships. Not one ship carried a complete missile.

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## **Tuesday, October 16**

Kennedy was informed of the missiles in Cuba during his breakfast on 16th. He then called a meeting for twelve of his important advisors. This group of people was called the executive committee (EX-COMM). At the meeting they discussed two major solutions: an air strike followed by an invasion, or a blockade of Cuba. Many of the military advisors wanted an invasion but Kennedy wanted to avoid a military confrontation.

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## **Wednesday, October 17**

In order to maintain secrecy, Kennedy followed his planned schedule and went to Connecticut to campaigned for a good friend of his, Abe Ribicoff. He was in a good mood and made a few jokes during his speech. As soon as he got in the car his demeanor immediately changed to being very

serious. He went back to the White House and considered the options of bombing or blockade. The Air Force wanted to bomb Cuba with over 100 missiles, but Kennedy would ask, "How many bombs do you want and what do you want to bomb?" Before the Air Force was done they had planned a massive air attack that would have wiped Cuba off the face of the Earth. During the night of the 17th, after another U-2 flight, the military discovered that there were SS-5 missiles. These missiles could reach almost all of the continental U.S.

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### **Thursday, October 18**

On October 18 Kennedy met with Soviet Foreign Minister Andrie Gromyko to discuss various matters, including whether or not the Soviets had offensive weapons in Cuba. Kennedy then read him a statement saying that the U.S. would not tolerate offensive weapons in Cuba. Gromyko said that the Soviets had no such weapons in Cuba. Before the meeting had begun Kennedy had decided not to show the pictures of the missiles to Gromyko because he had not yet decided how to handle the situation. Afterward Kennedy remarked to an advisor that he wanted to take the enlarged photographs out of his desk and ask, "What do these look like?"



Nine members of EX-COMM wanted to brief Kennedy about the new discovery of SS-5 missiles, but they were at the State Department and he was in the White House. If in the middle of the night they all went to the White House they would attract attention from the press. Then somebody remembered that there was a passage way from the Treasury Building to the White House via the bomb shelters under ground. So they all piled into one car and headed to the Treasury Building.

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### **Friday, October 19**

On October 19th Kennedy asked one of his advisors to draft two speeches: one telling the nation of air strikes and one announcing a blockade. At this time people were making plans to leave the White House if it was necessary. Later that day Kennedy started a campaign trip in the Mid-west. He planned to go to Cleveland, Ohio, Springfield, and Chicago, Illinois. Again he chose not to cancel this trip because he wanted to maintain secrecy.

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### **Saturday, October 20**

On Saturday, with Kennedy still gone on the campaign trip, EX-COMM met and discussed the two speeches being prepared. They approved them with a few minor changes and then Robert Kennedy (the President's brother and Attorney General) called the President to say that he had to come back to Washington. The President was reluctant to do so but he and Robert felt there should always be a consensus. It was necessary then, that he returns to discuss the two options, a "surgical" air strike or quarantine with EX-COMM. The President finally agreed and canceled his trip by saying that he had an "upper respiratory infection" and was going to return to Washington due to advice from his doctor. He flew back to Washington and had a meeting between 1:30 and 2:30 PM discussing the options. He would not make up his mind until the next day.

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## Sunday, October 21

On the 21st, Kennedy met with his top advisors to discuss the missiles in Cuba. He asked the head of Strategic Air Command (SAC) if they could take out all the missiles. The General replied that they would be able to take out all the missiles that they knew about. Then he asked the general how many casualties, civilian and military, would occur. The general said that 10,000 to 20,000 casualties would occur. This greatly influenced Kennedy's decision to use a blockade against Cuba. The press then contacted Kennedy wanting to know what was going on. The press knew that there were offensive weapons in Cuba and that Kennedy was discussing a plan with his advisors to deal with the threat. Kennedy replied that he was going to ask the networks for air time on Monday to tell the American people about what he was going to do about the missiles. He went on to say that if the reporters denied him the element surprise that "I don't know what the Soviets will do." After another U-2 flight the military found bombers and MIGs being assembled rapidly. They also found cruise missile sites being built on Cuba's northern shore.

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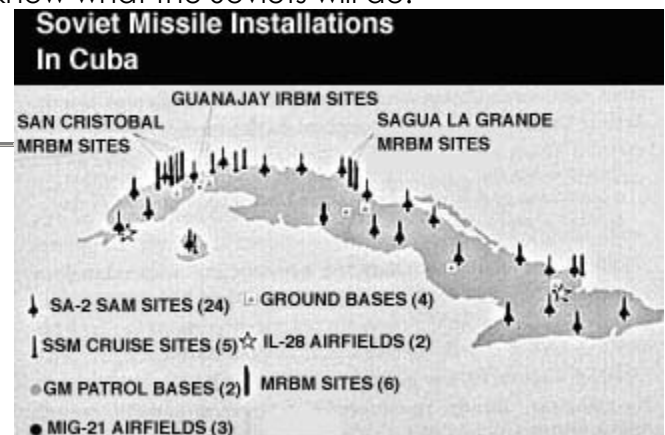
## Monday, October 22

Each of the missiles that were in Cuba each was the equivalent of 50 Hiroshimas. The Soviet field commanders were authorized to use their tactical nuclear missiles in case of an invasion. U.S. Senator leaders were then called to Washington for a special briefing. They came out of the briefing surprised and wanting air strikes. Ships were prepared for the blockade not knowing what was ahead of them. In Guantanamo Bay, Marines were brought in to reinforce the base and military dependents were evacuated. Military alert was raised to DEFCON 3 and instructions were given to be ready to launch missiles within minutes of the Presidents speech. Twenty planes with nuclear bombs were in the air ready within minutes to bomb Russia. Minuteman missiles were also on their highest alert ever. Kennedy sent Khrushchev a letter with his speech inside of it. Here is an excerpt from it:

This government, as promised, has maintained the surveillance of the Soviet military build up on the island of Cuba. Within the past week unmistakable evidence that fact that a serious of offensive missile sites is now in preparation of that imprisoned island. The purpose of these bases can be none other than to provide a nuclear strike capability against the Western Hemisphere...

I have directed that the following initial steps be taken...

- First, to halt this offensive build up, a strict quarantine of all military equipment under shipment to Cuba is being initiated.
- Second, I have directed the continued and increased close surveillance and its military build up.
- Third, it shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response on the Soviet Union.



John F. Kennedy  
October 22, 1962

In response to Kennedy's speech Castro mobilized all of Cuba's military forces and readied their defenses. Everything but the missile warheads were prepared for a strike. Khrushchev sent a letter in response to Kennedy's later that night.

### **Tuesday, October 23**

On the 23rd Kennedy ordered a low level reconnaissance mission by six Crusader jets. The mission, flown at 350 feet at 350 knots, brought back stunning close up pictures of the missile sites and also showed that the Soviets were exercising the missiles by going through all the procedures necessary to launch the missile but without actually launching them. One of the pilots, William Ecker, commented that, "When you can almost see the writing on the side of the missiles then you really know what you've got."

On the same day Kennedy got support for his actions when the Organization of American States (OAS) unanimously approved of the quarantine against Cuba. These countries realized that they were also threatened by the missiles on Cuba. When Kennedy signed the document his secretary got out the pens, as is the case for all documents, but after Kennedy signed it he kept one for himself. By the end of the day U.S. ships had taken up position along the quarantine line. They were instructed to shoot at any ship that failed to stop at the line for inspection.

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### **Wednesday, October 24**

On the 24th Soviets ships were approaching the quarantine line while American ships were preparing to disable them if they did not stop. The order given to the American ships was to first try to communicate with them; then if they



did not stop, they were to shoot a shot across their bow, and, finally, if they still did not stop, American ships were instructed to blow off the rudder in order to stop the ships' forward progress. Two of the major concerns of EX-COMM were of the Soviet submarines that were accompanying the ships and the possibility that Khrushchev had not had enough time to instruct the ship captain on what he should do.

Later that day, after receiving a radio message, the Soviet ships stopped dead in the water. This did not, however, mean that the crisis was over. To quote Secretary of State Dean Rusk, "We were eyeball to eyeball and the other guy just blinked."

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### **Thursday, October 25**

On the 25th military alert was raised to its highest point ever in history, DEFCON 2. This status meant that the military was ready at a moment's notice to launch an attack on Cuba and the Soviet Union. While this was happening one of the Soviet ships started up again toward the quarantine line. This worried many people that there really was going to be a military confrontation of some kind. Kennedy did not want to go to war so he sent his advisors to the United Nations to show the pictures of the missiles to the Security Council. The Soviets refused to answer any of the questions that they were asked so the advisors just showed the pictures and explained the power of the missiles.

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## Friday, October 26

On the 26th one of Soviet ships, the *Marcula*, was searched by the U.S. Navy. After the search it was cleared to Cuba because it contained only paper materials. While the vessel was being searched Khrushchev wrote a reply to Kennedy's letter of the 25th. The letter was clearly painstakingly written by Khrushchev. It said that the Soviets would remove the missiles if Kennedy made a public statement that it would never invade Cuba.

After another U-2 flight, the military found that the Soviets were now trying to camouflage the missiles.

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## Saturday, October 27

The 27th was the worst day of the crisis, with one U-2 getting shot down, another U-2 flying off course into Russia, and a second letter being received from Khrushchev.

First a U-2 on a routine air sampling mission picked the wrong star to navigate by and ended up over Russia. When he realized he was in trouble he raised the rescue station, "Duckbutt." The radio operator asked him to pick out any constellations. In response he said that he could see Orion



15 degrees to his left. The radio operator did some computations and then said to turn towards Orion. Meanwhile someone speaking good English was telling him to turn 35 degrees to the right. The pilot thought, "Some Ruskie". Then F-105s flew past him to protect from some Migs that were going to shoot him down. He did not know it at the time but the fighters, which never engaged the Migs, carried nuclear tipped missiles. This almost touched off a nuclear war because the Soviets could have interpreted this as a final reconnaissance mission before a nuclear attack.

Next while attempting to get updated pictures of the missile sites a U-2 was shot down over Cuba. A Soviet commander on the site thought that this was the last reconnaissance mission before an invasion or bombing raid would start. Khrushchev was worried then because the shooting had not been ordered from Moscow and similar incidents could also be started without the consultation of Moscow.

While these events were occurring Khrushchev sent Kennedy a second letter raising the price for moving the missiles out of Cuba. He now wanted Kennedy not only to make a public statement but also to remove missiles from Turkey. This letter contained a much harder approach and suggested that hard-liners had helped Khrushchev write it. The EX-COMM had much debate over what to do about the letter until Robert Kennedy suggested that they ignore the second letter and only respond to the first.

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## Sunday, October 28

The 28th was the final day of the crisis. On that day Khrushchev made an announcement over Radio Moscow that the Soviets had agreed to dismantle their nuclear missiles in Cuba and take them back to the Soviet Union. The missiles were transported across the Atlantic by ship. The missiles were placed on the decks with tarps over them so that when American aircraft or ships were near the tarps could be removed so the American could count the missiles.

