

Top-Secret Briefing A

To: President John F. Kennedy and advisors
From: U.S. Intelligence Community
Re: Nuclear missiles in Cuba, mid-October, 1962

Mr. President, on October 14, 1962, American U-2 spy planes photographed a missile launch pad under construction on the island of Cuba. This launch pad, when completed, will allow the firing of Soviet-supplied nuclear weapons with a range of more than 1,000 miles—enough to put the lives of 80 million Americans at risk should the missiles be fired at the United States.

In recent weeks, and on more than one occasion, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev pledged not to put offensive nuclear missiles in Cuba. It is clear that Khrushchev was lying and cannot be trusted. The state of readiness of the launch pad indicates that the Soviets have been shipping nuclear missiles secretly for months. It appears they may be ready to fire very soon.

The missiles in Cuba are part of what seems to be a huge arms buildup to shore up Communist control of Cuba. We believe there are between 10,000 and 20,000 Soviet "technicians" in Cuba at this time. The Soviets may be armed with tactical—small battlefield—nuclear weapons that are undetectable from the air. In addition, the Soviets have installed a ring of surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) that are capable of shooting down any aircraft the United States uses to maintain surveillance of the situation.

As you and your advisors are aware, Mr. President, the United States maintains clear superiority over the Soviets in the nuclear arms race. The number of ICBMs in U.S. arsenals is about double that of the Soviets. Also, the U.S. nuclear missiles in Turkey provide a distinct advantage. Remember, too, that a U.S. Navy submarine armed with nuclear missiles is about to be placed in the Mediterranean Sea to provide quick-strike capabilities.

Why the Soviet premier has chosen this line of action at this time is not entirely clear—after all, there are already enough nuclear missiles in the Soviet Union itself to annihilate the United States. It appears that the Soviet premier may be attempting to gain an upper hand in the Cold War with one bold move.

Critical Thinking Question A: You are a presidential advisor to Kennedy. You must decide whether the president should be concerned about Soviet missiles and launch pads in Cuba. What do you advise the president to do? Kennedy has asked you to brainstorm possible U.S. responses to the Soviet missile threat in Cuba. What will you include on your list?

Top-Secret Briefing B

To: President John F. Kennedy and advisors
From: U.S. Intelligence Community
Re: U.S. response to missile buildup in Cuba

Since our last briefing, Mr. President, the Soviet buildup of missiles in Cuba has continued at a frantic pace.

The missile launch site at San Cristóbal, about 50 miles from the capital city of Havana, will be operational within about a week. When complete, the warning time for a missile attack against the United States will be cut from 15 minutes to between 2 and 3 minutes. U.S. cities from Washington, D.C., to Kansas City are at risk. Furthermore, some of our intelligence suggests that the Soviets are presently installing longer-range nuclear missiles. These missiles would leave only one major U.S. city outside their range: Seattle.

Mr. President, you asked us to compile a list of options for you and your advisors to consider, keeping in mind your general goals: removing the missiles from Cuba, avoiding a nuclear exchange of any kind, preparing for Soviet moves elsewhere in the world (such as Berlin), and not losing face.

As we see it, the United States can respond in at least five ways to the Soviet construction of missile sites in Cuba:

1. Ignore the missiles.
2. Initiate a naval blockade of Cuba to prevent Soviet ships from bringing additional supplies to the island.
3. Invade Cuba.
4. Launch a conventional air strike against the missile sites.
5. Send an emissary to discuss the matter with Khrushchev.

Critical Thinking Question B: You are a member of the Executive Committee, known as Ex-COMM, a group of Kennedy's closest advisors who have gathered to help him work through this crisis. The president has asked you to assess these five possible responses. How would you prioritize each of the possible responses? What are the positive and negative aspects of each?

Top-Secret Briefing C

To: Ex-COMM members
From: President John F. Kennedy
Re: Our response and Soviet reactions

Since our last briefing by the U.S. Intelligence Community, you are well aware of the course of action that I have ordered: a naval quarantine, or blockade, of the island of Cuba. I decided to blockade Cuba because I believe that a U.S. air strike against Cuban missile sites might result in the death of Soviet soldiers in Cuba, and that loss would likely trigger World War III. As you know, however, the crisis with the Soviet Union over nuclear missiles in Cuba is far from over.

On television on Monday, October 22, I informed our citizens of my intent to begin a blockade of all offensive military equipment being shipped to Cuba. I also stated that any missile launched from Cuba would be regarded as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States and would require our full retaliatory response.

On Tuesday, Khrushchev sent me a letter stating that the Soviet Union would not observe the blockade, which he called illegal. The following day, I learned that 25 Soviet merchant ships were steaming toward Cuba, accompanied by as many as six Soviet submarines. These ships did eventually alter their course and remain outside the quarantine line.

On Friday, U.S. ships stopped and boarded a Panamanian vessel heading toward Cuba and full of Soviet goods. As the vessel contained no military material, they allowed it to proceed. The same day, another ship was spotted heading toward Cuba, seeming ready to defy the blockade. More ominously, a Soviet surface-to-air missile shot down one of our U-2 spy planes over Cuba by early Saturday morning, and the American pilot died.

The military generals who form my Joint Chiefs of Staff have recommended an immediate air strike on the missile sites—an action that would, I believe, very likely push us over the brink and into nuclear war with the Soviet Union. However, if I maintain the blockade despite the criticism of the military, I want to know what you think I should do in several situations that could arise. What do you recommend I do if:

1. the Soviets attempt to break the blockade?
2. the Soviets wait it out for weeks or months until the crisis subsides?
3. Cuban commanders launch at the United States one of the missiles already in Cuba?
4. the Soviets establish a blockade of Berlin?

Critical Thinking Question C: You are a member of Ex-COMM. Respond to the four situations the president might face, keeping in mind his goals for the crisis as outlined in Top-Secret Briefing C. Then offer your recommendation for what the president should do now.