



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

Handout A: Narrative

BACKGROUND

President John F. Kennedy faced a great crisis in 1962 when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev started building nuclear sites in Cuba. Khrushchev planned to house forty nuclear missiles that could reach the continental United States, as well as to build bases for 40,000 support troops. The missile sites and bases would be only a few dozen miles away from the coast of Florida. In 1961, early in his administration, Kennedy had launched the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion to oust communist leader Fidel Castro from Cuba. The failure was a huge embarrassment for the new president, but he took responsibility for the attack and learned a lesson about taking rash actions without significantly considering all of the possible consequences and alternatives.

Kennedy's administration suffered a blow in prestige in global affairs, especially in the view of the Soviet Union. In August 1961, Khrushchev tested Kennedy's resolve by blocking off East Berlin from West Berlin through building the Berlin Wall. Kennedy was not willing to start a war over the issue, and again Khrushchev thought that the American president was weak. The Soviet leader concluded that he could threaten the United States without repercussions.

However, Kennedy would not be bullied so easily. He was born in 1917 and came of age during World War II. He fought in that conflict and saw firsthand the tragic results that appeasing Hitler had brought about. When the Cold War began in the 1940s, Kennedy agreed with the predominant view that the U.S. must contain Soviet expansion and aggression around the globe. He was elected to the House of Representatives and then to the Senate before winning the presidency in 1960. Kennedy wanted to avoid a nuclear war, but he was willing to take a strong stand against the Soviet Union—even if it increased tensions. His purpose was to protect the free world from communist aggression.

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In early September 1962, Kennedy and several advisers spent hours preparing a statement to address the Soviet Union placing missiles in Cuba along with combat forces. Kennedy stated that while there was no immediate military threat to the United States, the administration was monitoring the situation carefully.

By October 1, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) received news from the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) that the missiles might be nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev attempted to reassure the United States that the "weapons that the USSR is sending to Cuba will only be of a defensive character." On October 14,

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a U-2 spy plane flew a mission to assess the situation. Flying at nearly 75,000 feet above Cuba for six minutes, the U-2 camera snapped almost 1,000 high-resolution photographs of the island and returned to the United States. In the meantime, Soviet Ambassador to the U.S., Anatoly Dobrynin assured the administration that the Russians were “not shipping offensive weapons.”

The U-2 photographs were developed and showed unmistakable evidence to CIA analysts of several nuclear missile silos under construction in Cuba. They quickly drew up a report and sent it to National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, who was shocked at the news when he received it late at night on October 15. He decided not to wake President Kennedy, but to deliver the news to him the following morning. Bundy presented the CIA analysis and materials to Kennedy in his bedroom at 8:45 a.m. Kennedy immediately called a meeting, telling his brother and Attorney General Robert Kennedy, “We have some big trouble. I want you over here.”

Within a few hours., President Kennedy met with thirteen advisors in the Cabinet Room for over an hour. The assembled group would come to be known as “ExComm.” After attempting to ascertain when the missiles would be ready, as well as what Khrushchev’s motivations could be, the president laid out four possible American responses: 1. a targeted airstrike against the missile installations; 2. a general airstrike on Cuba; 3. a blockade to keep Soviet ships from landing the missiles; 4. an invasion of Cuba.

The administration kept the U-2 photos secret, and the president kept up a normal schedule. The members of ExComm continued meeting and discussing the possible courses of action. On October 18, the JCS urged an invasion of Cuba as the best way to assure success. Kennedy resisted an invasion and war, arguing, “nobody knows what kind of success we’re going to have with this invasion.” Thousands would be dead on both sides, the attack might fail, and the Russians would most likely defend Cuba, leading to World War III. During several meetings over the next few days, the airstrike and invasion were hotly debated with no conclusion.

When the president and National Security Council (NSC) met for almost three hours on the morning of Saturday, October 20, the president began to lean in favor of a blockade, or quarantine, of Cuba. This fulfilled his hopes of avoiding war but was still a strong move against the Soviets. Kennedy and his advisors then prepared a televised address to the American people and the world for October 22 while spending the intervening time privately speaking with members of Congress, allies, and the media. Congressional leaders were outraged and more bellicose than Kennedy expected. He needed to rebuke multiple demands for immediate war with the Soviet Union.

In Monday night’s televised address, Kennedy told 100 million American viewers about the crisis. He discussed his plan of introducing a quarantine around Cuba and established the possibility of additional actions if the Soviets did not turn their missile-carrying ships back. The next day, Kennedy received a combative message from Khrushchev but decided with ExComm that the quarantine would begin on Wednesday, October 24. Kennedy’s purpose was to refuse to back down, as this would only embolden even stronger Russian actions.

On the morning of October 24, Soviets ships approached U.S. warships stationed around Cuba. The DEFCON (Defense Condition) level was changed from three to two. DEFCON level one meant the United States was at war. Robert Kennedy described his brother as the morning wore

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on, stating, “These few minutes were the time of greatest worry by the President. His hand went up to his face and covered his mouth, and he closed his fist. His eyes were tense, almost gray, and we just stared at each other across the table.” Six Soviet ships bore down on Cuba until, finally, they turned back. Secretary of State Dean Rusk turned to Bundy and whispered, “We’re eyeball to eyeball, and I think the other fellow just blinked.”

Nevertheless, the crisis was not over. By the following day, a dozen Soviet ships had turned back. However, more were still coming, and the ExComm members were concerned that the tense standoff was allowing the Russians to complete the missile installations on Cuba. That night, Kennedy received a letter from Khrushchev in which the Soviet leader offered to recall the ships and stop work on the missile sites if the U.S. would promise not to invade Cuba. Kennedy noticed his adversary did not promise to remove the missiles and withheld a response.

On Saturday afternoon, October 27, a second Khrushchev message arrived with the same deal, but with the additional demand that American missiles be removed from Turkey as a quid pro quo for the removal of missiles from Cuba. The ExComm considered the proposal for four hours that afternoon and evening. They went around and around tersely until the members hit upon the idea of responding to the first message and ignoring the second. Simultaneously, Robert Kennedy met with Dobrynin and informed him off-the-record that the president would remove the missiles from Turkey, but only if it was not part of the deal, and not revealed publicly. The Soviets would also remove missiles from Cuba that had arrived there prior to the blockade. President Kennedy and the other members of ExComm were exhausted, depressed, and tense as they contemplated nuclear annihilation and waited for the Soviet response.

Kennedy received the Soviet message announcing that it had accepted the deal on the morning of Monday, October 29. The pall was lifted and the two countries hammered out a few points of contention. President John Kennedy had pulled the U.S. from the brink of nuclear war. He combined a steely resolve to protect American interests and lives, a determined purpose to avert a war that would destroy countless millions on both sides, and careful decision-making based on evidence and good counsel. It was Kennedy’s finest hour and revealed his defining purpose in action like no other time of his administration.