

The Cuban Missile Crisis was the military confrontation between the United States, the Soviet Union, and Cuba when the Cold War threatened to become a nuclear war.

Two Weeks in October

On October 15, 1962, U.S. intelligence experts, studying films taken by a U-2 spy plane over Cuba, were surprised to see a Soviet missile-launching area. When the public heard about a U.S. blockade of Cuba on October 22, they didn't know the full story. Neither did Washington nor Moscow:

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- Nikita Khrushchev, concerned about U.S. missiles in Turkey, had persuaded Fidel Castro to accept missiles in Cuba as a defense against U.S. invasion.
- The Soviet Union had 45 missiles in Cuba. Years later, the West learned that nine of them were "tactical" nukes each with the power of the Hiroshima bomb - that could be fired at the discretion of the local Soviet commander. (At the time, U.S. missiles in Europe were controlled by their local commanders, and the ICBMs were later discovered to have electronic faults that could have caused them to launch themselves.)
- On October 22, a B-52 strayed over Siberia and was ordered destroyed. Officers in Moscow watched by radar as a pair of MiG-17s converged on the target; 50 kilometers from the bomber, they turned back. They were low on fuel.



Soon after the Cuban Revolution, the United States became concerned about the political orientation of Fidel Castro's government, and thus Cuba was a major focus of the new Kennedy administration when it assumed power in January 1961.

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- On October 23, Gen. Curtis LeMay, with the U.S. joint chiefs of staff, said, "If there is to be war, there's no better time than at present. We are prepared and 'the bear' is not."
- On the night of October 25, a wild bear climbed over the perimeter fence of the U.S. air force base in Duluth, Minnesota. A sentry shot at the shadowy figure and sounded the sabotage alarm to alert bases throughout the region. However, at Volk Field, Wisconsin, the alarm for nuclear war was triggered.

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Air crew, who had been told there would be no practice alerts during this crisis, rushed to take off. Luckily, the base commander phoned Duluth to find out what had really happened (the "saboteur" wasn't identified until later) and subordinate officers drove a car onto the Volk Field runway, blocking any departures.

- On October 26, saying "only lunatics or suicides" wanted nuclear war; Khrushchev offered to pull his missiles in return for a no-invasion pledge. But Cuban troops knocked down a U-2 and killed the pilot; U.S. fliers assumed they would hit back; however, Kennedy said, "We shall try (negotiations) again."
- On October 27, which was the deadline for Soviet missiles to be operational, a deal was reached and announced on Moscow Radio. U.S. troops had been scheduled to invade Cuba on October 29.

Sources: Eyeball to Eyeball, The Limits of Safety, Independent on Sunday, and news services.