

Cuban Missile Crisis! Can you avoid nuclear armageddon?

You will be split into two teams, the USA and the USSR. Both teams are made up of a group of advisers and a leader, who should be chosen by the team. Read the information on your team's view, and on the six stages of the crisis. Team USA should follow the 'Guidelines for action' below, and then pass their decision on to Team USSR, who follow the same process and respond.

The Russian view

Since 1933, Cuba was run by a corrupt and violent dictator called Batista. He was kept in power by America. The Americans exploited the Cubans by owning the best land and biggest industries. There was a massive gulf between rich and poor.

In 1959, Batista was overthrown by a 'people's revolution' led by Fidel Castro. Castro wanted an end to American exploitation and to help create a fair society based on Communist ideas – the first in the American continent. The USSR stepped in to help Cuba after America ceased to buy Cuban sugar or lend her any money. The USSR and Cuba became close allies.

In 1961, American land and air forces tried to invade Cuba at the Bay of Pigs, and remove its legal government. Understandably, Castro looked to Russia for protection against the threat of another American attack. The USSR were glad to defend Cuba with military equipment.

President Kennedy

Kennedy was a new president and had many problems to solve in America. In 1961, Russian Chairman Khrushchev had met Kennedy in Vienna. Khrushchev thought the young president was naïve and weak. Kennedy had already shown his poor judgement at the Bay of Pigs. Kennedy had also done nothing to stop Khrushchev building the Berlin Wall in the same year. Maybe Kennedy was too weak and inexperienced to cope?

Chairman Khrushchev

Khrushchev was at the height of his power and was a strong leader of the communist world. He had attacked and ended many of Stalin's policies. He needed to protect the USSR at all costs. He wanted 'peaceful co-existence' with the USA, but he was not going to reduce the USSR's strength. Khrushchev was worried that US missile bases in Europe and Turkey formed a ring around Russia. The USSR had no bases close to the US mainland.

Advisers

Military: the chiefs of the army, navy and air force, who are usually keen on action of some kind to make themselves more powerful.

Diplomatic: experts in foreign affairs, who will explain how other countries will judge your actions, and also understand international law.

Political: support their leader, and usually want to make sure the leader looks as strong as possible.

Intelligence: experts in how the other side thinks.

Guidelines for action

1. Each advisor should give their advice in turn.
2. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of each piece of advice as a team.
3. Consider how the other side might react to your actions.
4. Do not back down or 'lose face'.
5. Make sure the majority of advisers agree, but the leader should make the final decision.

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The American View

Since 1933, Cuba has been led by a pro-American dictator called Batista. The USA owned most of the land and industries, and bought Cuba's main crop, sugar.

In 1959, Batista was overthrown in a revolution led by Fidel Castro. The USA refused to lend Castro any money and refused to buy Cuban sugar. Castro began to take over much of the land and companies owned by Americans. The USSR then began to buy Cuban sugar, and Castro allowed the USSR to build military bases on Cuba. Now the USA had a communist neighbour only 90 miles from her mainland!

In 1961, followers of Batista, with some American support, landed at the Bay of Pigs to defeat Castro. But the force was easily destroyed by the Cuban army. Castro became even more anti-American. Cuba was now a real threat to American security!

President Kennedy

Elected in 1960, Kennedy was the youngest President in American history. He was idealistic, charming, and dynamic, and many Americans thought this was a beginning of a new era. Kennedy knew the Bay of Pigs had been a mistake, but he was determined to make America strong and safe. He was also committed to defend free countries from communism.

Chairman Khrushchev

Khrushchev had proved himself a wily political by becoming the sole leader of the USSR after Stalin's death and attacking Stalin's policies. He was keen on 'peaceful co-existence' with America. This seemed to offer hope, but he was unpredictable. He had proved his brutality by building the Berlin Wall in 1961. Khrushchev was proud of the USSR's strength and wanted to prove himself a strong leader.

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Six stages of the crisis

Stage 1: September 1962

CIA reports from Cuban refugees indicate a build-up of Russian bases on Cuba.



Stage 2: 14th October 1962

An American U2 spy plane flies over Cuba and takes photographs. The CIA identify missile sites being built for use with nuclear missiles.

Stage 3: 17th October 1962

American intelligence reports that the 16-32 missiles on Cuba could kill 80 million Americans over a range of 2000 miles. Their flight time is just 17 minutes.

Stage 4: 20th October 1962

Over 20 Russian ships are spotted in the mid-Atlantic on their way to Cuba. On board are missiles in crates.

Stage 5: 25th October 1962

Further aerial photographs show that the missile sites will be operational in a few days.

Stage 6: 27th October 1962

An American U2 spy plane is shot down by Soviet forces over Cuba. The pilot is killed.

What should you do next?