

## Why was the USA so threatened by the Soviet bases on Cuba?

Many historians consider 1962 as the year when the Cold War came closest to becoming a nuclear war between the Soviet Union and the USA. Your task is to explain why the Soviet Union's plan to install nuclear missile bases on Cuba was so threatening to the USA.

**Source 1** An aerial photograph taken by a US spy plane on 14 October 1962. The labels were added by military experts and clearly show the missile bases under construction. MRBM stands for Medium Range Ballistic Missile.

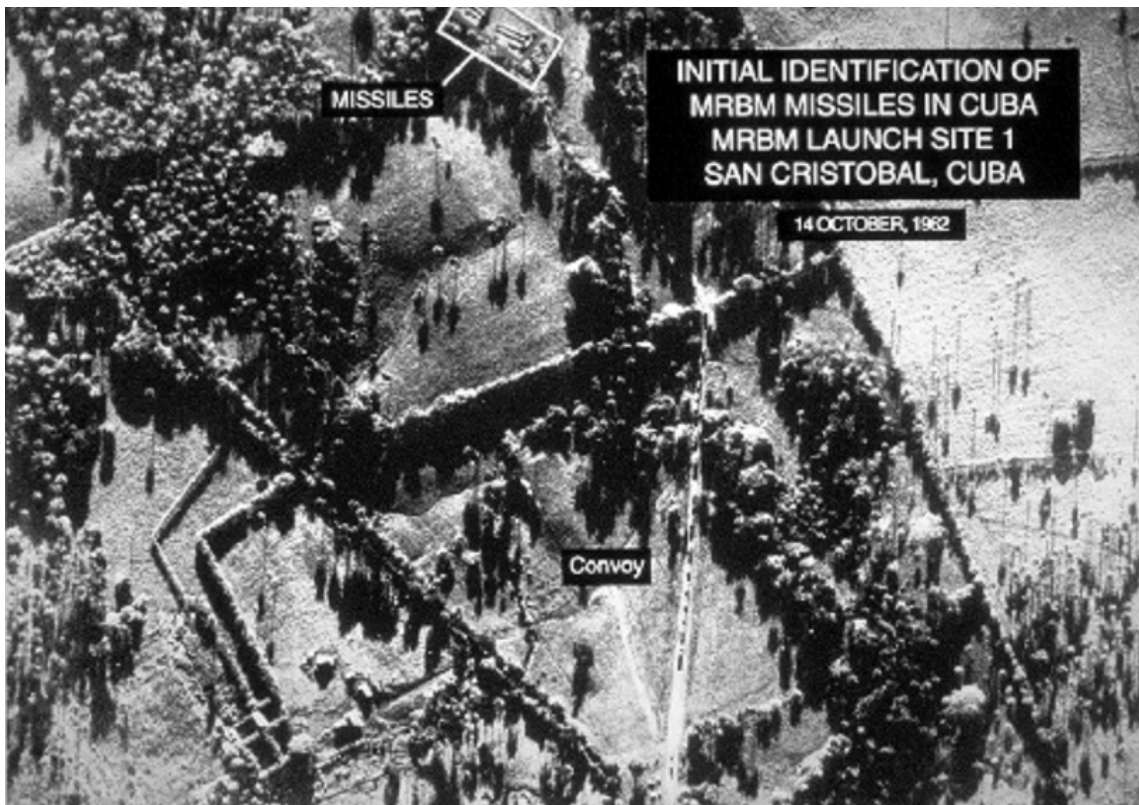


Image used courtesy of the CIA

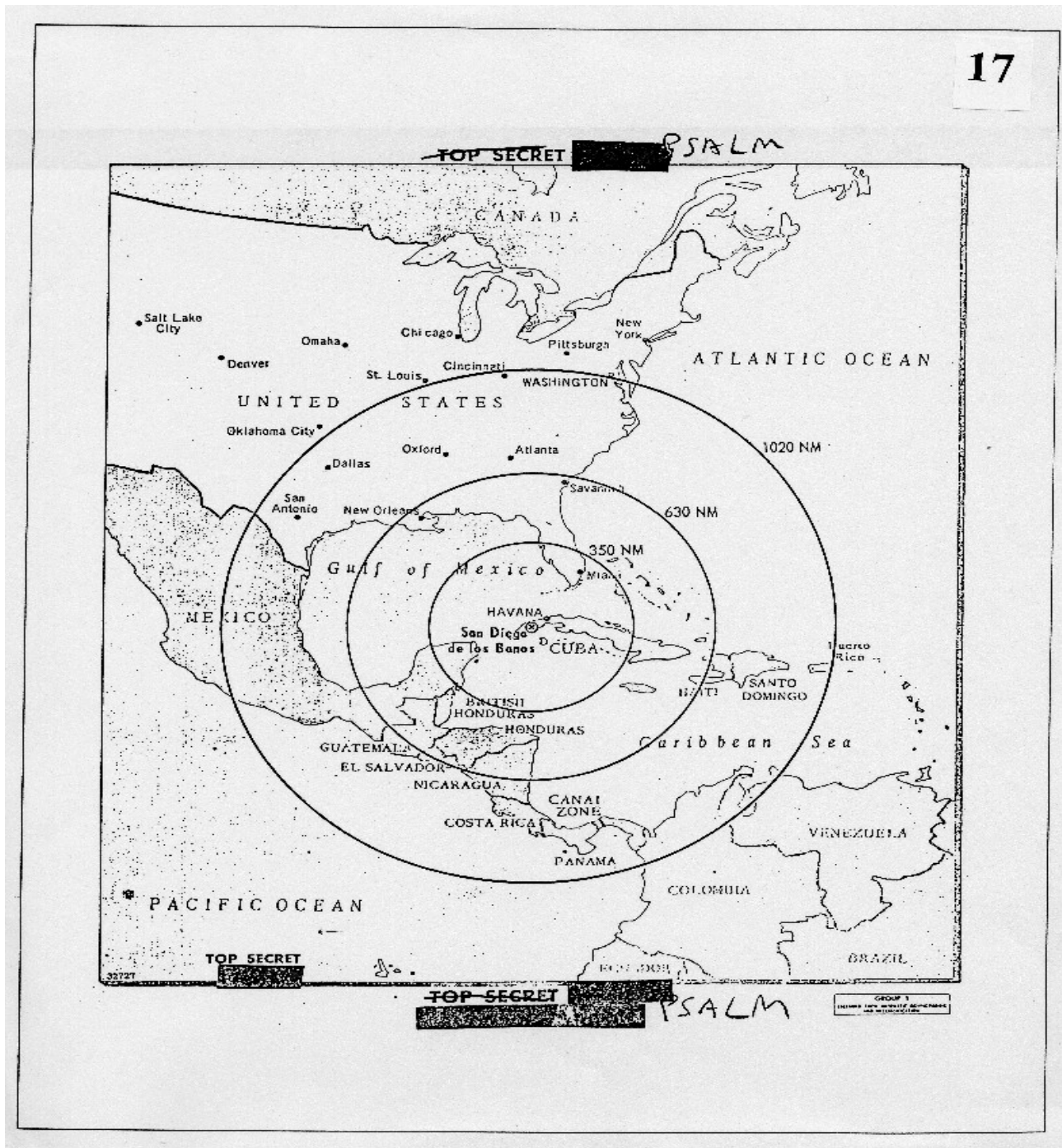
**Source 2** Information about the R-12 Dvina and R-16 Chusovaya type missiles, both of which were identified in Cuba.

	R-12 Dvina	R-14 Chusovaya
Type	Medium range ballistic missile	Intermediate range ballistic missile
Maximum range	1,100 nautical miles	2400 nautical miles
Capable of carrying a nuclear warhead?	✓	✓
Nuclear warhead explosive equivalent	2.3 megatons*	1 - 2 megatons*

\*One megaton is equivalent to one million metric tons of TNT.

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**Source 3** A CIA map of Cuba. The concentric circles show the distance from Cuba in nautical miles. A nautical mile is approximately 1,850 metres.



Page 144 of CIA documents on the *Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962*  
Image used courtesy of the CIA

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**Source 4** John F. Kennedy's speech to the nation which was broadcast on October 22, 1962.

Good evening, my fellow citizens. This Government, as promised, has maintained the closest surveillance of the Soviet military build-up on the island of Cuba. Within the past week unmistakable evidence has established the fact that a series of offensive missile sites is now in preparation on that imprisoned island. The purposes of these bases can be none other than to provide a nuclear strike capability against the Western Hemisphere.

Upon receiving the first preliminary hard information of this nature, last Tuesday morning at 9:00am, I directed that our surveillance be stepped up. And having now confirmed and completed our evaluation of the evidence and our decision on a course of action, this Government feels obliged to report this new crisis to you in fullest detail.

The characteristics of these new missile sites indicate two distinct types of installations. Several of them include medium-range ballistic missiles capable of carrying a nuclear warhead for a distance of more than 1,000 nautical miles. Each of these missiles, in short, is capable of striking Washington, D.C., the Panama Canal, Cape Canaveral, Mexico City, or any other city in the south-eastern part of the United States, in Central America, or in the Caribbean area.

Additional sites not yet completed appear to be designed for intermediate-range ballistic missiles capable of traveling more than twice as far-and thus capable of striking most of the major cities in the Western Hemisphere, ranging as far north as Hudson Bay, Canada, and as far south as Lima, Peru. In addition, jet bombers, capable of carrying nuclear weapons, are now being uncrated and assembled in Cuba, while the necessary air bases are being prepared.

This urgent transformation of Cuba into an important strategic base by the presence of these large, long-range, and clearly offensive weapons of sudden mass destruction, constitutes an explicit threat to the peace and security of all the Americas ...

### Tasks:

- ❖ Look carefully at the sources. What threats to the USA can you infer from each source?
- ❖ Study source 4 in detail. Why was the situation in October 1962 considered so urgent?

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### Teaching notes

Using the four sources, students build up their understanding of the impact the missile bases could have had on the US mainland. One approach is to review each source together as a class and build up a mind-map: 'why did the USA feel so threatened?'.

Source 4 is a transcription of the first 2 minutes, 30 seconds of Kennedy's speech. You can play this using the mp3 audio file available with this resource on the site (this was converted from the .ogg format file available at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuban\\_missile\\_crisis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuban_missile_crisis)). You can also watch the televised address at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WYVPx3x3oCg>.

### Additional sources

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- ❖ A comprehensive archive of source documentation for the crisis is at: <http://www.archives.gov/research/alic/reference/military/cuban-missile-crisis.html>
- ❖ The full transcription of Kennedy's 22 October speech is available at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1962kennedy-cuba.html>