The Cuban Missile Crisis

For 13 days in October 1962, two global superpowers faced off as the world stood seemingly on the brink of nuclear war. Today, we'll learn about the Cuban Missile Crisis—and the role it played in the larger Cold War.

Since the end of World War II, tensions had been escalating between the capitalist United States and the communist Soviet Union. Both countries were determined to expand their global influence while doing whatever it took to prevent the other from doing so, including amassing an arsenal of nuclear weapons in what became known as the arms race.

Nations around the world took sides in the conflict. Cuba, which underwent a socialist revolution in the 1950s, aligned itself with the Soviets, who provided economic and military support as Cuba's relationship with the US crumbled. Tensions skyrocketed in 1961 following the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, a US-backed campaign to oust the socialist Cuban government. In response, the Soviets secretly agreed to supply nuclear weapons to Cuba in an effort to protect the country from future attacks. But keeping this decision under wraps proved impossible—and soon, it would plunge the entire world into panic.

On October 14th, 1962, an American spy plane flying over Cuba covertly photographed several missile launch sites that were under construction on the island. Cuba lies just 100 miles south of the US mainland, meaning that these missiles could easily strike as far north as Ohio, with little time to prepare a military response.

Over the next several days, US President John F. Kennedy gathered his top advisors to decide a course of action. Some argued for an air strike to destroy the missiles, while others thought it would be better to simply warn Cuba and the Soviet Union. Kennedy opted for a middle approach. On October 22nd, he addressed the American public in a radio broadcast, announcing his plan to install a naval "quarantine" of Cuba—a ring of military ships around the island nation that would prevent the Soviets from sending any more missile supplies. He also sent a letter to Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev calling for the removal of missiles that were already there and demanding that the launch facilities be destroyed.

Nobody knew how Khrushchev would respond to these conditions. But after five days of heated negotiations—during which US forces were placed at DEFCON 2, indicating that war was imminent—both Kennedy and Khrushchev reached the same conclusion: The possibility of nuclear war was simply too devastating, and both superpowers needed to make concessions. Khrushchev agreed that the Soviets would remove the missiles and dismantle their launch sites; in exchange, Kennedy promised that the US would not attempt to invade Cuba again. But the Soviets weren't the only ones storing nuclear weapons in other countries. In a separate, secret deal, the US agreed to remove their own missiles from Turkey, an American ally strategically located in Eastern Europe.

Though the Cold War was far from over, things never got quite so contentious again. In the months following the Cuban Missile Crisis, American and Soviet leaders installed a telephone hotline between DC and Moscow to simplify future negotiations. And in 1963, both countries signed a treaty banning nuclear tests. Still, the US and the Soviet Union continued to build their nuclear arsenals at a breakneck pace. The Cold War wouldn't officially end until 1991.