I became interested in the Cuban Missile Crisis because I had already been extremely interested in the Cold War. The Cuban Missile Crisis appealed to me as the most important point of that time period. When researching the Cuban Missile Crisis, I realized how millions of lives depended on John F. Kennedy’s decision. The Cuban Missile Crisis was the most intense point of the Cold War, and the decision to set up a blockade made me think about if that reaction was necessary and if the government should have tried to find an alternative solution.

Once I chose my topic I got most of my research from reference sources in databases. The National Archive, which provided me with interesting primary sources showing specific data on the range of the missiles and meeting summaries, was very easy to use and an excellent source. I started with researching the Cuban revolution to get an idea on how Cuba turned to Communism. Then I focused on the debate within the U.S. Most of my research on the debate came from books but much of my research on Cuba and the Soviet Union were from reference sources in databases. A lot of my best research came from websites and books like The Cuban Missile Crisis by E.J. Carter that I found in my class library that provided me with necessary quotations from the debates. The books especially showed the intensity of the debates and helped me come to the realization of the urgency and the challenges Kennedy faced.

The Cuban Missile Crisis was a complex conflict. Without a lot of explanation, the topic can be very confusing, so I thought a paper would work best for me because I could fit everything I need to say. I also needed a large amount of quotations to cover the different points of view and who had them. This is also why I chose a paper--to have more room to present quotations.
On October 14, 1962, missiles in Cuba were found by the U-2 spy plane, and the world suddenly found itself in the most dangerous period of the Cold War. Through this stressful time, President Kennedy and his administration wanted to find the best solution and approach to this crisis. Kennedy successfully set up a working blockade around Cuba, that prevented nuclear supplies from entering the country. President Kennedy’s reaction was proven to be successful and the correct decision, as the blockade forced the Soviet Union to stop assembling missiles in Cuba and gave the two countries time to negotiate and defuse the crisis leading to the removal of missiles in Cuba.
Annotated Bibliography

**Primary Sources**


This photograph helped me know the image revealed to Kennedy and the actually size of the missile site. This also helped me understand the immediate urgency of the situation as the sites looked nearly complete.


This photograph displays the negotiation within the United States and the alternative options they had. Many government officials argued for approaches to handling the crisis that were different than the resulting compromise, giving me an idea of the possibilities of different responses and outcomes.


This book helped me understand the conversation going on within the US government during the 13 day's of the Cuban Missile Crisis and the chronological order of the debates. It also helped me understand the opinions of each of the ExComm members.

This image helped me understand the extreme risk the U.S had and it greatly helped in showing how good missile technology was at the time. Again, it helped me understand why J.F.K had such a strong reaction to this crisis and how if things had been handled differently many of us would not be here right now, because the missiles could have hit every important city in the U.S., even Washington DC.

Secondary Sources


This website helped me understand the previous usage of the U-2 spy plane and how it largely affected the war. Another u-2 spy plane had flown over Cuba and this website helped me understand how much of a difference the U-2 spy plane made in the Cuban Missile Crisis.

BY MARTIN J. SHERWIN OCTOBER 16, 2020 12:53 PM EDT Sherwin, George Mason University Professor of History, is the author of

This webpage helped me understand the exact conversation in the Kennedy administration and how the reaction of there allies largely influenced there decision.

This book assisted me find more information on the debate on invasion vs blockade and how some government officials called the invasion of Cuba being like the bombing of pearl harbor that resulted in the U.S. entering World War Two. It also explained why the United States decided on the blockade.


This reference source about the Cuban Missile Crisis helped me understand the reasoning behind the Cuban Missile Crisis and what lead up to it. It gave me detail on the extreme reaction of the United States president J.F.K as well as Cuba and Soviet response to the missiles in Turkey. These reactions are key information to how the Cuban Missile Crisis played out.


This reference source assisted me in finding debate between nations about if the U.S broke national law against Cuba and Russia As well as explaining the resulting compromise between U.S government officials to withdraw missiles from Turkey if Russia did the same with Cuba. The ending of this agreement decreased tension between countries and was a huge relief to all countries involved. This reference really helped me understand the different options and
ideas people in the U.S had, giving me further explanation on the possibilities of the more positive or negative results if things were handled differently.


This reference source assisted me in finding the build up of the Cuban Missile Crisis as well as Fidel Castro's conversion to communism. It also helped in explaining the alliance between Russia and Cuba and it showed that the conversion to communism that took place in Cuba resulted in U.S private businesses in Cuba losing billions of dollars angering Americans.


This website greatly assisted me in finding the timeline and what happened on each individual day, greatly helping me find when the crisis was defused, how long the Cuban quarantine lasted, and how fast each country reacted to statements and actions.


This reference source helped me understand blockades and how they work, along with their purpose.

This book helped me understand the previous conflict between Cuba and the U.S because of Fidel Castro's change to communism. Because of this change the Cuban government had taken over U.S businesses in the country resulting in the U.S attempt invasion of Cuba. This book also explained flight of the U-2 spy plane over Cuba, revealing the missiles.


This article helped me understand the large influence of nuclear weapons during the Cuban Missile Crisis and the discussion after the Crisis over the usage of nuclear weapons.

**Thesis**

On October 14, 1962, the Cold War conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union came to a head when an American U-2 spy plane discovered Soviet missiles capable of reaching the U.S. being assembled in Cuba. The heated debate within President John F. Kennedy’s administration about how to respond in a way that did not provoke war, ended when Kennedy announced his decision to use 180 U.S. Naval ships to blockade Cuba in a televised address to the nation. This crisis was significant, especially in the critical Cold War period, because it
proved the potential value of pursuing diplomatic solutions. Nevertheless, the handling of the crisis also further worsened relations between Cuba and the United States, whose relationship continues to be greatly problematic for both countries today.

**The Cuban Revolution**

The Cuban Missile Crisis was part of the Cold War, a long period of political and military tension between the U.S. and the Soviet Union over the spread of communism that started after the surrender of Nazi Germany in 1945. A violent revolution took place in Cuba over the period between July 26, 1953 and January 1, 1959, resulting in revolutionary Fidel Castro becoming head of state. The United States, which had sided with Fulgencio Batista, Cuba’s former dictator, had become furious at the communist country being set up in its own backyard. The Castro government seized billions of dollars in private American businesses located in Cuba after the revolution.

**Bay of Pigs**

U.S. President Kennedy, elected in 1960, decided to invade Cuba in April 1961 in response to the conflict. Many United States officials believed in the domino theory: a theory that if one country became a Communist nation, the surrounding countries would follow. John F. Kennedy believed surrounding countries in the Central America region would follow Cuba’s example.

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This threat led to President Kennedy’s decision to send 1500 trained Cuban exiles to invade Cuba. The people who debated this decision were mostly the same people who later fought for the invasion of Cuba during the Cuban Missile Crisis. President Kennedy wanted to hide the fact that the United States was behind this invasion to gain the support of the public and to not look like they were trying to use their military power on a less threatening country. This resulted in the United States limiting its air support, which undermined the exiles’ plans.²

The United States and the exiles assumed the Cuban people would join the exiles in the fight, believing the Cuban people wanted to overthrow their Communist leader. To their surprise, the Cuban people did not help the exiles, and the exiles were quickly overwhelmed by the Cuban militia. About 1,200 exiles surrendered and more than 100 died.

This invasion embarrassed the newly elected Kennedy and resulted in him losing support because of perceptions of his role in its failure. Many believed that the CIA had misled the inexperienced Kennedy. Kennedy next stopped trade between the U.S. and Cuba, which had disastrous consequences for Cuba, as the United States was their main source of trade. This resulted in Cuba turning to the Soviet Union for economic support and defense against the threat of another invasion.

**Missiles in Turkey**

On September 19, 1959, Turkey agreed to the deployment of Jupiter Missiles in their country by the U.S. for protection from a Soviet invasion that they believed was likely to occur. This angered Nikita Khrushchev, the premier of the Soviet Union, because he believed the missiles were meant to threaten the Soviet Union. The placement of these missiles played a large role in

² "Cuban Missile Crisis." *Cold War Reference Library*
influencing the Soviet Union's decision to deploy missiles in Cuba. Soviet leaders believed it was only fair that the U.S. knew how it felt to be threatened. On October 24, Khrushchev sent a letter to President Kennedy saying, “You are no longer appealing to reason. But wish to intimidate us,”³ accusing Kennedy of threatening the USSR. Krushchev later justified the placement of the missiles in Cuba as an act of defense.

U-2 Spy Plane

The U-2 spy plane was a key asset of the CIA and provided valuable information during the Cold War, including finding the missiles in Cuba. On May 1, 1961, a U-2 spy plane, which had previously been used to find information in Soviet air space, was shot down. The incident derailed an important summit meeting between President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev that was scheduled for later that month. This also intensified Khrushchev’s mistrust towards the United States.⁴ Another U-2 spy plane was used to find the missiles in Cuba. Finding these missiles caused increased deployment of U-2s flying over Cuba to monitor the missiles.

Missile Reveal

On October 16, 1962, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy revealed footage of the missiles in Cuba to Kennedy in the White House (Appendix C). This is when an Executive Committee (“ExComm”) was formed in the National Security Council by Kennedy, and the first ExComm meeting was held to review the recent aerial footage. The ExComm included 14 of

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Kennedy’s top advisors and administration officials chosen during the Cuban Missile Crisis to handle it. These officials were largely responsible for the debate on finding the best solution to the crisis.

**Invasion vs. Blockade**

The debate within the White House on how to resolve the crisis had ExComm members focused on whether to invade Cuba or blockade it. This debate was heated, with many ExComm members and military officials wanting to invade Cuba. During this debate many military officials thought a more intense approach to the crisis was necessary. Among them was General Curtis Lemay, who said, “I think that a blockade and political talk would be considered by a lot of our friends and neutrals as being a pretty weak response to this. And I’m sure a lot of our own citizens would feel that way, too.” Many ExComm members and generals supported the idea of an invasion, believing diplomatic solutions were ineffective during the Cold War and that diplomacy and delay only gave advantages to the enemy. (Appendix A)

General George Ball was the first ExComm member to argue against the invasion. He felt the idea of an unprompted attack would resemble the Japanese attack on the U.S. at Pearl Harbor, which brought the United States into World War II. President Kennedy’s brother, Robert Kennedy, seconded this position saying, “My brother is not going to be the Tojo of the 1960’s.” (Tojo was the former prime minister of Japan who had approved the bombing of Pearl Harbor).

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5Inside JFK's Decision Making During the Cuban Missile Crisis BY MARTIN J. SHERWIN

This strong statement by Robert Kennedy influenced President Kennedy’s decision to blockade Cuba. The goal of this blockade was to force the removal of Soviet Missiles in Cuba by limiting supplies being sent to the island.

**Going Public**

On Monday, October 22, 1962, President Kennedy addressed the nation on television from the White House and announced his decision to blockade Cuba in a 17 minute address to the American public. He largely tried not to panic the American people, but he still warned that the missiles were “capable of striking Washington, DC.” (See Appendix B) President Kennedy used the word “quarantine” instead of “blockade,” in a reference to an important speech made by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1937 about cutting off trade with Japan as a response to the attack on Pearl Harbor. This was to make the United States look like the victims of this crisis to a) gain public support, b) remind the American people of the horrors of World War II, and c) indicate what might happen if the nuclear missiles were fired.
The Blockade

On October 22nd, the blockade line was set up 800 miles (1287 kilometers) from the Cuban shore. It was later moved to only 500 miles (805 kilometers) offshore to make sure no ships were able to get between the patrols. The goal was to prevent Soviet ships from supplying more nuclear weapons to the missile sites. All ships entering the blockade would be searched by U.S. naval vessels; the blockade was made up of 180 ships. The Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara oversaw the entire operation. To win international support, the blockade did not apply to food and other needed supplies. Kennedy did not want to appear to be punishing ordinary Cuban citizens.

The Enforcement of the Blockade

On October 24th, several Soviet ships going to Cuba turned back. Many of the ships had valuable weapons, including the Poltava, a ship which held 20 nuclear warheads. The Soviets did not want these weapons to be captured by American naval forces. A tense moment occurred when two ships, the Yuri Gagarian and the Komiles, kept moving forward. By the next day the vessels, defended by Soviet submarines, were getting close to the blockade enforcement zone. Krushchev threatened to sink American ships if he was stopped.

ExComm announced that the naval destroyer, the Essex, would drop depth charges until the submarines revealed themselves. As a result the Soviet ships ended up turning around to avoid challenging the U.S. naval force at the expense of valuable ships and supplies. There are multiple sources.

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reports of other “near misses” during the enforcement of the blockade when only individual human decisions avoided triggering conflict.  

**Possible Solutions**

On Friday October 27th, 1962, Adlai Stevenson, the United States Ambassador to the United Nations (UN), told ExComm members that he believed the Soviets would take the missiles out of Cuba if the United States would assure the Soviets that they would not invade Cuba and if the missiles set up in Turkey would be removed. The idea that the Soviets would agree to this was debated vigorously within the United States government. The U.S. believed that the missiles in Turkey were solely to defend Turkey from Soviet invasion and the missiles in Cuba were purely for offensive purposes. The Soviets believed the exact opposite, saying the missiles in Cuba were to prevent invasion of Cuba and the missiles in Turkey were set up to threaten the Soviet Union. An argument that supported the Soviet position was that the United States had previously tried to invade Cuba in the Bay of Pigs, showing Cuba was under the threat of invasion.

**Diplomacy**

The blockade could have been seen as an act of war so it was necessary to convince the international community that it was defensive and justified. On October 24, 1962, U Thant, the Secretary General of the UN, proposed a cooling period for a few weeks, during which the blockade and Soviet arms shipments would be stopped. The U.S. did not like this idea, as it allowed the Soviets to continue building missile sites in Cuba with nuclear material that had already arrived. President Kennedy rejected the proposal but put forward an alternative: if the

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Soviets would stay away from the blockade zone, the U.S. would take part in talks, delaying the assembly of the missiles.\(^9\) Although Kushchev had admitted that there were missiles in Cuba, the Soviet ambassador to the UN, Valerian Zorin, still claimed there were not. At a later meeting, Zorin and the Soviet Union were embarrassed when detailed images were shown that the missiles were in Cuba.

**Missile Assembly**

Meanwhile in Cuba, Soviet technicians were working rapidly to set up the missiles with supplies that had already arrived (Appendix C). Many ExComm members argued that the missiles should be destroyed. Kennedy responded to the continued missile development by increasing the number of U-2 spy planes flying over Cuba to keep an eye on the assembly. In response Fidel Castro authorized his soldiers to fire on the U-2 spy planes. Krushchev later described this as a mistake saying, “it became clear to us that Fidel totally failed to understand our purpose… We had installed the missiles not for the purpose of attacking the United States, but to keep the United States from attacking Cuba.” At this point, Krushchev decided to bring up the idea of the U.S. removing its missiles in Turkey and committing not to invade Cuba in exchange for the removal of the Soviet missiles in Cuba. Kennedy agreed. Even after they reached agreement, there was still distrust between the two nations but the immediate crisis had been diffused.

**Long Term Impact**

While the crisis was successfully resolved from the perspective of Soviet and American leaders, Cuban leadership was frustrated at being sidelined from the negotiations. Diplomatic relations

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between the U.S. and Cuba still have not been normalized since the crisis, and Cuba continues to be a communist nation. In 2015, the United States took steps toward normalization by loosening trade restrictions between the two countries. However, the changes were subsequently walked back and there is still much tension between the two countries today.

After the Cuban Missile Crisis’s blockade and diplomatic tactics forced the removal of the missiles, the potential advantages of diplomatic approaches were reinforced for future U.S. presidents and government officials. At the same time, the disastrous consequences of the Vietnam War and potentially avoidable violence at other points of the Cold War highlight the high costs of failure with violent solutions. After the Cuban Missile Crisis, supporters of diplomatic tactics throughout the U.S. government could draw on the success of the measures employed against the USSR to bring about a desired result when advocating for diplomatic approaches to other confrontations.
Early in 2022, the world’s attention was once again focused on provocative actions by the leader in the Kremlin as he cited concerns about its vulnerability to attack from the West. This time the leader is Russia’s president, Vladimir Putin, and the dispute centers on Ukrainian territory and its government’s involvement with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). A key question being debated as the world found itself on the brink of war was what Putin may have learned from Khrushchev’s decision to back down and allow for a diplomatic resolution to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Unlike Khrushchev, Putin chose a path of violent confrontation. It is widely reported that the invasion by Russian forces of Ukraine has not gone as planned. While it is too soon to tell, Putin’s chosen path may not produce the negotiating benefits to advance Russia’s interests on the world stage he had expected.
Two big questions must be answered, and in conjunction with each other:

1. Which military action, if any:
   -- Limited air strikes: Ruskin, probably Bell and Johnson, Acheson originally
   -- Fuller air strikes: McNamara and Taylor (who convinced Acheson)
   -- Tobin's second choice
   -- Blockade: Dobbs, Thompson, probably Martin, probably McNamara and
   Taylor second choice
   -- Invasion: McGeorge, maybe Hill

2. Should political action -- in particular a letter of warning to Khrushchev --
   precede military action:
   -- If blockade or invasion, everyone says yes
   -- If air strike
     -- Yes: Tobin, Thompson (also C. O'Donnell)
     -- No: Taylor, McNamara, presumably Acheson
   -- Undecided: Ruskin

These questions could be focused upon by considering either the Ruskin or the
Dobbs approaches.

Ruskin favors the limited or "surgical" air strike without prior political action or
warning. This is opposed by 3 groups:
   -- By the diplomats (Dobbs, Thompson, probably Martin) who insist that
     prior political action is essential and not harmful
   -- By the military (McNamara, Taylor, McGeorge) who insist that the
     air strikes cannot be limited
   -- By advocates of the blockade route

Dobbs favors a prompt letter to Khrushchev, deciding after the response whether
we use air strike or blockade
   -- All blockade advocates would support this, and some of the air strike
     advocates
   -- Taylor would oppose this, unless the decision had already been made
     to go the blockade route
   -- If you accept the Dobbs plan, we can then consider the nature of the
     letter to it.

Also ask Pentagon to develop:
1. Extent to which military problems are increased by the advance
   warning a note to Khrushchev would make off
2. Hard necessity of follow-up sortie to initial "surgical" attack
3. Possibilities of commando-type raid by parachute or helicopter

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Appendix A

Cuban Missile Crisis Meeting Summary; 10/18/1962; Theodore Sorensen Papers. [Online
December 13, 2021.]
Appendix B

Appendix C