The Cuban Missile Crisis: How to Respond?

Overview

Subject Area: US and World History after World War II

Time Required: One class period

Goals/Rationale

During the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy's advisors discussed many options regarding how they might respond to the installation of Soviet missiles in Cuba. In this lesson plan, students consider some of the options discussed, what groups and which individuals supported each option, and the respective pros and cons of the alternatives.

Essential Question: Does an individual's role in government influence his or her view on how to respond to important issues?

Objectives

Students will:

- discuss some of the options considered by Kennedy’s advisors during the Cuban Missile Crisis;
- identify the governmental role of participants involved in decision making and consider whether or not their role influenced their choice of option(s);
- consider the ramifications of each option;
- evaluate the additional information that might have been helpful as of October 18, 1962 for Kennedy and his staff to know in order to make the most effective decision.

Connections to Curriculum

National History Standards

US History, Era 9
Standard 2: How the Cold War and conflicts in Korea and Vietnam influenced domestic and international politics.
Standard 2A: The student understands the international origins and domestic consequences of the Cold War.

Massachusetts History and Social Studies Curriculum Frameworks

USII.19 – Analyze the sources and, with a map of the world, locate the areas of Cold War conflict between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. (H,G)
Preparation

Materials

- The President’s Desk Recording — Cuban Missile Crisis Meeting, 10/16/62 (http://microsites.jfklibrary.org/presidentsdesk/#/secretTapes)
- Memo written by Ted Sorensen for President Kennedy, dated 10/18/62 (http://microsites.jfklibrary.org/cmc/oct18/)
- JFK’s late night recording of 10/18/62 (Tape 31.1: “Kennedy Summarizes a Late-Night Meeting on the Cuban Missile Crisis.” Kennedy’s audio begins at 1:08.) (http://millercenter.org/presidentialrecordings/jfk-mtg-31.1)

Additional Resources

A compilation of websites on US relations with Cuba can be found on our website (http://www.jfklibrary.org/~media/assets/Education%20and%20Public%20Programs/Education/Lesson%20Plans/Websites%20US%20Relations%20with%20Cuba.pdf)

Procedure

1. Have students listen to Defense Secretary Robert McNamara’s 10/16/62 discussion of possible responses to the installation of missiles in Cuba. McNamara outlines three approaches: (1) political, (2) “open surveillance,” and (3) military action. Have students note McNamara’s comments on each approach.
2. Have students read Ted Sorensen’s memo of 10/18/62 in which he spells out the various options and who supports each one. Ask them:
   1. What were the options that Kennedy’s advisors were considering as of October 18th?
   2. What government positions did each of these officials hold? How might their positions relate to their recommendations?
   3. If you were the president, what information would you want to know to rule out or proceed with each of these options?

Assessment

Have students research the arguments of one of Kennedy’s advisors mentioned in Sorensen’s memo and/or McNamara’s discussion and then have them write a 2-3 page essay on the rationales for their advisor’s arguments and some follow-up questions that President Kennedy might have asked of the advisor.

As a concluding activity, have students listen to JFK’s late night recording of October 18, 1962. (“Kennedy Summarizes a Late-Night Meeting on the Cuban Missile Crisis.”) Ask them:

- Who else did JFK consult about the crisis?
What additional option was mentioned in this recording? What was the rationale given by these advisors for this option? How did Berlin factor into the discussion?

How did JFK describe the plan to proceed with the blockade as of October 18th?

Why might he have taken this position over other options?

Extensions

Have students look at the image of an October 29, 1962 meeting of the ExComm (included in this packet), and see if they can locate some of the advisors mentioned in the 10/18/62 sources.

Have students read through and listen to JFK’s "Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Soviet Arms Buildup in Cuba," October 22, 1962. Have them:

- identify a minimum of three audiences whom JFK was addressing;
- discuss how JFK made his case for his decisions to these audiences;
- consider how and why he addressed the people of Cuba.
ST-A26-1-62 Meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, 29 October 1962