

# The Cuban Missile Crisis: How to Respond?

**Topic:** Cuban Missile Crisis

**Grade Level:** Grades 9 – 12

**Subject Area:** US and World History after World War II; US Government

**Time Required:** 1-2 hours

**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, students examine primary source documents and recordings to consider some of the options discussed by Kennedy's advisors during this crisis and the rationale for why the president might have selected the path he chose.

**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;
- discuss 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.
- analyze why President Kennedy made the decision to place a naval blockade around Cuba.

## Connections to Curriculum (Standards)

*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.T5 (1) Using primary sources such as campaign literature and debates, news articles/analyses, editorials, and television coverage, analyze the important policies and events that took place during the presidencies of John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon.

WHII.T5 (3) Evaluate the importance of key military and political developments on the outcome of the Cold War. Students may use one the following examples to address this standard: (f) The Cuban Revolution and the Cuban Missile Crisis.

## Historical Background

In October 1962, an American U-2 spy plane secretly photographed nuclear missile sites being built by the Soviet Union on the island of Cuba. President Kennedy did not want the Soviet Union and Cuba to know that he had discovered the missiles. He met in secret with his advisors for several days to discuss the problem. Two principal courses were offered: an air strike and invasion, or a naval quarantine with the threat of further military action. To avoid arousing public concern, the president maintained his official schedule, meeting periodically with advisors to discuss the status of events in Cuba and possible strategies.

## Materials

- The President's Desk Recording — [Cuban Missile Crisis Meeting](#), October 16, 1962
- [Memo written by Ted Sorensen for President Kennedy](#), dated October 18, 1962
- JFK's [late night recording of 10/18/62](#)
- JFK's "[Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Soviet Arms Buildup in Cuba](#)," October 22, 1962

## 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 October 18, 1962 in which he spells out the various options and who supports each one. Ask them:
  - a. What were the options that Kennedy's advisors were considering as of October 18th?
  - b. What government positions did each of these officials hold? How might their positions relate to their recommendations?
  - c. 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. 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](#), and see if they can locate some of the advisors mentioned in the October 18, 1962 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.