

## **CRISIS**

### **Crisis Committee Cuban Missile Crisis**

#### **Overview**

On April 17th, 1961, the United States of America launched an invasion of Cuba. Using trained Cuban operatives, exiled from their home country by a Castro-led government, as well as U.S. naval officers and Air Force pilots, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) would attempt to fight and overthrow Castro's Socialist government in favour of a more democratic and USA-approved system. The event shifted the tides in Cuban politics and laid the groundwork for one of the closest encounters to catastrophe for all humankind: the Cuban Missile Crisis, a 13-day event filled with miscommunication, political tension, and the looming threat of nuclear destruction.

#### **Viva Cuba (Cuban Independence and the US)**

The United States' influence is deeply ingrained in Cuba's political history. After the end of the Spanish-American war, the U.S. gained control of Cuba in 1899. Over the next three years, Cuba would be run by the U.S. military, which opened up more governmental and political positions for Cubans. As well, these efforts improved the country's sanitation, health, and education infrastructures. A new constitution for the country was accepted in 1901 with a provision known as the Platt Amendment; this included clauses to lease naval operations to the US, promising not to incur unpayable national debts, continuing the US's public work efforts, and allowing U.S. intervention in any threats to Cuban independence and a government that protects life and property. By May 1902, Tomás Estrada Palma, the first Cuban president, would come into power and Cuba would become a major trading partner with the US, with an economy fueled by sugar exports.<sup>1</sup>

Over the next few decades, the Cuban government would struggle with issues of corruption and instability, starting with the Liberal Party accusing Palma of a rigged election in 1905. Insurrection and eventually revolution brewed from this incident, causing Palma to resign in 1906 and U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt put Secretary of War William Taft in charge of the country until the insurrectionists would be disbanded in 1909. These events of corruption accusations and U.S. intervention would continue into 1925, with claims of each

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<sup>1</sup> "Cuban Revolution." Encyclopædia Britannica, January 1, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Cuban-Revolution>.

leader using or promoting racism against Afro-Cubans or nepotism and fraud creating an environment of violence and war from one government to the next. Despite an economic boom due to the price of sugar in the prior year, 1920 would bring a terrible financial crisis, causing bankruptcy in many banks and businesses. With the help of financial reforms and a large U.S. loan, Cuba would recover until it would again fall into war due to corruption charges against its current president.<sup>2</sup>

In 1925, Gen. Gerardo Machado y Morales came into power. Although he pledged major reforms, he did very little until his second term in 1928, when Machado imposed martial law with Congress' permission to suspend freedoms of speech, assembly, and press. Despite this, insurrection grew while Machado's efforts to stabilize sugar prices failed as the 1930s economic depression hit Cuba. Violence grew, Cubans were exiled to the US, and U.S. intervention was offered until the Cuban army drove out Machado under the leadership of Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar.<sup>3</sup>

Fulgencio Batista y Zaldívar gained control of the Cuban army when disposing of Machado. While two new presidents came and left, Batista remained in this position and influenced Col. Carlos Mendieta to run for presidency via a coup. It was then that the Platt Agreement would be removed with the approval of the U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt, as it would only fuel leaders to villainize U.S. interference as an excuse for violence. Batista remained as presidents changed, even with Mendieta delaying elections, until Batista ran himself in 1940. Cuba would join the Second World War under Batista on the side of the allied forces, first creating a diplomatic relationship between Cuba and the USSR. Batista lost the next election and would stay idle for the next two presidencies. Batista made his grand return in 1952, overthrew governing powers without violence, and closed Congress. He was elected as president in 1954 and began his first term without opposition in February 1955. He went on to reinstate the 1940s constitution and create the 1956 Sugar Act, which reduced exports to the US. With the uncertainty of Cuba's largely sugar-based economy and future, opposition grew again, with militant groups refusing to recognize Batista's victory in the 1954 election. One such group included the 26th of July Movement (Movimiento 26 de Julio).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

### **And That's When Fidel Came (The Cuban Revolution)**

Fidel Castro was a revolutionary from the University of Havana, graduating with a law degree in 1950. In 1952, he was the Cuban People's Party presidential candidate. That election year, he failed as the government was overthrown by Batista in March of that year. This led Castro to alter his methods of challenging dictatorship in Cuba. On July 26, 1953, Castro, along with his brother Raúl, attempted to rile up anti-Batista sentiment by raiding Santiago army barracks. Castro failed and many of the 160 people that took part in the raid died, while Castro and Raúl were imprisoned until 1955, when they were freed on amnesty. Castro fled to Mexico where he began new efforts to create an anti-Batista force to reclaim Cuba for the people.<sup>5</sup>

On December 2nd, 1956, Castro returned to Cuba with his brother in a small band of 81 armed men. The yacht, *Granma*, that they entered was captured and many were arrested though Castro, his brother, and another revolutionary named Ernesto "Che" Guevara escaped with a few others. Using guerrilla tactics, this group, the July 26th Movement, would battle Batista's force from within the Sierra Maestra mountains.

During the next year, fighting would continue and new groups would rebel against Batista's regime while Batista would tighten efforts to maintain control of Cuba. In March of 1957, a group of students called the Revolutionary Directorate (Directorio Revolucionario) attacked the presidential place. Trade Unions threatened strikes but were silenced when threatened with being blacklisted. In August, Batista would strip the public of the freedoms of expression and assembly. In September, he would assure the people that the upcoming elections would still occur while a naval base in Cienfuegos fell to an uprising a day later.

By 1958, the country was riddled with bloodshed. The sugar industry suffered from mills being burned while mining struggled due to overtaken territory by rebel forces and tourism was reduced by bombings in Havana. The U.S. enacted an arms embargo against Cuba in an effort to reduce violence. Batista delayed the upcoming elections, citing the violence as justification while communist groups vocalized their opposition to Batista. Batista sent his forces into the Sierra Maestra mountains in July but was pushed back by the July 26th movement and retreated in August.

Castro drew the U.S. into multiple violent events, such as the kidnapping of American civilians working in Freeport Sulphur mining company and the U.S. sailors from outside Guantanamo Bay, both in July. Castro also voiced his opposition through many threats

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

towards Batista, presidential candidates in the upcoming election, and even voters. Voter turnout in the rebel-controlled regions of Cuba was severely reduced during the delayed election. When the results were revealed, the clear election fraud was exposed as the candidate who won was majorly decided through stuffed ballots assigned to the rebel territories, while the popular vote in areas of high voter turnout favoured another candidate.

Support for Batista would further decline post-election. The army would diminish in its ability to fight off rebellious activity due to diminished ammunition from the U.S. embargo and be outmatched by Castro's guerrilla tactics and the weapons obtained from foreign powers. In December 1958, Che Guevara captured a train with a weapons cache of which Batista forces were in dire need. Batista, seeing his power crumble before him, fled to the Dominican Republic on January 1st, 1959. On January 3rd, Guevara led rebel troops into Havana unopposed and by January 8th Castro arrived in the city under a new government led by Manuel Urrutia Lleó as president and Fidel himself as prime minister.

### **Back in the USA**

The United States recognized the new Cuban government on January 7th, 1959,<sup>6</sup> though there were many questions still to be answered about the nation's relationship with the US. One such debate was...

#### Are They Communists? (Growing Threat and Socialist Allegations)

The U.S. had just left an era of McCarthyism, a time where even hinting at being a Communist could lead to imprisonment. Despite this, the threat of Communism was still a major aspect of fear among the American people, especially in foreign affairs. Though the era of accusing thy neighbour of having a red agenda was ending, that red spectre was still haunting the world.

In January, President Eisenhower received a memo from his secretary of state claiming that Castro appeared to be open to friendly relations with the U.S. and was not Communist. Later in the year, Castro met Vice President Nixon, with whom he would converse about the idea that politicians are not to follow public opinion and give the people what they want; rather, politicians must do what the people need and direct their support back to themselves. U.S. officials, including CIA director Allen Dulles, expressed to Eisenhower that Castro must either be Communist-adjacent or naive to the ideas of Communism. In October of that year, Eisenhower signed off on a joint effort program between the CIA and

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<sup>6</sup> "Bay of Pigs Chronology." The National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/bayofpigs/chron.html>

the Department of State to train a crew of Cuban exiles to invade, oppose, and overthrow Castro's government.

Fidel Castro's policies within Cuba also added to the mystery behind his intentions. Firstly, Castro associated with Che Guevara, who was known to be a radical Marxist. Guevara met Castro during Castro's time in Mexico after he left Guatemala due to the CIA overthrowing the Socialist Árbenz government (which he had helped take power). Since then, Guevara had joined Castro's cause and had influenced the direction Cuba would take after the revolution<sup>7</sup>. This connection to such a political rival to the U.S. and Castro's embrace of the originally Argentinian revolutionary caused much speculation, both from the U.S. and the citizens of Cuba, about whether Castro was truly as naive of Communist influences as he seemed to be.

Castro also introduced many Socialist reforms to land ownership, private businesses, and the economy that would strengthen these suspicions. In August 1960, Castro nationalized U.S. petroleum and sugar refineries as well as other U.S.-owned businesses, which the U.S. condemned as Communist. Over time, Castro would nationalize more businesses in direct opposition to the U.S. government, often in response to U.S. actions.<sup>8</sup> These include support of the political dissent against Castro and perceived attacks on Cuba such as the *La Coubre* explosion, which caused an estimated 75-100 deaths.<sup>9</sup> Castro also introduced land reforms that would distribute sugar cane fields and farmland back into the possession of the Cuban people.<sup>10</sup> In February of 1960, Castro established a trade agreement with the USSR, further feeding into the US's distrust.<sup>11</sup>

Lastly, Castro's approach to criticism and opposition matched that of those the U.S. feared Communism would take. Castro tried and executed many rebellious groups as well as hunting down those who fought on Batista's side during the revolution. One notable case highlighting Castro's strict approach to justice occurred when Castro demanded a retrial on a case of 19 individuals who operated bombers, resulting in them being found guilty and sentenced to 30 years of harsh labour. Notably, they had previously been acquitted due to

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<sup>7</sup> "Che Guevara." Encyclopædia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Che-Guevara#ref324360>

<sup>8</sup> "Bay of Pigs Chronology." The National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/bayofpigs/chron.html>

<sup>9</sup> "The Hemisphere: Remember La Coubre." Time, March 14, 1960, <https://time.com/archive/6809191/the-hemisphere-remember-la-coubre/>

<sup>10</sup> "Cuban Agrarian Reform Law." CIA, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79R00890A001100050025-3.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> "Fidel Castro." Encyclopædia Britannica, January 13, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Fidel-Castro>

taking measures to prevent bombs from killing any people.<sup>12</sup> Another significant incident involved a former comrade of Castro, Huber Matos, who fought with Castro against Batista until late 1959. Seeing the Communist influence that grew in Castro's government and the rise of Socialist leaders like Guevara, Matos resigned from military command, claiming he did not want to bury the revolution. Matos was labelled a traitor and arrested for treason, spending his entire 20-year sentence in prison.<sup>13</sup> Under Castro's rule, many other Cubans fled or rebelled, ending up in prison or exile.

### **Election Time (U.S. Politics)**

1960 was an election year in the United States. The candidates for the Republican and Democratic parties were Vice President Richard Milhous Nixon and John Fitzgerald Kennedy respectively. During the campaigns of these candidates, the topic of the USSR and Communism arose as a big point of interest, as the American public desperately wanted to know how each candidate would deal with such a pressing threat. Though both candidates promised to crack down on the Communist threat, Kennedy particularly attacked Nixon's previous effort for allowing Castro's seemingly Communist nation to grow so close to American soil. Nixon and Eisenhower had not disclosed any aspect of the invasion to Kennedy, thus Kennedy's promises to deal with Cuba (and, by effect, the USSR) rang truer to the American people. Kennedy won the election with 303 electoral votes versus Nixon's 219.<sup>14</sup>

Having won the election, President Kennedy was now tasked with dealing with Castro's Cuban government. Leading up to his presidency, Kennedy was only given a glimpse into the details of the full scope of the operation, with President Eisenhower mentioning that there were plans to change Cuban leadership with trained rebels. Only on January 28th, 1961 did Kennedy receive a full briefing and, now being the U.S. president, ordered three new directives: 1) Ramp up CIA activity, such as propaganda and political sabotage. 2) Review and report all proposals for action against Castro to the President, done by the CIA and Defense Department. 3) Have the Department of State develop proposals on

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<sup>12</sup> "Cuba: One-Man Court." Time, March 16, 1959, <https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,936996-1,00.html>.

<sup>13</sup> "A Moderate in the Cuban Revolution." PBS, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/castro-huber-matos-moderate-cuban-revolution/>.

<sup>14</sup> Note: 15 electoral votes were cast for Harry Byrd, not a candidate who took part in this election. "United States Presidential Election of 1960." Encyclopædia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/event/United-States-presidential-election-of-1960>.

steps to take with Latin American countries that can lead to the isolation of Castro and eventually judgment from the Organization of American States.<sup>15</sup>

### **It's a Secret (Covert Efforts)**

Over the next few months, Kennedy's strategy was divided. Though there was much that was planned already, Kennedy wished to prioritize covert actions rather than direct invasion in regard to dealing with Castro. Despite this, he would still continue to plan and develop what would become the Bay of Pigs invasion, though he would make significant alterations to the operation to create a layer of deniability from U.S. involvement. This included changes like moving the drop location from Trinidad to the Zapata Peninsula (which included the Bay of Pigs) to give the guise of this being a guerrilla attack done by infighting rebels.<sup>16</sup>

Kennedy would also keep the peace with the concerned American public by stating that there were no plans to invade Cuba with U.S. Armed Forces or American action taken within Cuba, keeping this sentiment as soon as even five days before the planned invasion was to take place. On April 12th, 1961, the same day as a press conference in which Kennedy denied U.S. plans of interference within Cuba, Deputy Director of the CIA Richard Bissell presented a paper with the final changes to the Zapata operation before launch, including the confirmed day of the attack, April 17th.<sup>17</sup>

### **¡Invasion!**

April 15th, 1961. American B-26 Bombers piloted by Cuban exiled attack airfields near Havana. The planes were disguised with FAR (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias aka Cuban Revolutionary Armed Forces) markings in an attempt to create the illusion that the attack was done by defectors rather than a planned attack. The goal of the attack was to damage Cuban weaponry, which included several aircraft, as well as divert attention away from on-land activities and towards another impending airstrike. Castro prepares for the possibility of an upcoming invasion.

April 16th, 1961. The U.S. air battalion moves from Guatemala, where they have been training under E. Howard Hunt to Nicaragua. From there, they will provide aerial support to Brigade 2506, the roughly 1,300 men made up of Cuban exiles intended to overthrow Castro,

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<sup>15</sup> "Bay of Pigs Chronology." The National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/bayofpigs/chron.html>

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

which will start its ground invasion at midnight of the 17th. To the dismay of the US, Castro not only is expecting an invasion but is also not handicapped by the airstrike from the day prior. Kennedy, aware that Castro is still in possession of an almost complete airforce, cancels the future airstrikes for fear of the operation being exposed as a U.S.-led initiative.<sup>18</sup>

Midnight comes on the 17th. Aboard ships set for the Cuban coast, troops and CIA operatives are alerted of an inevitable Cuban air strike at dawn. The decision to board close to shore is made. In the early morning hours, José San Roman leads his men along with their supplies and weaponry to shore, fighting off local militias in small firefights. Castro is woken up and alerted to enemy activity at 3:15 in the morning.<sup>19</sup>

Over the next day, Castro would push back against the invasion using the FAR and their airforce. Troops landed on shore were bound due to the heavy fire and bombardment while some ships still coming to unload were struck while retreating and sunk. By the end of the first day, Brigade 2506 controlled two access roads with aims at taking a third, though they were down many men, a couple ships as well as a full landing craft.<sup>20</sup>

Day two of the operation is in effect. Castro has given step-by-step orders to deploy tanks as a means to retake territory claimed by the Brigade. Meanwhile, Kennedy was warned by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, seeing the Cuban invaders were U.S. trained and using American weaponry, should the U.S. involve itself in national affairs with military violence, the USSR is not afraid to provide backup. Kennedy responded with claims that the U.S. would retaliate against or involve itself with any affairs within Cuba as obligated by its historical standing, though the U.S. would not start any action within the region itself. Both the USSR and the U.S. are in possession of nuclear weapons.

Continued fighting into the third day of the invasion, caused San Roman to radio the Nicaragua-bound airships, requesting air support. Instead, he and his men are forced to retreat. President Kennedy has been informed of the continued failure of the Brigade but has denied even two planes from being deployed. This invasion is failing and blame is being placed on the Kennedy administration. After three days of fighting, the U.S. had lost 89 men and just under 1,800 were captured, while only 157 Cuban defenders had been killed.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.



### **Failure (Aftermath)**

The plan had deviated, spun out, and ultimately failed. Cuba had in their grips almost the entire Brigade 2506 within prisons, being tried and sentenced to 30 years in prison, avoiding death sentences thanks to the unknown negotiations of the Brazilian government.<sup>21</sup> Most would not be freed until 1962. Kennedy was forced to admit the invasion was a mistake to the Department of State and to regroup in order to focus on plans on dealing with Castro, called Operation Mongoose with a new emphasis on the covert and direct disposing of Castro. Kennedy would also request a report on the failure of the operation from General Maxwell D. Taylor, as well as other officials, about the failures of the operation.<sup>22</sup>

### **The Red Wave (Cuba, Post Invasion)**

Because of their successful defence, Cuba was more emboldened than ever. Castro had made a statement to the world that their country was uninterested in uninvited foreign interference within their politics and intolerant of violent attacks from the Capitalists and the West. Furthermore, Cuba had a new stance on their Socialist allegation: they began to embrace their Socialist tendencies with Castro, declaring that the revolution had reformed the country as Socialist.<sup>23</sup>

### **The Friend of My Enemy (USSR-Cuban Relations)**

The 1960s was a time of war, though it was what we now know as the Cold War. Citizens of the world felt pressure as the threat of nuclear annihilation hung over their heads like a sword held by a thread. But, only the fate of the world was in the hands of two conflicting nations: the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. This conflict arose after World War Two but became a clash of ideologies, Communism versus Capitalism, battled through many proxy wars and veiled threats of mass destruction. Since the end of WWII, both nations rushed to develop, improve, and acquire more nuclear weaponry. Both nations would come into a considerably large possession of WMDs (weapons

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<sup>21</sup> "Saving the Bay of Pigs Prisoners: Did JFK Send a Secret Warning to Fidel Castro – through Brazil?" National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/cuba/2021-04-28/saving-bay-pigs-prisoners-did-john-f-kennedy-send-secret-warning-fidel-castro-through-brazil?eType=EmailBlastContent&eId=6792ec89-c302-4b83-bc05-fa77caec3cd8>

<sup>22</sup> "The Bay of Pigs Invasion and Its Aftermath, April 1961–October 1962." Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/bay-of-pigs>.

<sup>23</sup> Though the country would become officially Socialist until its new constitution was written in 1976. "Post-Revolution Cuba." PBS, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/post-revolution-cuba/>.

of mass destruction) and both nations would rely on allies to store these collections of world-ending weapons.

With a declaration of its Socialist presence, Cuba attracted the attention of the USSR's premier Nikita Khrushchev. Khrushchev, who was now at odds with Kennedy over the U.S. involvement in the invasion, would partner with Castro to protect Cuba from the U.S. Around this time, the U.S. attempted to ostracise Cuba for their international relations with the USSR by pressuring the Organization of American States to take actions against Cuba such as revoking Cuba's membership.

### **Missiles and More (The Cuban Missile Crisis)**

July 1962. The USSR's support arrived in Cuba in the form of medium and intermediate-range ballistic missiles as agreed in secret by Castro and Khrushchev. These missiles would be able to reach the Eastern Coast of the U.S. in minutes, which was something that Russia-launched WMDs were unable to do. U.S. suspicions of nuclear weapons shipment and construction arose by August and into September, with Kennedy announcing a warning against the introduction of these weapons. Despite this, a U-2 spy plane would report back images, taken on October 14th, of offensive weapon construction sites to the White House.<sup>2425</sup>

On October 22nd, Kennedy declared a blockade on Cuba by the U.S. Navy, enforcing a seizure of offensive weaponry from any incoming ships. Kennedy would also repeat a statement rejecting the shipments of offensive weapons along with a demand for the dismantling of weapons currently constructed directly to Khrushchev via letter, which would open a line of communication with Russia. On October 24th, Khrushchev responded that this act of aggression would not be tolerated and that shipments would continue.

Over the next few days, the world would watch with bated breath, anticipating what would arise from the next piece of communication. Some Russian ships would be turned back by the Naval blockade. Khrushchev would call for the U.S. to remove its weapons from Turkey. Rumours would spread over what would happen next as the two superpowers hovered over their red buttons. Would either side really risk the threat of mutually assured destruction?

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<sup>24</sup> "The Cuban Missile Crisis, October 1962." Office of the Historian.

<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/cuban-missile-crisis>

<sup>25</sup> "Cuban Missile Crisis." Encyclopædia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Cuban-missile-crisis>

The ordeal would end on October 28th, when Khrushchev announced that the USSR's weapons would be deconstructed and removed from Cuba. In return, the U.S. would promise not to invade Cuba. Kennedy would also reveal that he had already planned to remove the missiles it had overseas in Turkey, but would keep this a secret to not alarm the American public, thus quelling Khrushchev's fears of a U.S. nuclear strike. Castro himself was infuriated by the outcome of both parties but was ultimately powerless in this matter.

While the crisis was over, the world could take a temporary sigh of relief. Yet, the Cold War was still a dwelling ball of stress in the back of the global mind, with that threat of annihilation never truly going away until the fall of the USSR. The Cuban Missile Crisis marked the peak of anxiety within the Cold War, seeing as it almost became the climax of the whole conflict. Many continue to wonder what would have happened if things had gone differently, asking themselves; "Would we still be here today?"

### **Call To Action**

It is the first of October 1962. Castro leads a Socialist nation just off the coast of the United States. His country is constructing Soviet missiles aimed directly at the US. Working with Khrushchev, Castro intends to defend his nation's status as a serious government, not just some sugar-producing islands under U.S. guidance. On the other side of the world, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics is readying four submarines, each armed with one nuclear torpedo, for deployment in the seas near Cuba. Among them is submarine B-59, a cramped and stuffy sea vessel, crewed by 70 men that holds the power to launch the first strike in this nuclear stand-off.<sup>26</sup> In the United States of America, Kennedy is growing impatient with Castro, who threatens the democratic values America holds by the presence and success of his Socialist republic. He suspects that Khrushchev is using his connections with Castro to fill in the gap in the USSR's nuclear range, but he lacks the evidence to prove it.

You are American politicians. Or Soviet leaders. Or Cuban officials. Possibly the commanders of a submarine crew. But you all have one common knowledge. You know that a crisis is inevitable and war is coming. The stakes are higher than one can imagine and one wrong attack, movement, or even sentence could put the entire world at risk. Each of you has your own goals. Whether they are to dethrone a tyrant in your country's eyes, rebuke your

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<sup>26</sup> "The Underwater Cuban Missile Crisis at 60." National Security Archive, October 3, 2022. <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2022-10-03/soviet-submarines-nuclear-torpedoes-cuba-n-missile-crisis>

enemy's way of life, or ensure true freedom and independence, you will all attempt to discuss, debate, and direct the situation as you see fit.

So, now that you understand your task... how will you defuse the situation when someone else holds the match?

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