

Kennedy and the Cold War

MAIN IDEA

The Kennedy administration faced some of the most dangerous Soviet confrontations in American history.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

America's response to Soviet threats developed the United States as a military superpower.

Terms & Names

- John F. Kennedy
- flexible response
- Fidel Castro
- Berlin Wall
- hot line
- Limited Test Ban Treaty

One American's Story

John F. Kennedy became the 35th president of the United States on a crisp and sparkling day in January 1961. Appearing without a coat in freezing weather, he issued a challenge to the American people. He said that the world was in “its hour of maximum danger,” as Cold War tensions ran high. Rather than shrinking from the danger, the United States should confront the “iron tyranny” of communism.

A PERSONAL VOICE JOHN F. KENNEDY

“Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans, born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage, and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this nation has always been committed. . . .

Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any . . . foe, in order to assure . . . the survival and the success of liberty.”

—Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961

The young president won praise for his well-crafted speech. However, his words were put to the test when several Cold War crises tried his leadership.



▲ John F. Kennedy delivers his inaugural address on January 20, 1961.

The Election of 1960

In 1960, as President Eisenhower's second term drew to a close, a mood of restlessness arose among voters. The economy was in a recession. The USSR's launch of *Sputnik I* in 1957 and its development of long-range missiles had sparked fears that the American military was falling behind that of the Soviets. Further setbacks including the U-2 incident and the alignment of Cuba with the Soviet Union had Americans questioning whether the United States was losing the Cold War.



◀ John F. Kennedy (right) appeared confident and at ease during a televised debate with his opponent Richard M. Nixon.

Vocabulary

charismatic:

possessing personal charm that attracts devoted followers

MAIN IDEA

Predicting Effects

A What effect do you think the televised debate would have on American politics?

The Democratic nominee for president, Massachusetts senator John Kennedy, promised active leadership “to get America moving again.” His Republican opponent, Vice President Richard M. Nixon, hoped to win by riding on the coattails of Eisenhower’s popularity. Both candidates had similar positions on policy issues. Two factors helped put Kennedy over the top: television and the civil rights issue.

THE TELEVISED DEBATE AFFECTS VOTES Kennedy had a well-organized campaign and the backing of his wealthy family, and was handsome and charismatic. Yet many felt that, at 43, he was too inexperienced. If elected, he would be the second-youngest president in the nation’s history.

Americans also worried that having a Roman Catholic in the White House would lead either to influence of the pope on American policies or to closer ties between church and state. Kennedy was able to allay worries by discussing the issue openly.

One event in the fall determined the course of the election. Kennedy and Nixon took part in the first televised debate between presidential candidates. On September 26, 1960, 70 million TV viewers watched the two articulate and knowledgeable candidates debating issues. Nixon, an expert on foreign policy, had agreed to the forum in hopes of exposing Kennedy’s inexperience. However, Kennedy had been coached by television producers, and he looked and spoke better than Nixon. **A**

“That night, image replaced the printed word as the natural language of politics.”

RUSSELL BAKER

Kennedy’s success in the debate launched a new era in American politics: the television age. As journalist Russell Baker, who covered the Nixon campaign, said, “That night, image replaced the printed word as the natural language of politics.”

KENNEDY AND CIVIL RIGHTS A second major event of the campaign took place in October. Police in Atlanta, Georgia, arrested the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and 33 other African-American demonstrators for sitting at a segregated lunch counter. Although the other demonstrators were released, King was sentenced to months of hard labor—officially for a minor traffic violation. The Eisenhower administration refused to intervene, and Nixon took no public position.

When Kennedy heard of the arrest and sentencing, he telephoned King’s wife, Coretta Scott King, to express his sympathy. Meanwhile, Robert Kennedy, his brother and campaign manager, persuaded the judge who had sentenced King to release the civil rights leader on bail, pending appeal. News of the incident captured the immediate attention of the African-American community, whose votes would help Kennedy carry key states in the Midwest and South.



The Camelot Years

President and Mrs. Kennedy enjoy time with their children, Caroline and John, Jr., while vacationing in Hyannis Port, Massachusetts.



The election in November 1960 was the closest since 1884; Kennedy won by fewer than 119,000 votes. His inauguration set the tone for a new era at the White House: one of grace, elegance, and wit. On the podium sat over 100 writers, artists, and scientists that the Kennedys had invited, including opera singer Marian Anderson, who had once been barred from singing at Constitution Hall because she was African American. Kennedy's inspiring speech called for hope, commitment, and sacrifice. "And so, my fellow Americans," he proclaimed, "ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country."

During his term, the president and his beautiful young wife, Jacqueline, invited many artists and celebrities to the White House. In addition, Kennedy often appeared on television. The press loved his charm and wit and helped to bolster his image.

THE KENNEDY MYSTIQUE Critics of Kennedy's presidency argued that his smooth style lacked substance. But the new first family fascinated the public. For example, after learning that JFK could read 1,600 words a minute, thousands of people enrolled in speed-reading courses. The first lady, too, captivated the nation with her eye for fashion and culture. It seemed the nation could not get enough of the first family. Newspapers and magazines filled their pages with pictures and stories about the president's young daughter Caroline and his infant son John.

With JFK's youthful glamour and his talented advisers, the Kennedy White House reminded many of a modern-day Camelot, the mythical court of King Arthur. Coincidentally, the musical *Camelot* had opened on Broadway in 1960. Years later, Jackie recalled her husband and the vision of Camelot.

A PERSONAL VOICE JACQUELINE KENNEDY

"At night, before we'd go to sleep, Jack liked to play some records and the song he loved most came at the very end of [the *Camelot*] record. The lines he loved to hear were: 'Don't let it be forgot, that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot.' There'll be great presidents again . . . but there'll never be another Camelot again." **B**

—quoted in *Life* magazine, *John F. Kennedy Memorial Edition*

THE BEST AND THE BRIGHTEST Kennedy surrounded himself with a team of advisers that one journalist called "the best and the brightest." They included McGeorge Bundy, a Harvard University dean, as national security adviser; Robert McNamara, president of Ford Motor Company, as secretary of defense; and Dean Rusk, president of the Rockefeller Foundation, as secretary of state. Of all the advisers who filled Kennedy's inner circle, he relied most heavily on his 35-year-old brother Robert, whom he appointed attorney general.

Background

The fictional King Arthur was based on a real fifth- or sixth-century Celt. In literature, Arthur's romantic world is marked by chivalry and magic.

MAIN IDEA

Developing Historical Perspective

B What factors help explain the public's fascination with the Kennedys?



A New Military Policy

Vocabulary

third world: during the Cold War, the developing nations not allied with either the United States or the Soviet Union


From the beginning, Kennedy focused on the Cold War. He thought the Eisenhower administration had not done enough about the Soviet threat. The Soviets, he concluded, were gaining loyalties in the economically less-developed third-world countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. He blasted the Republicans for allowing communism to develop in Cuba, at America's doorstep.

DEFINING A MILITARY STRATEGY Kennedy believed his most urgent task was to redefine the nation's nuclear strategy. The Eisenhower administration had relied on the policy of massive retaliation to deter Soviet aggression and imperialism. However, threatening to use nuclear arms over a minor conflict was not a risk Kennedy wished to take. Instead, his team developed a policy of **flexible response**. Kennedy's secretary of defense, Robert McNamara, explained the policy.

A PERSONAL VOICE ROBERT S. MCNAMARA

“The Kennedy administration worried that [the] reliance on nuclear weapons gave us no way to respond to large non-nuclear attacks without committing suicide. . . . We decided to broaden the range of options by strengthening and modernizing the military's ability to fight a nonnuclear war.”

—*In Retrospect*

Kennedy increased defense spending in order to boost conventional military forces—nonnuclear forces such as troops, ships, and artillery—and to create an elite branch of the army called the Special Forces, or Green Berets. He also tripled the overall nuclear capabilities of the United States. These changes enabled the United States to fight limited wars around the world while maintaining a balance of nuclear power with the Soviet Union. However, even as Kennedy hoped to reduce the risk of nuclear war, the world came perilously close to nuclear war under his command as a crisis arose over the island of Cuba. 

MAIN IDEA

Summarizing

C What was the goal of the doctrine of flexible response?

Vocabulary

guerrilla: a soldier who travels in a small group, harassing and undermining the enemy

THE CUBAN DILEMMA Castro gained power with the promise of democracy. From 1956 to 1959, he led a guerrilla movement to topple dictator Fulgencio Batista. He won control in 1959 and later told reporters, “Revolutionaries are not born, they are made by poverty, inequality, and dictatorship.” He then promised to eliminate these conditions from Cuba.

The United States was suspicious of Castro's intentions but nevertheless recognized the new government. However, when Castro seized three American and British oil refineries, relations between the United States and Cuba worsened. Castro also broke up commercial farms into communes that would be worked by formerly landless peasants. American sugar companies,

ANOTHER

PERSPECTIVE

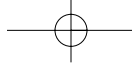
EISENHOWER'S WARNING

The increase in defense spending in the 1960s continued the trend in which Defense Department suppliers were becoming more dominant in the American economy. Before leaving office, President Eisenhower warned against the dangers of what he called the “military-industrial complex.” He included in his parting speech the following comments:

“This conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence—economic, political, even spiritual—is felt in every city, every statehouse, every office of the federal government. We recognize the imperative need for this development. Yet we must not fail to comprehend its grave implications. . . . The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist.”

Crises over Cuba

The first test of Kennedy's foreign policy came in Cuba, just 90 miles off the coast of Florida. About two weeks before Kennedy took office, on January 3, 1961, President Eisenhower had cut off diplomatic relations with Cuba because of a revolutionary leader named **Fidel Castro**. Castro openly declared himself a communist and welcomed aid from the Soviet Union.



▲ (top) Castro celebrates after gaining power in Cuba.

(above) The Bay of Pigs mission was said to have blown up in Kennedy's face.

which controlled 75 percent of the crop land in Cuba, appealed to the U.S. government for help. In response, Congress erected trade barriers against Cuban sugar.

Castro relied increasingly on Soviet aid—and on the political repression of those who did not agree with him. While some Cubans were taken by his charisma and his willingness to stand up to the United States, others saw Castro as a tyrant who had replaced one dictatorship with another. About 10 percent of Cuba's population went into exile, mostly to the United States. Within the large exile community of Miami, Florida, a counterrevolutionary movement took shape.

THE BAY OF PIGS In March 1960, President Eisenhower gave the CIA permission to secretly train Cuban exiles for an invasion of Cuba. The CIA and the exiles hoped it would trigger a mass uprising that would overthrow Castro. Kennedy learned of the plan only nine days after his election. Although he had doubts, he approved it.

On the night of April 17, 1961, some 1,300 to 1,500 Cuban exiles supported by the U.S. military landed on the island's southern coast at Bahia de Cochinos, the Bay of Pigs. Nothing went as planned. An air strike had failed to knock out the Cuban air force, although the CIA reported that it had succeeded. A small advance group sent to distract Castro's forces never reached shore. When the main commando unit landed, it faced 25,000 Cuban troops backed up by Soviet tanks and jet aircraft. Some of the invading exiles were killed, others imprisoned.

The Cuban media sensationalized the defeat of "North American mercenaries." One United States commentator observed that Americans "look like fools to our friends, rascals to our enemies, and incompetents to the rest." The disaster left Kennedy embarrassed. Publicly, he accepted blame for the fiasco. Privately, he asked, "How could that crowd at the CIA and the Pentagon be this wrong." **D**

Kennedy negotiated with Castro for the release of surviving commandos and paid a ransom of \$53 million in food and medical supplies. In a speech in Miami, he promised exiles that they would one day return to a "free Havana." Although Kennedy warned that he would resist further Communist expansion in the Western Hemisphere, Castro defiantly welcomed further Soviet aid.

THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS Castro had a powerful ally in Moscow: Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, who promised to defend Cuba with Soviet arms. During the summer of 1962, the flow to Cuba of Soviet weapons—including nuclear missiles—increased greatly. President Kennedy responded with a warning that America would not tolerate offensive nuclear weapons in Cuba. Then, on October 14, photographs taken by American planes revealed Soviet missile bases in Cuba—and some contained missiles ready to launch. They could reach U.S. cities in minutes.

On October 22, Kennedy informed an anxious nation of the existence of Soviet missile sites in Cuba and of his plans to remove them. He made it clear that any missile attack from Cuba would trigger an all-out attack on the Soviet Union.

Vocabulary

political

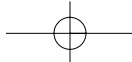
repression:

government intimidation of those with different political views

MAIN IDEA

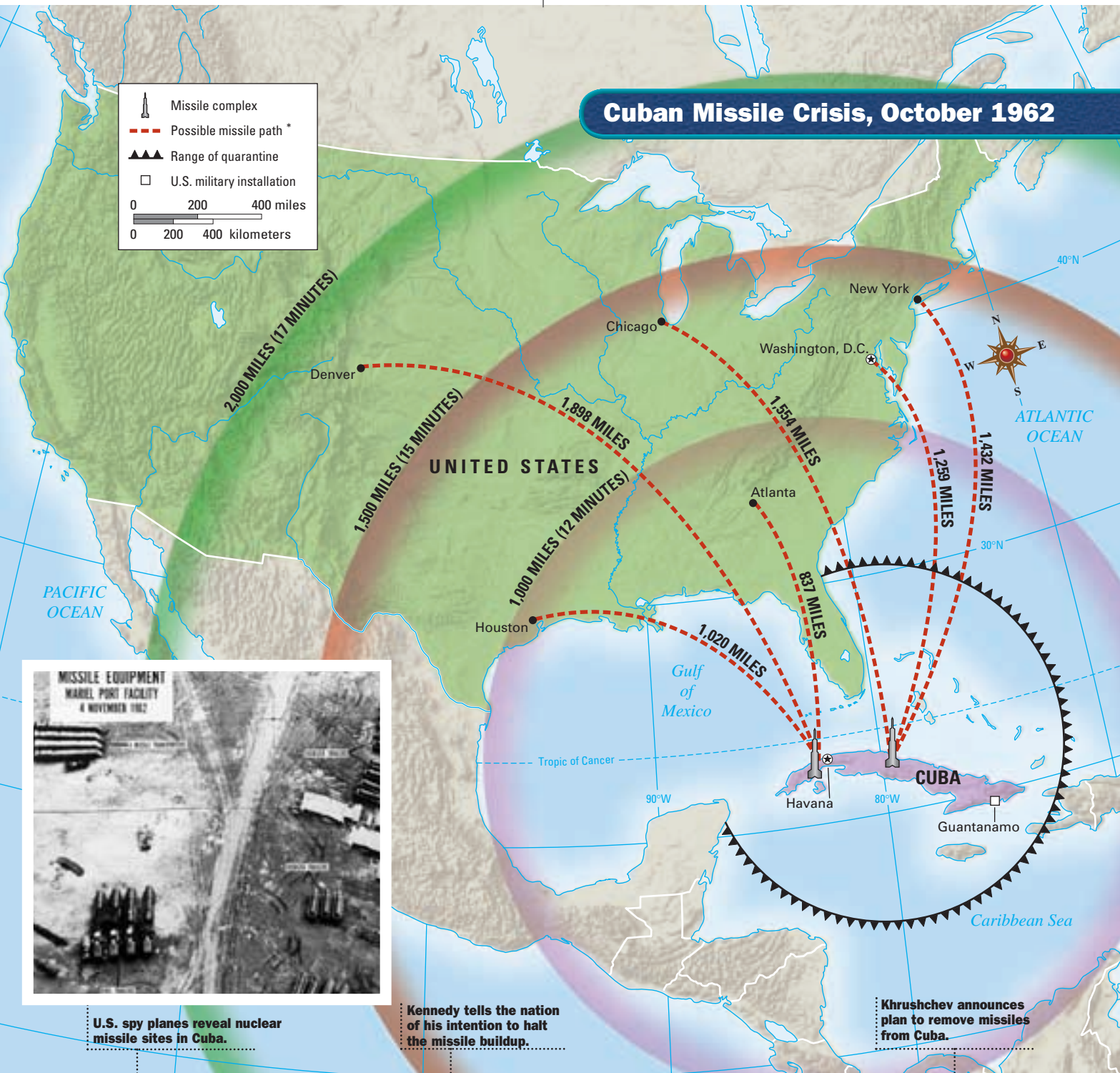
Analyzing Effects

D What were the consequences of the failed invasion for the United States?



Cuban Missile Crisis, October 1962

Missile complex
 Possible missile path *
 Range of quarantine
 U.S. military installation
 0 200 400 miles
 0 200 400 kilometers



U.S. spy planes reveal nuclear missile sites in Cuba.

Kennedy tells the nation of his intention to halt the missile buildup.

Khrushchev announces plan to remove missiles from Cuba.

OCT. 14

OCT. 22

OCT. 24

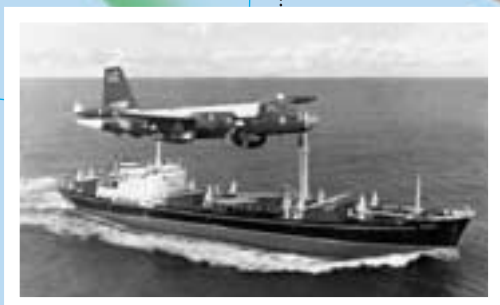
OCT. 25

OCT. 28

*Missile path times and distances are approximate.

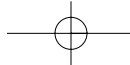
Kennedy implements a naval "quarantine" of Cuba, blocking Soviet ships from reaching the island. (below) A U.S. patrol plane flies over a Soviet freighter.

Soviet ships approaching Cuba come to a halt.



GEOGRAPHY SKILLBUILDER

- Movement** About how long would it have taken for a missile launched from Cuba to reach New York?
- Human-Environment Interaction** Why do you think it may have been important for Soviet missiles to reach the U.S. cities shown above?



KEY PLAYERS



JOHN F. KENNEDY
1917–1963

John F. “Jack” Kennedy grew up in a politically powerful family that helped make his dreams possible. His parents instilled in him the drive to accomplish great things.

During World War II he enlisted in the navy and was decorated for heroism. In 1946, he won his first seat in Congress from a Boston district where he had never lived. While a senator, he won a Pulitzer Prize for his book *Profiles in Courage*.

Although he radiated self-confidence, Kennedy suffered many ailments, including Addison’s disease—a debilitating condition that he treated with daily injections of cortisone. “At least one half of the days that he spent on this earth were days of intense physical pain,” recalled his brother Robert.



NIKITA KHRUSHCHEV
1894–1971

“No matter how humble a man’s beginnings,” boasted Nikita Khrushchev, “he achieves the stature of the office to which he is elected.” Khrushchev, the son of a miner, became a Communist Party organizer in the 1920s. Within four years of Stalin’s death in 1953, Khrushchev had consolidated his power in the Soviet Union.

During his regime, which ended in 1964, Khrushchev kept American nerves on edge with alternately conciliatory and aggressive behavior. During a 1959 trip to the United States, he met for friendly talks with President Eisenhower. The next year, in front of the UN General Assembly, he took off his shoe and angrily pounded it on a desk to protest the U-2 incident.

For the next six days, the world faced the terrifying possibility of nuclear war. In the Atlantic Ocean, Soviet ships—presumably carrying more missiles—headed toward Cuba, while the U.S. Navy prepared to quarantine Cuba and prevent the ships from coming within 500 miles of it. In Florida, 100,000 troops waited—the largest invasion force ever assembled in the United States. C. Douglas Dillon, Kennedy’s secretary of the treasury and a veteran of nuclear diplomacy, recalled those tension-filled days of October.

★ PERSONAL VOICE C. DOUGLAS DILLON

“The only time I felt a fear of nuclear war or a use of nuclear weapons was on the very first day, when we’d decided that we had to do whatever was necessary to get the missiles out. There was always some background fear of what would eventually happen, and I think this is what was expressed when people said they feared they would never see another Saturday.”

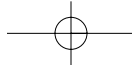
—quoted in *On the Brink*

The first break in the crisis occurred when the Soviet ships stopped suddenly to avoid a confrontation at sea. Secretary of State Dean Rusk said, “We are eyeball to eyeball, and the other fellow just blinked.” A few days later, Khrushchev offered to remove the

missiles in return for an American pledge not to invade Cuba. The United States also secretly agreed to remove missiles from Turkey. The leaders agreed, and the crisis ended. “For a moment, the world had stood still,” Robert Kennedy wrote years later, “and now it was going around again.”

KENNEDY AND KHRUSHCHEV TAKE THE HEAT The crisis severely damaged Khrushchev’s prestige in the Soviet Union and the world. Kennedy did not escape criticism either. Some people criticized Kennedy for practicing brinkmanship when private talks might have resolved the crisis without the threat of nuclear war. Others believed he had passed up an ideal chance to invade Cuba and oust Castro. (It was learned in the 1990s that the CIA had underestimated the numbers of Soviet troops and nuclear weapons on the island.)

The effects of the crisis lasted long after the missiles had been removed. Many Cuban exiles blamed the Democrats for “losing Cuba” (a charge that Kennedy had earlier leveled at the Republicans) and switched their allegiance to the GOP.



MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Effects

E What were the results of the Cuban missile crisis?

Meanwhile, Castro closed Cuba's doors to the exiles in November 1962 by banning all flights to and from Miami. Three years later, hundreds of thousands of people took advantage of an agreement that allowed Cubans to join relatives in the United States. By the time Castro sharply cut down on exit permits in 1973, the Cuban population in Miami had increased to about 300,000. **E**

Crisis over Berlin

One goal that had guided Kennedy through the Cuban missile crisis was that of proving to Khrushchev his determination to contain communism. All the while, Kennedy was thinking of their recent confrontation over Berlin, which had led to the construction of the **Berlin Wall**, a concrete wall topped with barbed wire that severed the city in two.

THE BERLIN CRISIS In 1961, Berlin was a city in great turmoil. In the 11 years since the Berlin Airlift, almost 3 million East Germans—20 percent of that country's population—had fled into West Berlin because it was free from Communist rule. These refugees advertised the failure of East Germany's Communist government. Their departure also dangerously weakened that country's economy.

WORLD STAGE

THE BERLIN WALL, 1961

In 1961, Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet premier, ordered the Berlin Wall built to stop the flow of refugees from East to West Berlin. Most were seeking freedom from Communist rule.

The wall isolated West Berlin from a hostile German Democratic Republic (GDR). Passing from East to West was almost impossible without the Communist government's permission.

During the 28 years the wall was standing, approximately 5,000 people succeeded in fleeing. Almost 200 people died in the attempt; most were shot by the GDR border guards. In 1989, East Germany opened the Berlin Wall to cheering crowds. Today the rubble of concrete is a reminder of the Cold War tensions between East and West.

The "death strip" stretched like a barren moat around West Berlin, with patrols, floodlights, electric fences, and vehicle traps between the inner and outer walls.

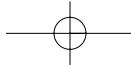
Walls and other barriers 10–15 feet high surrounded West Berlin. The length of the barriers around the city totaled about 110 miles.

Guard dogs and machine guns dissuaded most people from crossing over illegally, yet some still dared.



The Berlin Wall was first made of brick and barbed wire, but was later erected in cement and steel.





“I want peace. But, if you want war, that is your problem.”

**SOVIET PREMIER
NIKITA KHRUSHCHEV**

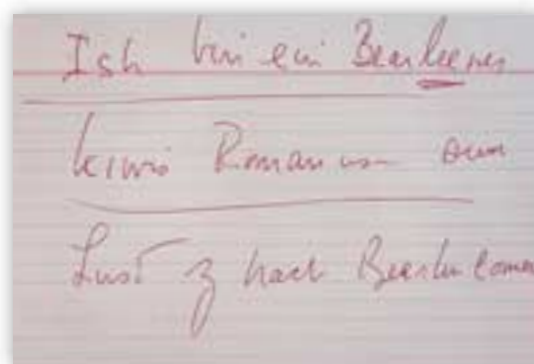
Khrushchev realized that this problem had to be solved. At a summit meeting in Vienna, Austria, in June 1961, he threatened to sign a treaty with East Germany that would enable that country to close all the access roads to West Berlin. When Kennedy refused to give up U.S. access to West Berlin, Khrushchev furiously declared, “I want peace. But, if you want war, that is your problem.”

After returning home, Kennedy told the nation in a televised address that Berlin was “the great testing place of Western courage and will.” He pledged “[W]e cannot and will not permit the Communists to drive us out of Berlin.”

Kennedy’s determination and America’s superior nuclear striking power prevented Khrushchev from closing the air and land routes between West Berlin and West Germany. Instead, the Soviet premier surprised the world with a shocking decision. Just after midnight on August 13, 1961, East German troops began to unload concrete posts and rolls of barbed wire along the border. Within days, the Berlin Wall was erected, separating East Germany from West Germany.

The construction of the Berlin Wall ended the Berlin crisis but further aggravated Cold War tensions. The wall and its armed guards successfully reduced the flow of East German refugees to a tiny trickle, thus solving Khrushchev’s main problem. At the same time, however, the wall became an ugly symbol of Communist oppression. **F**

SEARCHING FOR WAYS TO EASE TENSIONS Showdowns between Kennedy and Khrushchev made both leaders aware of the gravity of split-second decisions that separated Cold War peace from nuclear disaster. Kennedy, in particular, searched for ways to tone down his hard-line stance. In 1963, he announced that the two nations had established a **hot line** between the White House and the Kremlin. This dedicated phone enabled the leaders of the two countries to communicate at once should another crisis arise. Later that year, the United States and Soviet Union also agreed to a **Limited Test Ban Treaty** that barred nuclear testing in the atmosphere.



▲ **Reading from this note card during a speech in West Berlin, Kennedy proclaimed “Ich bin ein Berliner” (“I am a Berliner”).**

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Motives

F What led Khrushchev to erect the Berlin Wall?



ASSESSMENT

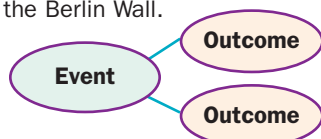
1. TERMS & NAMES For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- John F. Kennedy
- Fidel Castro
- hot line
- flexible response
- Berlin Wall
- Limited Test Ban Treaty

MAIN IDEA

2. TAKING NOTES

Using diagrams such as the one below, list two outcomes for each of these events: first Kennedy-Nixon debate, Bay of Pigs invasion, Cuban missile crisis, and construction of the Berlin Wall.



Which of these outcomes led directly to other events listed here or described in this section?

CRITICAL THINKING

3. EVALUATING DECISIONS

How well do you think President Kennedy handled the Cuban missile crisis? Justify your opinion with specific examples from the text.

Think About:

- Kennedy’s decision to impose a naval “quarantine” of Cuba
- the nuclear showdown between the superpowers
- Kennedy’s decision not to invade Cuba



4. ANALYZING VISUAL SOURCES

Examine the cartoon above of Kennedy (*left*) facing off with Khrushchev and Castro. What do you think the cartoonist was trying to convey?

5. DRAWING CONCLUSIONS

What kind of political statement was made by the United States’ support of West Berlin?