What was the Cuban Missile Crisis?

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In October 1962, American spy planes photographed Soviet nuclear missile sites being constructed in Cuba — just 90 miles from the coast of Florida. What followed was 13 days of confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union that brought the world to the edge of nuclear war. The full details of just how close it came weren't known for decades.

How did Soviet missiles end up in Cuba?

Cuba had undergone a revolution in 1959, led by Fidel Castro, which brought a communist government to power. The US was alarmed by a communist ally 90 miles from its coastline and tried — and failed — to overthrow Castro via the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961. Meanwhile, the US had placed nuclear missiles in Turkey, aimed at the Soviet Union. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev decided to place Soviet missiles in Cuba partly as a counter-balance and partly to deter any further US attack on Cuba. The missiles were being installed in secret when American U-2 reconnaissance aircraft photographed them in mid-October 1962.

🎲 Imagine two people playing a game where each has a pistol pointed at the other. Neither wants to fire first, because the other will certainly shoot back. But if one thinks the other is about to fire, they might shoot pre-emptively — and then everyone loses. That was the logic of nuclear deterrence during the Cold War. The Cuban Missile Crisis was a moment when both pistols were cocked and fingers were on triggers, and the people holding them had to figure out how to put the guns down without either side feeling they'd backed down.

Thirteen days

President Kennedy convened a secret advisory group called ExComm. The debate was fierce: military advisers pushed for air strikes to destroy the missile sites, or a full-scale invasion. Kennedy chose a middle path: a naval "quarantine" (blockade) of Cuba, demanding the Soviets remove the missiles. Soviet ships carrying more military equipment were heading towards the blockade line. The moment they reached it, a confrontation — possibly a shooting confrontation — would begin.

Behind the scenes, frantic secret negotiations were underway. The Soviet ships stopped short of the blockade line. Eventually a deal emerged: the Soviets would remove the missiles from Cuba; the US would pledge not to invade Cuba and would quietly remove its missiles from Turkey.

How close did it actually get?

Very close. Documents declassified decades later revealed that a Soviet submarine, cut off from communication and believing war had started, came within one officer's dissent of launching a nuclear torpedo at an American ship. That officer, Vasili Arkhipov, refused to authorise the launch — a decision that may literally have prevented nuclear war. Castro, meanwhile, urged Khrushchev to launch a nuclear first strike against the US if it invaded Cuba. Khrushchev declined.

The crisis led directly to the establishment of the Moscow-Washington hotline — the "red telephone" — so the two leaders could communicate directly in a future crisis without delays. It was perhaps the single most important lesson of the Cold War: that in a crisis, the ability to talk is everything.