Fidel Castro and the Cuban Missile Crisis

I.B. Twentieth Century World History
In late 1945, Castro entered law school at the University of Havana.

During 1948, Castro was twice linked to political assassinations.

He was suspected of Manolo Castro's assassination that took place on February 22.

University policeman Oscar Fernandez was killed in front of his own home on June 6. Dying Oscar Fernandez and other witnesses identified Castro as the assassin.

In 1948, Castro joined an anti-American demonstration trip to Bogotá, Colombia, paid by Argentinean army colonel and President Juan Perón.

Castro joined mob violence and property destruction, and later sought refuge in the Argentinean embassy.
The Cuban revolution began when the poorly armed Cuban rebels attacked the Moncada Barracks in Santiago and the barracks in Bayamo on 26 July 1953.

The exact number of rebels killed is debatable, however in his autobiography, Fidel Castro claims that five were killed in the fighting, and an additional fifty-six were killed later by the Batista regime.

The survivors, among them Fidel Castro and his brother Raúl Castro Ruz, were captured shortly afterwards. In a highly political trial, Fidel Castro spoke for nearly four hours in his defense, ending with the words; "Condemn me, it does not matter. History will absolve me."

In 1955, under broad political pressure, the Batista regime freed all political prisoners in Cuba – including the Moncada attackers. Batista was persuaded to include the Castro brothers in this release in part by Fidel's Jesuit childhood teachers.
While he was being held at the prison for political activists on Isla de Pinos, he continued to plot Batista's overthrow, planning upon release to reorganize and train in Mexico.

Once in Mexico, Castro reunited with other Cuban exiles and founded the 26th of July Movement, named after the date of the failed attack on the Moncada Barracks.

In Mexico Castro met Ernesto "Che" Guevara, a proponent of guerrilla warfare. Guevara joined the group of rebels and became an important force in shaping Castro's evolving political beliefs.

On November 26, 1956, Castro and his group of 81 followers, mostly Cuban exiles, set out from Tuxpan, Veracruz, aboard the yacht Granma for the purpose of starting a rebellion in Cuba.

The rebels landed at Playa Las Coloradas on December 2, 1956. In short order, most of Castro's men were killed, dispersed, or taken prisoner by Batista's forces.

The group of survivors included Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, and Raúl Castro. Those who survived were aided by people in the countryside. They regrouped in the Sierra Maestra in Oriente province and organized a column under Fidel Castro's command.
From their encampment in the Sierra Maestra mountains, the 26th of July Movement waged a guerrilla war against the Batista government.

In 1957, Castro also signed the Manifesto of the Sierra Maestra, in which he agreed to call elections under the Electoral Code of 1943 within the first 18 months of his time in power and to restore all of the provisions of the Constitution of 1940 that had been suspended under Batista.

In February 1958, Castro published in Coronet Magazine a famous statement of the goals of the movement. He stated that "we are fighting to do away with dictatorship in Cuba and to establish the foundations of genuine representative government" and promised to "prepare and conduct truly honest general elections within twelve months" after success. He also stated, "we have no plans for the expropriation or nationalization of foreign investments here".

In May 1958, Batista launched Operation Verano aiming to crush Castro and other anti-government groups.

Although on paper heavily outnumbered, Castro's guerrilla forces scored a series of victories, largely aided by mass desertions from Batista's army of poorly trained and uncommitted young conscripts.

During the Battle of La Plata, Castro's forces defeated an entire battalion.

In December 1958, the columns of Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos continued their advance through Las Villas province. They succeeded in occupying several towns, and then began preparations for an attack on Santa Clara, the provincial capital.

Defeated on all sides, Batista's forces crumbled. The provincial capital was captured after less than a day of fighting on December 31, 1958.
After the loss at the Battle of Santa Clara, expecting betrayal by his own army and having lost all backup from the previously supportive US government, Batista boarded a plane and fled to the Dominican Republic in the early hours of January 1, 1959. Accompanying Batista into exile was an amassed fortune of more than $300,000,000 that he acquired through “graft and payoffs.”

Batista left behind a junta headed by Gen. Eulogio Cantillo, recently the commander in Oriente province, the center of the Castro revolt. The junta immediately selected Dr. Carlos Piedra, the oldest judge of the Supreme Court, as provisional President of Cuba as specified in the Constitution of 1940. Castro refused to accept the selection of Justice Piedra as provisional President and the Supreme Court refused to administer the oath of office to the Justice.

The rebel forces of Fidel Castro moved swiftly to seize power throughout the island. At the age of 32, Castro had successfully masterminded a classic guerrilla campaign from his headquarters in the Sierra Maestra and ousted Batista.
On January 8, 1959, Castro's army rolled victoriously into Havana. 2 days later the US recognizes the new government of Cuba. Castro was the Commander and Chief of the Army.

February 16, 1959, Castro was sworn in as Prime Minister of Cuba.

The new government began expropriating property and announced plans to base the compensation on the artificially low property valuations that the companies themselves had kept to a fraction of their true value so that their taxes would be negligible.

During this period Castro repeatedly denied being a communist. For example in New York on April 25 he said, “...[communist] influence is nothing. I don't agree with communism. We are democracy. We are against all kinds of dictators... That is why we oppose communism.”

In February 1960, Cuba signed an agreement to buy oil from the USSR. When the U.S.-owned refineries in Cuba refused to process the oil, they were expropriated, and the United States broke off diplomatic relations with the Castro government soon afterward.

To the concern of the Eisenhower administration, Cuba began to establish closer ties with the Soviet Union. A variety of pacts were signed between Castro and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, allowing Cuba to receive large amounts of economic and military aid from the USSR. The mould was set. U.S. disappointment with their lack of power in Cuban decision making fueled Castro's fears leading to increasing Cuban dependence on USSR support.
By the early autumn of 1960, the U.S. government was engaged in a semi-secret campaign to remove Castro from power.

In September 1960, Castro created Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, which implemented neighborhood spying in an effort to weed out "counter-revolutionary" activities.

By the end of 1960, all opposition newspapers had been closed down and all radio and television stations were in state control, run under the Leninist principle of Democratic Centralism.

Moderates, teachers and professors were purged. He was accused of keeping about 20,000 dissenters held captive and tortured under inhuman prison conditions every year.

Groups such as homosexuals were locked up in concentration camps in the 1960s, where they were subject to medical-political "re-education".

The Communist Party strengthened its one-party rule, with Castro as the Prime Minister.

In the 1961 New Year's Day parade, Castro exhibited Soviet tanks and other weapons. The Soviet Union awarded him with the Lenin Peace Prize later that year.
On March 15, 1960, US President Dwight D. Eisenhower ordered the CIA to use their Special Activities Division to equip, train and lead Cuban exiles in an amphibious invasion of Cuba, to overthrow the new Cuban government of Fidel Castro.

In April 1960, the CIA began to recruit anti-Castro Cuban exiles in the Miami area. Until July 1960, assessment and training was carried out on Useppa Island and at various other facilities in South Florida.

Anticipating an invasion, Che Guevara stressed the importance of an armed civilian populace, stating “all the Cuban people must become a guerrilla army, each and every Cuban must learn to handle and if necessary use firearms in defense of the nation.”

An April 29, 2000 Washington Post article, "Soviets Knew Date of Cuba Attack", reported that the CIA had information indicating that the Soviet Union knew the invasion was going to take place and did not inform Kennedy.

On April 15, 1961. The US launched air raids to destroy Cuban airfields.

Cuban Foreign Minister Raúl Roa attempted to accuse the US of aggressive air attacks against Cuba, and that afternoon formally tabled a motion to the Political (First) Committee of the UN General Assembly. In response, US ambassador to the UN Adlai Stevenson stated that US armed forces would not "under any conditions" intervene in Cuba, and that the US would do everything in its power to ensure that no US citizens would participate in actions against Cuba.
During the night of 16/17 April, a mock diversionary landing was organized by CIA operatives near Bahia Honda, Pinar del Río Province. A flotilla of small boats towed rafts containing equipment which broadcasted sounds and other effects of a ship borne invasion landing.

Four transport ships carrying about 1,300 Cuban exile ground troops of, plus tanks and other armor in the landing craft arrived around midnight on the 17th.

Shortly afterwards more troops landed either by boat or parachute.

Cuban troops and militia, supported by tanks, took Playa Larga after Brigade forces had fled towards Girón in the early hours. During the day, Brigade forces retreated to San Blas. By then, both Fidel Castro and José Ramón Fernández had re-located to that battlefront area.

During the night of 18 April, a FAL C-46 delivered arms and equipment to the Girón airstrip occupied by Brigade 2506 ground forces, and took off before daybreak on 19 April.

Fearing international backlash, Kennedy pulls air support for the operation.

Without direct air support, and short of ammunition, Brigade 2506 ground forces retreated to the beaches in the face of considerable onslaught from Cuban government artillery, tanks and infantry.

Late on 19 April, destroyers USS Eaton and USS Murray moved into Cochinos Bay to evacuate retreating Brigade soldiers from beaches, before firing from Cuban army tanks caused Commodore Crutchfield to order a withdrawal.
The first consignment of SS-3 MRBMs (medium range ballistic missiles) arrived on the night of September 8, followed by a second on September 16. The planned arsenal was forty launchers, a 70% increase in first strike capacity. When President Kennedy saw the photographs on 16 October, he assembled the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (EXCOMM), fourteen key officials and his brother Robert, at 9.00 a.m. The U.S. had no plan for dealing with such a threat, because U.S. intelligence was convinced that the Soviets would not install nuclear missiles in Cuba. The EXCOMM quickly discussed five possible courses of action:

- Do nothing.
- Use diplomatic pressure to get the Soviet Union to remove the missiles.
- An air attack on the missiles.
- A full military invasion.
- The naval blockade of Cuba, which was redefined as a more selective quarantine.
Unanimously, the Joint Chiefs of Staff agreed that a full-scale attack and invasion was the only solution. They agreed that the Soviets would not act to stop the U.S. from conquering Cuba.

Kennedy was skeptical, saying:

They, no more than we, can let these things go by without doing something. They can't, after all their statements, permit us to take out their missiles, kill a lot of Russians, and then do nothing. If they don't take action in Cuba, they certainly will in Berlin.

The EXCOMM then discussed the effect on the strategic balance. The Joint Chiefs of Staff believed that the missiles would seriously alter the balance, but Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara disagreed. He was convinced that the missiles would not affect the strategic balance at all.

The EXCOMM did agree, however, that the missiles would affect the political balance.

First, Kennedy had explicitly promised the American people less than a month before the crisis that "if Cuba should possess a capacity to carry out offensive actions against the United States...the United States would act".

Second, U.S. credibility amongst their allies, and amongst the American people, would have been damaged if they had allowed the Soviet Union to appear to redress the strategic balance by placing missiles in Cuba.

Kennedy explained after the crisis that "it would have politically changed the balance of power. It would have appeared to, and appearances contribute to reality."
A full-scale invasion was not the first option, but something had to be done.

Robert McNamara supported the naval blockade as a strong but limited military action that left the U.S. in control.

According to international law a blockade is an act of war, so we call it a Quarantine instead.

By 19 October, frequent U-2 spy flights showed four operational sites.

As part of the blockade, the US military was put on high alert to enforce the blockade and to be ready to invade Cuba at a moment's notice.

The 1st Armored Division was sent to Georgia, and five army divisions were alerted for maximal action.

In customary international practice, a blockade stops all shipments into the blockaded area, and is considered an act of war. Quarantines are more selective, as, in this case, being limited to offensive weapons.
At 7 p.m., on 22 October, President Kennedy delivered a televised radio address announcing the discovery of the missiles. As part of the context of the speech a directive went out to all US forces worldwide placing them on DEFCON 3.

On 23 October at 11:24 a.m. a cable drafted by George Ball to the U.S. Ambassador in Turkey and the U.S. Ambassador to NATO notified them that they were considering making an offer to withdraw missiles from Italy and Turkey in exchange for a withdrawal from Cuba.

A telegram from Khrushchev to Kennedy which was received at 10:52 p.m., in which Khrushchev stated, "If you coolly weigh the situation which has developed, not giving way to passions, you will understand that the Soviet Union cannot fail to reject the arbitrary demands of the United States," and that the Soviet Union views the blockade as "an act of aggression" and their ships will be instructed to ignore it.

On the night of October 23, the Joint Chiefs of Staff instructed Strategic Air Command to go to DEFCON 2, for the only confirmed time in history.

At 1:45 a.m., on 25 October, Kennedy responded to Khrushchev's telegram, stating that the U.S. was forced into action after receiving repeated assurances that no offensive missiles were being placed in Cuba, and that when these assurances proved to be false, the deployment "required the responses I have announced... I hope that your government will take necessary action to permit a restoration of the earlier situation."
At 1:00 p.m., John A. Scali of ABC News had lunch with Aleksandr Fomin at Fomin's request. Fomin noted, "War seems about to break out," and asked Scali to use his contacts to talk to his "high-level friends" at the State Department to see if the U.S. would be interested in a diplomatic solution.

He suggested that the language of the deal would contain an assurance from the Soviet Union to remove the weapons under UN supervision and that Castro would publicly announce that he would not accept such weapons in the future, in exchange for a public statement by the U.S. that it would never invade Cuba.

The U.S. responded by asking the Brazilian government to pass a message to Castro that the U.S. would be "unlikely to invade" if the missiles were removed.

At 6:00 p.m., the State Department started receiving a message that appeared to be written personally by Khrushchev.

Robert Kennedy described the letter as "very long and emotional." Khrushchev reiterated the basic outline that had been stated to John Scali earlier in the day,

"I propose: we, for our part, will declare that our ships bound for Cuba are not carrying any armaments. You will declare that the United States will not invade Cuba with its troops and will not support any other forces which might intend to invade Cuba. Then the necessity of the presence of our military specialists in Cuba will disappear."
Castro dictated a letter to Khrushchev which appeared to call for a preemptive strike on the U.S.

He also ordered all anti-aircraft weapons in Cuba to fire on any U.S. aircraft, whereas in the past they had been ordered only to fire on groups of two or more.

At 6:00 a.m., on 27 October, the CIA delivered a memo reporting that three of the four missile sites at San Cristobal and the two sites at Sagua la Grande appeared to be fully operational.

They also noted that the Cuban military continued to organize for action, although they were under order not to initiate action unless attacked.

At 9 a.m., Radio Moscow began broadcasting a message from Khrushchev. Contrary to the letter of the night before, the message offered a new trade, that the missiles on Cuba would be removed in exchange for the removal of the Jupiters from Italy and Turkey.

At 10 a.m., the executive committee met again to discuss the situation and came to the conclusion that the change in the message was due to internal debate between Khrushchev and other party officials in the Kremlin.

While the meeting progressed, at 11:03 a.m. a new message began to arrive from Khrushchev. The message stated, in part,

"You are disturbed over Cuba. You say that this disturbs you because it is ninety miles by sea from the coast of the United States of America. But... you have placed destructive missile weapons, which you call offensive, in Italy and Turkey, literally next to us... I therefore make this proposal: We are willing to remove from Cuba the means which you regard as offensive... Your representatives will make a declaration to the effect that the United States ... will remove its analogous means from Turkey ... and after that, persons entrusted by the United Nations Security Council could inspect on the spot the fulfillment of the pledges made." The executive committee continued to meet through the day.
After much deliberation between the Soviet Union and Kennedy's cabinet, Kennedy secretly agreed to remove all missiles set in southern Italy and in Turkey, the latter on the border of the Soviet Union, in exchange for Khrushchev removing all missiles in Cuba.

At 9 a.m., on 28 October, a new message from Khrushchev was broadcast on Radio Moscow. Khrushchev stated that, "the Soviet government, in addition to previously issued instructions on the cessation of further work at the building sites for the weapons, has issued a new order on the dismantling of the weapons which you describe as 'offensive' and their crating and return to the Soviet Union."

Kennedy immediately responded, issuing a statement calling the letter "an important and constructive contribution to peace". He continued this with a formal letter:

"I consider my letter to you of October twenty-seventh and your reply of today as firm undertakings on the part of both our governments which should be promptly carried out... The U.S. will make a statement in the framework of the Security Council in reference to Cuba as follows: it will declare that the United States of America will respect the inviolability of Cuban borders, its sovereignty, that it take the pledge not to interfere in internal affairs, not to intrude themselves and not to permit our territory to be used as a bridgehead for the invasion of Cuba, and will restrain those who would plan to carry an aggression against Cuba, either from U.S. territory or from the territory of other countries neighboring to Cuba."
The practical effect of this Kennedy-Khrushchev Pact was that it effectively strengthened Castro's position in Cuba in that he would not be invaded by the United States.

The compromise was a particularly sharp embarrassment for Khrushchev and the Soviet Union because the withdrawal of U.S. missiles from Italy and Turkey was not made public—it was a secret deal between Kennedy and Khrushchev.

Khrushchev's fall from power two years later can be partially linked to Politburo embarrassment at both Khrushchev's eventual concessions to the U.S. and his ineptitude in precipitating the crisis in the first place.

June 20, 1963; The Cuban Missile Crisis spurred the Hotline Agreement, which created the Moscow-Washington hot line, a direct communications link between Moscow and Washington, D.C. The purpose was to have a way that the leaders of the two Cold War countries could communicate directly to solve such a crisis.