



President and Mrs. Kennedy greet members of the Cuban Invasion Brigade in December 1962 in Miami, Florida.

Photograph by Cecil Stoughton, White House, in the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston.



President Kennedy meets with General Curtis LeMay and the reconnaissance pilots who found the missile sites in Cuba.

The Bay of Pigs Invasion

As in Europe, the rest of the world also seemed to become a more dangerous place. Even before his inauguration, President Kennedy had learned about Dwight D. Eisenhower's scheme to train Cuban exiles for an invasion of their homeland and victory over Fidel Castro's revolutionary regime. The United States had maintained a close relationship with the Caribbean island's land-owning junta ever since Cuban independence in 1898 and benefitted from its significant influence over the island's sugar economy and political and social affairs. Fidel Castro's guerilla troops successfully toppled the junta-friendly Cuban dictator Fulgencio Batista, who left Cuba on January 1, 1959.²⁸

Although Castro sought a cordial relationship with the United States and was reluctant to embrace the political label of Marxism, the two nations soon found themselves at odds, and the Eisenhower administration grew eager to direct a regime change in Cuba the way it had done elsewhere in Latin America. Accordingly, the CIA prepared a force of 1,400 Cuban anti-communist exiles for an invasion at the island's **Bay of Pigs**. Faced with a plan inherited from his predecessor, Kennedy let the operation take place on April 17, 1961, but did not intervene with aid when the landing stalled and the expected popular support from locals failed to materialize. The disastrous invasion attempt was the first major crisis of Kennedy's presidency. The new president took full responsibility for the invasion—even though it had been planned under Eisenhower's watch. The surviving troops surrendered and were allowed to return to the U.S. the following year.²⁹

The Cuban Missile Crisis

Along with a number of other covert American attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro or topple his regime, the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961 helped push Cuba and the Soviet Union closer together. A target for the U.S. and in need of a friend, Castro welcomed overtures from Khrushchev, who liked the idea of an ally just about a hundred miles off the coast of Florida. In October 1962, American spy-planes documented the installation of a nuclear missile site on the Caribbean island. Alarmed, Kennedy imposed a naval blockade on Cuba and demanded the removal of all Soviet missiles and the destruction of the launching facilities. As Soviet ships hovered near U.S. Navy patrols off Cuba's coast, the president and his advisors debated their strategy toward Khrushchev, wavering between a preemptive nuclear attack, an ultimatum, or continued negotiations. Although most of Kennedy's advisors counselled the more aggressive options of attack or ultimatum, Kennedy resisted these options. On October 28, 1962, when the Soviet leader agreed to remove the missile facility in exchange for an American commitment not to invade Cuba and to remove its similarly closely installed missile facilities in Turkey, most observers agreed that the world had just stepped back from a thermonuclear war.

The Turn Toward Non-Proliferation

The severity of the crisis worried both Kennedy and Khrushchev, who soon began talks aimed at eventually limiting the spread of nuclear weapons. They reached an agreement in 1963 that prohibited atmospheric nuclear tests. That year, Kennedy seemed to encourage a step

