

The Cuban Missile Crisis: A Warning From Khrushchev

The Cuban missile crisis of October 1962 was one of the most frightening times in the cold war. A U.S. spy plane flying high above Cuba photographed Soviet nuclear missile bases under construction there. The bases meant that the Soviet Union was seeking to shorten the time it would take for its nuclear warheads to reach U.S. targets. Cuba is only 90 miles from the coast of Florida, and midrange missiles based there could strike a large part of the United States. In a dramatic television address on October 22, President John F. Kennedy demanded that the Soviet Union remove the missiles. He imposed a naval blockade (he called it a "quarantine") aimed at preventing Soviet ships from carrying any more missiles to Cuba.

This document is a letter to President Kennedy by Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. Its uncompromising tone stirred fears of a showdown, perhaps involving an exchange of nuclear strikes. However, both sides eased their positions. Khrushchev ordered Soviet ships to stop and wait. Kennedy promised that U.S. forces would not invade Cuba if the missiles were removed. Kennedy also said that he would remove U.S. nuclear missiles based in Turkey not far from Soviet borders. On October 28, Khrushchev announced that he would stop building bases in Cuba and withdraw the missiles.

His Excellency
Mr. John F. Kennedy
President of the United States of America
Washington

Dear Mr. President

...Imagine, Mr. President, what if we were to present to you such an ultimatum [demand] as you have presented to us by your actions. How would you react to it? I think you would be outraged at such a move on our part. And this we would understand.

Having presented these conditions to us, Mr. President, you have challenged us. Who asked you to do this? By what right have you done this? Our ties with the Republic of Cuba, as well as our relations with other nations, regardless of their political system, concern only the two countries between which these relations exist. And, if it were a matter of quarantine [isolating people, goods, or places infected with some danger to prevent the infection from spreading] as mentioned in your letter, then, as is customary in international practice, it can be established only by states agreeing between themselves, and not by some third party. Quarantines exist, for example, on agricultural goods and products. However, in this case we are not talking about quarantines, but rather about each more serious matters, and you yourself understand this.

You, Mr. President, are not declaring a quarantine, but rather issuing an ultimatum, and you are threatening that if we do not obey your orders, you will then use force. Think about what you are saying! And you want to persuade me to agree to this! What does it mean to agree to these demands? It would mean for us to conduct our relations with other countries not by reason, but by yielding to tyranny. You are not appealing to reason; you want to intimidate us.

No, Mr. President, I cannot agree to this, and I think that deep inside, you will admit that I am right. I am convinced that if you were in my place you would do the same....

The Organization of American States has no authority or rounds whatsoever to pass resolutions like those of which you speak in your letter. Therefore, we do not accept these resolutions. International law exists, generally accepted standards of conduct exist. We firmly adhere to the principles of international law and strictly observe the standards regulating navigation on the open sea, in international waters. We observe these standards and enjoy the rights recognized by all nations.

You want to force us to renounce the rights enjoyed by every sovereign state; you are attempting to make laws concerning questions of international law; you are violating the generally accepted standards of this law. All this is due not only to hatred for the Cuban people and their government, but also for reasons having to do with the election campaign in the USA. What morals, what laws can justify such an approach by the American government to international affairs? Such morals and laws are not to be found, because the actions of the USA in relation to Cuba are outright piracy. This, if you will, is the madness of a shrinking imperialism. Unfortunately, people of all nations, and not least the American people themselves, could suffer heavily from madness such as this, since with the appearance of modern types of weapons, the USA has completely lost its former inaccessibility unreachable global position.

Therefore Mr. President, if you weigh the present situation with a cool head without giving way to passion, you will understand that the Soviet Union cannot afford not to decline the tyrannical demands of the USA. When you lay conditions such as these before us, try to put yourself in our situation and consider how the USA would react to such conditions. I have no doubt that if anyone attempted to dictate similar conditions to you—the USA, you would reject such an attempt. And we likewise say—no.

The Soviet government considers the violation of the freedom of navigation in international waters and air space to constitute an act of aggression propelling humankind into the abyss of a world nuclear-missile war. Therefore, the Soviet government cannot instruct captains of Soviet ships bound for Cuba to observe orders of American naval forces blockading this island. Our instructions to Soviet sailors are to observe strictly the generally accepted standards of navigation in international waters and not retreat one step from them. And, if the American side violates these rights, it must be aware of the responsibility it will bear for this act. To be sure, we will not remain mere observers of pirate actions by American ships in the open sea. We will then be forced on our part to take those measures we deem necessary and sufficient to defend our rights. To this end we have all that is necessary.

Respectfully, /s/ N. Khrushchev
N. Khrushchev
Moscow
21 October 1962

Review Questions

1. Why did President John F. Kennedy order a naval blockade (“quarantine”) of Cuba?
2. What did Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev mean when he said that President Kennedy was “not declaring a quarantine, but rather issuing an ultimatum”?
3. Why did Khrushchev refuse to cooperate with the United States?
4. Why did Khrushchev mean when he stated, “with the appearance of modern types of weapons, the USA has completely lost its former inaccessibility”?
5. How did the Cuban missile crisis end?