

Introduction: October 16, 1962

On October 16, 1962, President John F. Kennedy confronted an earth-shattering revelation: the Soviet Union had placed missiles capable of carrying nuclear weapons on the island of Cuba, just ninety miles from the United States.

Tensions between the Soviet Union and the United States had been high since the late 1940s. For every U.S. president since Truman, this ideological standoff—known as the Cold War—had shaped foreign and domestic policy. Kennedy had worried for months about Soviet intentions toward West Berlin and in Southeast Asia, but this was much closer to home. Kennedy realized that, if launched, these missiles could hit the United States in minutes. The Cold War seemed about to boil over.

Cuba presented a thorny problem for the president. Cuba's leader, Fidel Castro, welcomed in the United States with open arms just a few years before, had recently aligned himself with the Soviet Union.

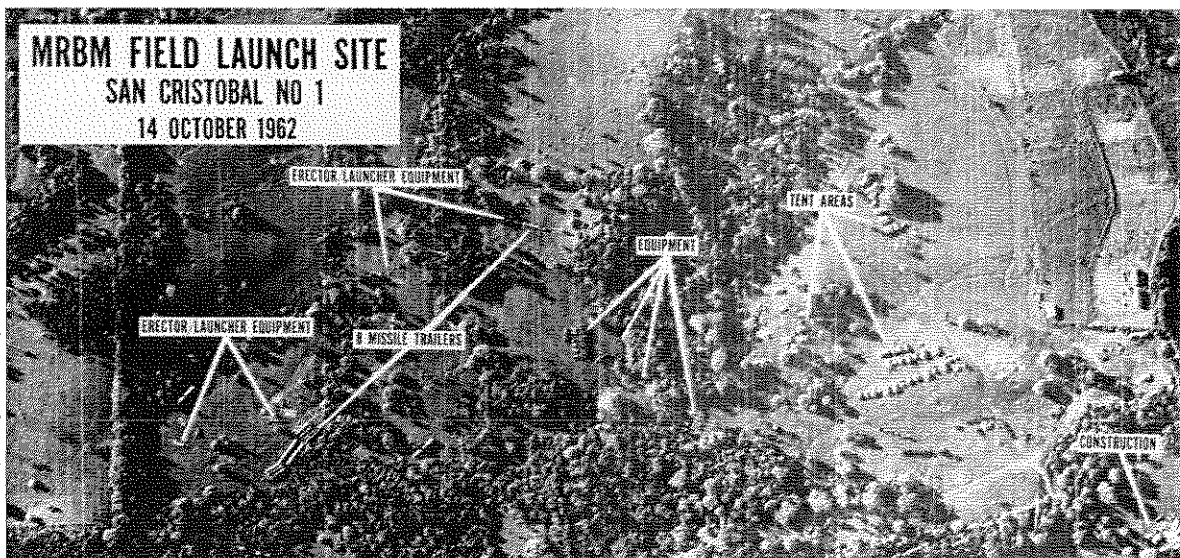
Many Americans felt that Castro's revolution was a rejection of the U.S. effort to bring American skills and values to the region. The island had become a flashpoint for U.S. anxiety about the world. In an attempt to overthrow Castro, Kennedy had authorized

a CIA-sponsored invasion of Cuba in 1961. Known as the Bay of Pigs invasion, it was a disastrous failure.

The president had met with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev the previous year in an effort to improve relations between the two nuclear powers but with little success. Khrushchev, convinced that the Soviet Union was a growing power and emboldened by advances in Soviet rocket technology, saw little reason for compromise.

Nonetheless, Khrushchev had promised to do nothing that might affect the upcoming U.S. elections. Furthermore, he had promised not to place offensive weapons in Cuba. Now Kennedy wondered what Khrushchev was doing and how he should respond.

In these readings, you will explore the circumstances that brought the United States to the brink of nuclear war in 1962. You will explore the history of U.S. relations with Cuba—the country to challenge U.S. domination of the Caribbean and Central America most boldly. You will then grapple with the same question President Kennedy pondered: how should the United States respond to the Soviet missiles in Cuba? An epilogue reviews the outcome of the missile crisis.



John F. Kennedy Library. Used with permission.

U.S. experts first learned of Soviet missile installations in Cuba by examining this reconnaissance photograph.

Part I: From Colonialism to Statehood

Perhaps nowhere in the world have U.S. actions left a greater impact than in the Caribbean and Central America. The size and strength of the United States have cast an enormous shadow over the small states of the region. The people of the Caribbean and Central America have often found themselves swept up in the currents of U.S. history.

How did the Caribbean and Central America become entangled in U.S. history?

When Americans developed a taste for bananas, coffee, sugar, and other products of the tropics, American businessmen moved quickly to set up huge plantations in the Caribbean and Central America. When the needs of U.S. trade and defense required a shorter ocean route between the Atlantic and the Pacific, the United States stepped in to build the Panama Canal in the early 1900s. And when Soviet expansion began to worry U.S. leaders after World War II, the United States provided large amounts of foreign aid to support friendly governments in the region.

What role did European explorers have in the region?

European explorers made their first contact with the New World in the Caribbean and Central America. From the beginning, the encounter favored the Europeans. In Central America, the efforts of the Spanish empire to colonize the region met resistance from a well-organized society dominated by Mayan culture. By 1543, however, the Spanish had imposed control, uniting an area from what is today southern Mexico to Panama under a single jurisdiction.

In 1823, after the Spanish empire crumbled in Mexico and South America, the United Provinces of Central America was formed. The federation disintegrated by 1838, giving rise to the independent states of Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. (Panama, another Central American country, broke away from Colombia in 1903.)

In the Caribbean, Spain overwhelmed the native populations in the 1500s. In the next two centuries, the British, French, and Dutch joined the Spanish in colonizing the cluster of islands that stretches from the tip of Florida to the coast of Venezuela. Sugar cane became the most profitable crop of the islands, and African slaves the European colonizers imported worked on the huge plantations.

Political independence came very slowly to the region. A successful slave revolt in Haiti defeated the French colonial powers in 1804, but for much of the Caribbean, independence was not achieved until the twentieth century. Unlike Mexico, many countries of the Caribbean and Central America lacked a unifying sense of nationhood. Their small size and economic weakness left them vulnerable to pressures from their larger neighbors, especially the United States.

What role did Manifest Destiny play in the region?

From the earliest days of the republic, Americans felt that the United States was a unique force for good in the world. Many believed that the values of American democracy and individual liberty were destined to sweep across the continent and perhaps the entire Western Hemisphere. Believers in Manifest Destiny, a term first coined in the 1840s by a New York journalist, held that the territorial expansion of the United States was part of God's plan to spread the American experiment in self-government.

Manifest Destiny served as a guiding principle of U.S. foreign policy during the Mexican-American War, which was ignited in 1846 by a dispute over the boundary of Texas. After U.S. forces captured Mexico City the following year, Mexico was forced to give up not only its claims to Texas but also territories that now comprise the American Southwest and California. The peace settlement with Mexico, however, did not satisfy some in Washington. Twelve of fifty-two senators ultimately op-

posed the treaty, arguing that the United States should annex all of Mexico.

By the mid-1800s, the present boundaries of the United States had been drawn except for Alaska and Hawaii. With expansion to the west closed, attention turned toward the Caribbean and Central America. In the years leading up to the Civil War, Southerners sought to expand the plantation system to Cuba and Nicaragua, and in the process strengthen their position against the North. Cuba was especially attractive to the South, because the economy was already dominated by sugar, coffee, and tobacco plantations using the labor of African slaves. In 1854, President Franklin Pierce expressed the U.S. desire to obtain Cuba from Spain. Pierce's declaration, known as the Ostend Manifesto, asserted that the United States had a reasonable right to buy Cuba for a fair price or even use force if the offer were refused.

An American Empire

The North's victory in the Civil War put an end to the South's plans of expansion and spurred the emergence of the United States as an industrial giant. More than ever, Americans felt their country had a special mission to promote democratic values in the world. The late nineteenth century was also a time of fierce competition among the major powers of Europe. Their colonial empires in Asia and Africa required naval power to protect them. Britain maintained the largest navy during the 1800s, but Germany was rapidly closing the gap. In this atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion, Americans feared that the European nations would extend their struggle to the Western Hemisphere.

What was the purpose of the Monroe Doctrine?

The Monroe Doctrine had long served as a warning for Europeans to stay out of the Americas. When President James Monroe originally proclaimed it in 1823, the United States depended on Britain to enforce the policy. By the end of the century, however, new British

settlements in Central America and a boundary dispute between Venezuela and the British colony of Guiana raised U.S. concerns about British plans. Moreover, the French and Germans were seeking to increase their influence in the Caribbean and Central America.

Among the colonial powers of Europe, the United States most resented Spain. Not only did the Spanish rule Cuba and Puerto Rico with a heavy hand, but many Americans saw the Spanish monarchy as backward and corrupt.

Cuban attempts to overthrow Spain's control attracted widespread support among Americans during the nineteenth century. The Cuban poet and patriot, José Martí, organized and unified the drive for Cuban independence from New York City. When a new revolt began in 1895, American sympathies again went out to the Cubans fighting for independence. Martí returned to Cuba and was killed in battle. (Martí remains a hero to Cubans to this day.) Spanish efforts to crush the rebellion in 1896 raised the stakes further. A Spanish army of 200,000 men attacked villages where support for the revolt was strong and herded hundreds of thousands of peasants into fortified towns. The Spanish also burned crops and slaughtered thousands of farm animals in hopes of destroying the roots of the uprising.

Why did the United States declare war on Spain in 1898?

By 1898, the war in Cuba had stalemated. The Spanish held the cities while the Cuban rebels controlled the countryside. Meanwhile, newspapers in the United States inflamed the public with details of Spanish brutality. "Blood on the roadsides, blood in the fields, blood on the doorsteps, blood, blood, blood," wrote the *New York World*. When the U.S. battleship *Maine* exploded mysteriously in Havana harbor in February 1898, the press rushed to blame the Spanish. President William McKinley could not resist the mounting public pressure. Even though Spain was ready to accept U.S. demands, he asked Congress to declare war.

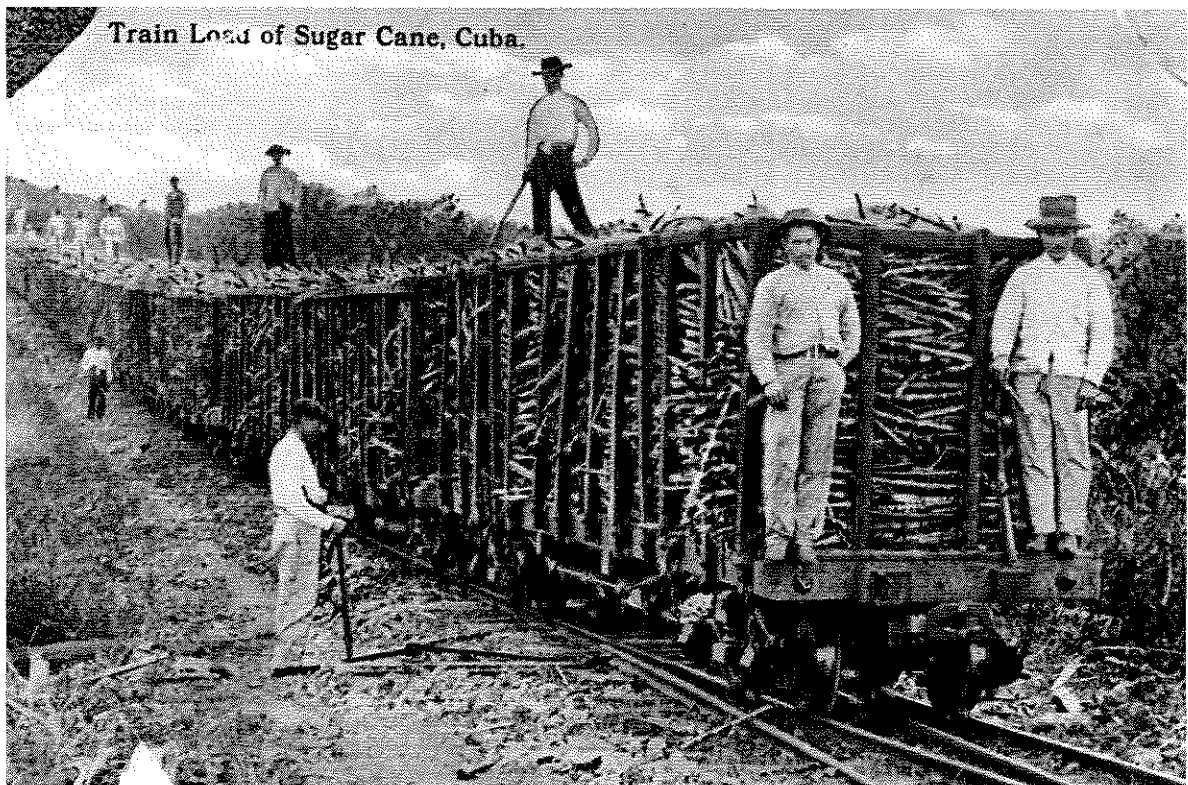
McKinley's war goals, however, differed from the popular call to intervene on the side of Cuban independence. McKinley believed that the United States should take military action to end the conflict and establish a stable government. But Congress feared that McKinley's real intent was to make Cuba a permanent U.S. possession. While giving President McKinley the authority to enter the war in 1898, Congress also passed an amendment requiring the United States to grant Cuba self-government once the Spanish colonial army was defeated.

What was the result of the Spanish-American War?

The Spanish-American War lasted only four months and ended with a decisive victory for the United States. Spain and the United States concluded a peace treaty that turned over to U.S. control the Spanish colonies of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines, as well as Cuba. As Americans quickly discov-

ered, governing an empire was much more difficult than conquering one. Particularly in Cuba, the conclusion of the Spanish-American War failed to lay the foundation for a peaceful future. Many Cubans had already invested thirty years of their lives into the independence movement when U.S. troops arrived in 1898. Their struggle had united supporters of independence throughout the island. As might be expected, Cuban nationalists were deeply disappointed when the United States negotiated an end to Spanish rule without their participation. Many felt they had merely traded one colonial power for another.

The U.S. military occupation of Cuba began in 1899. The United States provided benefits that the Cubans could not have provided for themselves. Americans brought their advanced technology and administrative expertise to the island. Roads and telegraph lines were built, finances reorganized, schools opened, sanitation improved, and yellow fever stamped out. At the same time, U.S. officials



A trainload of sugar cane in Cuba around the beginning of the twentieth century.

University of Miami Library. Used with permission.

sought to create a political system that would closely follow Washington's guidance. Only 5 percent of Cuba's population had voting rights. Nonetheless, elections in 1900 produced an assembly that strongly favored immediate independence for Cuba. The McKinley administration now found itself in a quandary. White House policymakers wanted to protect U.S. business and security interests in Cuba, but the American public expected Washington to establish a strong democratic government on the island.

Why did the Platt Amendment anger Cubans?

U.S. concerns about the future of Cuba were ultimately settled, but in Washington rather than Cuba. Under a plan crafted largely by the U.S. State Department, Cuba was to receive independence only after accepting a number of limitations. The plan, known as the Platt Amendment, gave the United States the right to oversee the Cuban economy, veto international commitments, and intervene whenever necessary "for the protection of life, property, and individual liberty." The United States was also allowed to build a naval base on the southeastern tip of the island at Guantanamo Bay. News of the proposed amendment sparked angry demonstrations and protests in Cuba, but the McKinley administration insisted that the Platt Amendment was the price Cubans would have to pay for ending the U.S. military occupation of their island. In 1901, the amendment passed the Cuban assembly by one vote.

The Platt Amendment opened the door to greater American investment in Cuba's economy. By 1928, American companies produced 75 percent of Cuba's sugar—the island's leading crop. Cubans who had fought in the independence struggle found few opportunities in an economy dominated by Americans and recent immigrants from Spain. They came to resent the alliance between foreign businesses and wealthy Cuban plantation owners. Their frustration would later emerge as a powerful force in Cuban politics.

Why did the United States construct the Panama Canal?

The American experience in Cuba proved to be the first of many U.S. involvements in the Caribbean and Central America. The construction of the Panama Canal in the early 1900s was among the boldest. Interest in a canal across the isthmus of Central America had steadily grown since the United States had expanded across the continent to the Pacific Ocean in 1848. Events during the Spanish-American War had demonstrated the military importance of a canal. For example, the U.S. cruiser *Oregon* had taken nearly ten weeks to round Cape Horn and join the battle against the Spanish navy.

The Panama Canal drew the United States closer to the Caribbean and Central America. As American economic and military power increased in the first decades of the 1900s, U.S. leaders began to view the region as their country's backyard. The Caribbean and Central America became both an area of vital national interest and a testing ground for cultivating American values.

What was the "Roosevelt Corollary"?

Theodore Roosevelt set the stage for increased U.S. involvement during his State of the Union address to Congress in 1904 by adding an additional idea to the Monroe Doctrine. In what came to be known as the Roosevelt Corollary, he warned that the United States would act as an "international police power" to maintain stability in the Western Hemisphere. Roosevelt soon put his pledge into practice, sending U.S. troops to Cuba in 1906 after supporters of the Cuban Liberal Party rose up in opposition to the re-election of the Conservative Party president.

World War I raised new concerns about the security of the Caribbean and Central America. The commander of the U.S. Marine Corps was convinced that Germany had provoked chaos in Haiti and Santo Domingo (now the Dominican Republic) in order to set up military bases on the island. President Woodrow Wilson ordered troops into the two countries in 1914 and 1916 respectively. Haiti became a U.S.

protectorate (a country that is watched over and partly controlled by a stronger one). A U.S. military government was installed in Santo Domingo.

U.S. involvement in Nicaragua left a particularly lasting impact. Originally, U.S. troops landed in 1910 to back a pro-U.S. government. The force soon grew to three thousand soldiers, and the Nicaraguan government increasingly came under the management of U.S. experts and advisers. Opponents of U.S. domination in Nicaragua turned to guerrilla warfare in 1927. The United States committed six thousand soldiers against a small rebel army led by Augusto César Sandino, and eighteen U.S. warplanes conducted history's first dive-bombing attacks. The guerrillas, however, moved too quickly and the terrain proved too difficult for the Americans to gain a decisive victory. Frustrated, the United States withdrew its forces in 1933. Before leaving, the Americans set up the Nicaraguan National Guard to police the country. The force soon became the private army of its commander, Anastasio Somoza. In 1934, Somoza lured Sandino to a meeting in Nicaragua's capital with a promise of peace talks, and then assassinated him. By 1937, Somoza had toppled Nicaragua's elected leader and installed himself as president. With control of the National Guard, Somoza intimidated his opponents and built the framework of a family dynasty that ran Nicaragua until 1979.

What was the role of the United Fruit Company in the Caribbean?

Overall, the American presence in the Caribbean and Central America during the early 1900s was more economic than military. The United Fruit Company, operating banana



President Theodore Roosevelt is depicted as “the world’s constable.”

plantations throughout the region, became the largest agricultural enterprise in the world. Along with its rival, Standard Fruit, the company built highways, railroads, ports, and communications facilities. Schools, hospitals, and housing were constructed for the workers.

American businesses linked the economies of the region to the outside world, boosted the production of export crops, and created thousands of jobs. Transportation and communication improvements opened up new possibilities for development. Meanwhile, U.S. officials worked toward establishing sound financial institutions and effective government.

At the same time, the U.S. presence had negative consequences. American companies in the Caribbean and Central America meddled in local politics and relied on the U.S. military to support their interests. In Cuba, 60 percent of the property in the countryside belonged to Americans by 1905. At one United Fruit plantation there, even the post office and twenty armed soldiers were based on company land. In Honduras, an American commanded the army, and the U.S. dollar was legal currency. Economic development often proved imbalanced and smothered local initiative. Most of Central America's highways and

United Fruit Company

The story of the United Fruit Company is intertwined with the history of Central America and the Caribbean. The company originated in the late 1800s, a time when leaders of the region were seeking to create new economic links with the outside world. In Costa Rica, the government offered an American businessman, Minor Keith, 800,000 acres to build a railroad from the capital to the Atlantic Ocean. Keith planted bananas on much of his land and merged with another trading firm to form the United Fruit Company in 1899. United Fruit constructed railroads and port facilities up and down the Caribbean coast of Central America. The company also helped governments control tropical diseases.

United Fruit soon became known as “The Octopus” for its domination of much of Central America and the Caribbean. By the 1920s, the company not only controlled the rail system, ports, and communications of the region, but also played an important role in political affairs. In Honduras, presidents could not be elected without United Fruit support, while in Guatemala the government relied on the company for loans. During the 1970s, banana-producing countries tried to assert their economic independence. They complained that exporting countries received only 17 cents of every dollar spent on bananas and demanded a greater share of the profits. In response, United Brands (the successor of United Fruit) joined with other exporting giants in threatening to close down their operations. Countries in the region recognized that they could not afford to lose markets for their products in North America. The emergence of new industries in the Caribbean and Central America has loosened the economic hold of Chiquita Brands International (the successor of United Brands), but the company remains a powerful force to this day.

railroads connected the plantations to Caribbean ports but did not serve national capitals. The emphasis on export crops left countries dependent on a single product. During the Depression of the 1930s, for example, a fall in the price of Cuban sugar from twenty-two cents a pound to half a cent pushed millions of Cubans into desperate poverty.

How did President Franklin D. Roosevelt change U.S. relations with Latin America?

President Franklin D. Roosevelt brought changes to U.S. relations with Latin America. Under his “Good Neighbor Policy,” Roosevelt repealed the Platt Amendment, offered gov-

ernment loans to Latin American countries, and pledged not to intervene in the region. The policy withstood a major challenge in 1938, when Mexico took over the property of American oil companies in the country. Despite pressure from business interests to send in troops, Roosevelt negotiated a settlement with Mexico that provided payment to the oil companies.

But Roosevelt’s new approach to Latin America would be overtaken by a rapidly changing world. The beginning of the Second World War launched a series of events that would force profound changes in the foreign policy of the United States.