

Option 2: Blockade Cuba

The United States cannot put up with the presence of offensive nuclear weapons just ninety miles from its shores. The Soviet Union has misled us privately and publicly about its intentions in Cuba. Its motivations for this deployment are unclear. We must be prepared for any eventuality, including that the weapons would be used against us or used to pressure us to withdraw from Berlin. The United States must steer a careful course. If we tolerate the presence of these missiles in Cuba our credibility and courage will be questioned around the world. We will use force if necessary, but a blockade could allow us to pursue a solution with the Soviets that does not back them into a corner.

The U.S. Navy should blockade Cuba. Our military experts cannot tell us for sure how many or if any missiles in Cuba are operational. We must factor in this uncertainty. They also say that they cannot guarantee the destruction of all of the missiles if we launch an air strike. If a surprise air strike cannot eliminate the risk of a missile launch from Cuba against the United States, then it is too dangerous to undertake such an action. A naval blockade would prevent the arrival of Soviet ships carrying more missiles or materials necessary to make the missiles operational. It allows for a peaceful solution.

A naval blockade represents a combination of diplomatic and military responses, but without the danger that would be caused by an immediate U.S. attack. On the other hand, an unannounced U.S. attack against Cuba holds the disadvantage of losing the moral high ground for the United States. We tried Japanese officials as war criminals for their sneak attack on Pearl Harbor. A sneak attack on Cuba would discredit us in the eyes of the world today and for generations to come.

The United States still maintains a significant edge in nuclear weapons over the Soviet Union even with these weapons so close to our shores. Our overwhelming nuclear superiority will deter any Soviet action against the United States.

Beliefs and Assumptions Underlying Option 2

1. The consequences and risks of a military attack on the missiles in Cuba are impossible to predict. A surprise military attack erodes U.S. moral standing around the world.

2. Using diplomacy could take months or years, allowing more missiles to be brought to and assembled in Cuba.

3. Accepting Soviet missiles on Cuban territory erodes U.S. standing around the world as a defense against the Soviet Union.

4. The Soviet missiles in Cuba do not actually change the strategic balance. The United States still has an overwhelming edge in nuclear weapons over the Soviet Union.

Supporting Arguments for Option 2

1. A blockade is a prudent and flexible step that would allow the United States to move to military action (if necessary) without being accused of having conducted a "Pearl Harbor"-style attack.

2. Diplomatic action alone, without a blockade, would allow the Soviet Union to

continue to assemble missiles in Cuba.

3. A blockade of Cuba would prevent the Soviet Union from delivering more missiles and weapons to Cuba. It is a prudent first step demonstrating U.S. resolve against Soviet expansionism.

From the Historical Record

Statement to Joint Chiefs of Staff by President John F. Kennedy

“If we attack Cuban missiles, or Cuba, in any way, it gives them [the Soviet Union] a clear line to go ahead and take Berlin, as they were able to in Hungary [in 1956] under the Anglo war [Suez Crisis] in Egypt. We would be regarded as trigger-happy Americans who lost Berlin. We would affect the West Germans’ attitude towards us. And [people would believe] that we let Berlin go because we didn’t have the guts to endure a situation in Cuba.”

Statement to Joint Chiefs of Staff by President John F. Kennedy

“So there isn’t any doubt that, whatever [military] action we take against Cuba, no matter how good our films are, or what this is going to cause in Latin America, a lot of people would regard this as a mad act by the United States, which is due to a loss of nerve.”

Statement to ExComm by Llewellyn Thompson, Former U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union

“My preference is this blockade plan...I think it’s very highly doubtful that the Russians would resist a blockade against military weapons, particularly offensive ones, if that’s the way we pitched it to the world.”

Statement to ExComm, by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara

“I don’t think there is a military problem here.... I’ve gone through this today, and I asked myself: ‘Well, what is it then, if it isn’t a military problem?’ Well, it is just exactly this problem: that if Cuba should possess a capacity to carry out offensive action against the U.S., the U.S. would act. Now it’s that problem. This is a domestic political problem. The announcement. [McNamara refers to a recent U.S. government announcement saying that it would not tolerate the presence of Soviet offensive weapons in Cuba.] We didn’t say we’d go in or not, and kill them. We said we’d act. Well, how will we act? Well, we want to act to prevent their use, and it’s really the act. Now

how do we prevent their use? Well, first place, we carry out open surveillance, so we know what they’re doing. [At] all times. Twenty-four hours a day from now and forever, in a sense, indefinitely. What else do we do? We prevent further offensive weapons coming in. In other words, we blockade offensive weapons. And then an ultimatum. I call it an ultimatum associated with these two actions, a statement to the world, particularly to Khrushchev, that we have located offensives. We’re maintaining a constant surveillance over them. If there is ever any indication that they’re to be launched against this country, we will respond not only against Cuba, but we will respond directly against the Soviet Union with a full nuclear strike. Now, this alternative doesn’t seem to be a very acceptable one. But wait until you work on the others.”

Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara

“If you go to nuclear war, and the other side retaliates, and only a few—maybe only one—bomb gets through to destroy an American city, you—the one who just initiated the nuclear war—will have to shoulder the responsibility for the worst catastrophe in the history of this country.”

Memorandum by Undersecretary of State George Ball

“I am persuaded that the disadvantages of an air strike are too great for us to undertake. I have, therefore, concluded that the blockade plan—while by no means wholly satisfactory—is the course we should follow.... It is my strongly held view that we cannot launch a surprise attack against Cuba without destroying our moral position and alienating our friends and allies. If we were to do so, we would wake up the following morning to find that we had brought down in ruins the structure of alliances and arrangements and that our whole post-war effort of trying to organize the combined strength of the Free World was in shards and tatters.”