

Option 3: Airstrike and Invade

Khrushchev has gone too far this time. The communists are threatening our security and way of life all around the world. Now they have the audacity to place nuclear missiles just ninety miles from our shores. We have warned the Soviet Union not to put offensive weapons in Cuba. The Soviets have assured us they would not. Now they have. The United States must act decisively and with force to remove this threat and to preserve our credibility with our political allies and neutral countries.

U.S. Air Force bombers should immediately launch an air strike to destroy the missile sites to prevent them from becoming operational. Because there is no guarantee that all of the missile sites would be destroyed in such a strike, a full-scale invasion of Cuba will need to follow. We do not have time to spare. Negotiations would give the Soviets the ability to make or to propose compromises and would not halt the deployment. While such military actions would risk American lives and kill Soviet and Cuban military personnel and Cuban civilians, it is worth the cost to preserve our safety and our credibility as an opponent of the Soviet Union. Failure to respond definitively to the missile build-up will lead to a loss of confidence in the United States and provide encouragement to pro-communist forces, particularly in Latin America.

A full-scale invasion could accomplish not only the removal of the missiles but also the end of the Castro regime. The Soviet Union is testing the resolve of the United States by placing missiles in our strategic backyard. Failure to react here means we will face more challenges around the world from the Soviets. The free peoples of the world are depending on us. We cannot appear to be weak or indecisive. History has taught us what comes from appeasing tyrants—war, suffering, and more tyrannical aggression. A weak response encouraged Hitler. We must not encourage the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union has backed down when faced with strong action by the United States. They will do so again.

Beliefs and Assumptions Underlying Option 3

1. Soviet missiles in Cuba are an immediate threat to the security of the United States and must be dealt with by whatever means are necessary.

2. The United States military

can successfully neutralize the Soviet missiles in Cuba.

3. The Soviet Union will not respond militarily elsewhere in the world to U.S. military action against Cuba.

Supporting Arguments for Option 3

1. A military strike against Cuba signals that the United States is not prepared to bargain bases in Cuba for positions in Berlin and elsewhere.

2. Eliminating the missiles with force protects the U.S. position in the Western

Hemisphere by demonstrating our will to fight to protect national interests.

3. Military action against the missiles and Cuba would eliminate a military threat to the United States.

From the Historical Record

Memorandum by Secretary of the Treasury Douglas Dillon

“It is my view that the Soviet Union has now deliberately initiated a public test of our intentions that can determine the future course of world events for many years to come. If we allow the offensive capabilities presently in Cuba to remain there, I am convinced that sooner or later and probably sooner we will lose all Latin America to Communism because all credibility of our willingness to effectively resist Soviet military power will have been removed in the eyes of the Latins. We can also expect similar reactions elsewhere, for instance in Iran, Thailand, and Pakistan. I, therefore, believe that the survival of our nation demands the prompt elimination of the offensive weapons now.”

Statement to President Kennedy by General Maxwell Taylor, Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff

“I think we all would be unanimous in saying that really our strength in Berlin, our strength any place in the world, is the credibility of our response under certain conditions. And if we don't respond here in Cuba, we think the credibility is sacrificed.”

Statement to President Kennedy by General Curtis Lemay, Air Force Chief of Staff

“I'd emphasize, a little strongly perhaps, that we don't have any choice except direct military action. If we do this blockade that's proposed, the first thing that's going to happen is your missiles are going to disappear into the

woods, particularly your mobile ones. Now, we can't find them, regardless of what we do, and then we're going to take some damage if we try to do anything later on.... Now, as for the Berlin situation, I don't share your view that if we knock off Cuba, they're going to knock off Berlin. We've got the Berlin problem staring us in the face anyway. If we don't do anything to Cuba, then they're going to push on Berlin and push real hard because they've got us on the run.... So I see no other solution. This blockade and political action, I see leading into war. I don't see any other solution. It will lead right into war. This is almost as bad as the appeasement at Munich.”

Statement to President Kennedy by General Earle Wheeler, Army Chief of Staff

“The lowest-risk course of action it would take in protecting the people of the United States against a possible strike on us is to go ahead with a surprise air strike, the blockade, and an invasion, because these series of actions progressively will give us increasing assurance that we really have gone after the offensive capability of the Cuban/Soviet corner. Now, admittedly, we can never be absolutely sure until and unless we actually occupy the island.”