

**RESOURCE LIBRARY**

ACTIVITY : 1 HR 30 MINS

## 13 Days: President Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis

Students investigate outcomes of the Cuban Missile Crisis by using primary documents and role-playing President Kennedy's national security team.

**GRADES**

9 - 12+

**SUBJECTS***Social Studies, U.S. History, World History***CONTENTS**

4 PDFs, 2 Images, 1 Resource, 1 Video

## OVERVIEW

Students investigate outcomes of the Cuban Missile Crisis by using primary documents and role-playing President Kennedy's national security team.

For the complete activity with media resources, visit:

<http://www.nationalgeographic.org/activity/13-days-president-kennedy-and-cuban-missile-crisis/>

## Program

KILLING  
KENNEDY

## DIRECTIONS

1. Read an excerpt from the *Killing Kennedy* script.

Assign students to play the different roles in the Cuban Missile Crisis Scene selection from the *Killing Kennedy* script. Have students act out the scene. Before reading, ask the remaining students to listen to identify what problem President Kennedy faces in this scene. After, ask: *What problem did President Kennedy face in this clip?* Explain to students that this problem has come to be known as the Cuban Missile Crisis. It occurred in 1962. For thirteen days, the world teetered on the brink of nuclear war. Ask: *Why did missiles in Cuba pose a threat to the United States?*

## **2. Review Kennedy's policy options in the face of the Cuban Missile Crisis.**

Explain to students that they will be acting as Kennedy's advisers during this thirteen-day period. They will need to research and analyze the documents that Kennedy's real advisers had available to them, and then present their findings to the president (you).

Tell students that President Kennedy had several options in responding to the threat posed by the placement of missiles on Cuban soil. Ask students what options they think Kennedy had. List student responses on poster paper or on a whiteboard. Use the discussion to prompt students to include all of the options listed below. You may wish to project the list for students to read.

1. Do nothing: American vulnerability to Soviet missiles was not new. Newly placed missiles in Cuba made little strategic difference in the military balance of power.
2. Diplomacy: Use diplomatic pressure to get the Soviet Union to remove the missiles.
3. Warning: Send a message to Castro to warn him of the grave danger he, and Cuba, were facing.
4. Blockade: Use the U.S. Navy to block any missiles from arriving in Cuba.
5. Air strike: Use the U.S. Air Force to attack all known missile sites.
6. Invasion: Launch a full force invasion of Cuba and overthrow of Castro.

## **3. Students research Kennedy's policy options using primary resources and role-playing as EXCOMM.**

Explain to students that after the failure of Bay of Pigs invasion, Kennedy encouraged dissent among his advisers. If an idea was bad, Kennedy wanted his advisers to tell him; he did not want "yes men" to help him make decisions. Explain to students that during the Bay of Pigs

invasion, members of Kennedy's staff who disagreed with the action refused to voice their negative opinions, not wanting to criticize the larger group. After this failure, Kennedy altered his leadership style, wanting to explore all options before making a decision.

Tell students they will now be role-playing as national security advisers to President Kennedy, a group known during the Cuban Missile Crisis as EXCOMM. Each student group will be assigned one policy option brainstormed earlier and will be responsible for:

- List of pros and cons for the group's policy choice
- Visual aid—on poster paper—to present pros and cons to the class

Divide the class into groups and assign one policy option per group for further exploration. Distribute the Confidential Files to each group. Tell students they will use these Confidential Files to support their policy choices. Distribute a T-Chart to each group and instruct them to use it to make a pros/cons chart. Distribute poster paper and markers to each group to develop a visual aid that will identify their policy option as well as the pros/cons of that option.

#### **4. Acting as EXCOMM, students present their policy arguments and the class comes to consensus on one response.**

After groups finish drafting their pros and cons with visual aids on poster paper, have each group present their policy and its accompanying pros and cons. After each group presents, students may ask questions about the group's policy and thinking. Have the whole class summarize the presentation by determining the most significant pro and con for the policy. Ask students to support all statements with evidence taken from the Confidential Files.

After all groups have presented, have students discuss all the options that were presented.

#### **5. Compare the EXCOMM class consensus to Kennedy's actual response to the Cuban Missile Crisis.**

Play the Red Threat video clip to the class. After watching, ask:

- *What policy choice did Kennedy make in response to the Cuban Missile Crisis?*

- *Compared to the pros and cons lists developed earlier, do you believe Kennedy made the best possible decision? Why or why not?*

## 6. Examine the outcomes of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Explain to students the following outcomes of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Project these points in a PowerPoint presentation or write them on a piece of poster paper.

- After the blockade, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev sent a letter to Kennedy. Khrushchev agreed to remove missiles from Cuba if the United States promised not to invade Cuba and to eventually remove missiles from Turkey.
- Kennedy agreed. The United States secretly removed missiles from Turkey. Khrushchev openly removed missiles from Cuba, ending the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Close the activity with a discussion of the questions below. Ask:

- *To what extent was Kennedy a successful leader in this crisis?*
- *Why was Kennedy more successful in the Cuban Missile Crisis than he was during the Bay of Pigs invasion? In what ways?*

# Modification

Instead of discussing summary questions, formally assess students by asking them to respond in writing to the final discussion questions.

## Tip

In Step 2, if students brainstorm other feasible options, you may choose to incorporate them into the activity at your discretion.

## Tip

This activity is extremely student-centered, involving small group work and student-led discussion. For more information on establishing procedures for these types of activities in your classroom, please refer to the Other Notes in the Preparation section.

# Informal Assessment

Have students respond to the following questions, supporting their responses with evidence from the activity. *To what extent was Kennedy a successful leader in this crisis? Why was Kennedy more successful in the Cuban Missile Crisis than he was during the Bay of Pigs invasion? In what ways?*

## Extending the Learning

Have students research the politics of détente and the period of relaxed tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union following the Cuban Missile Crisis.

## OBJECTIVES

## Subjects & Disciplines

### **Social Studies**

- U.S. History
- World History

## Learning Objectives

Students will:

- argue in favor of one course of action for President Kennedy in the Cuban Missile Crisis by identifying the pros and cons of that action from primary source evidence
- evaluate President Kennedy's leadership in the Cuban Missile Crisis by identifying the outcomes of the event

## Teaching Approach

- Learning-for-use

## Teaching Methods

- Brainstorming
- Cooperative learning
- Decision-making
- Discussions

- Issue analysis
- Reading
- Role playing

## Skills Summary

This activity targets the following skills:

- 21st Century Student Outcomes
  - Information, Media, and Technology Skills
    - Information Literacy
  - Learning and Innovation Skills
    - Communication and Collaboration
    - Creativity and Innovation
    - Critical Thinking and Problem Solving
  - Life and Career Skills
    - Leadership and Responsibility

## National Standards, Principles, and Practices

### NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL STUDIES CURRICULUM STANDARDS

- Theme 6:

Power, Authority, and Governance

- Theme 9:

Global Connections

### Preparation

### What You'll Need

### MATERIALS YOU PROVIDE

- Chart paper
- Markers

- Paper
- Pencils
- Pens

## REQUIRED TECHNOLOGY

- Internet Access: Required
- Tech Setup: 1 computer per classroom, Projector, Speakers
- Plug-Ins: Flash

## PHYSICAL SPACE

- Classroom

## SETUP

For this activity, it would be useful to have desks or tables arranged to facilitate students working in small groups.

## GROUPING

- Large-group instruction

## OTHER NOTES

This activity is extremely student-centered, involving small group work and student-led discussion.

- For more information on implementing effective group work, please see the following site: [CTE-Lilly Teaching Fellows: Group Work and Collaborative Learning: Best Practices](#)
- For more information on facilitating excellent discussions, please see [Human Rights Education Associates: Establishing Rules for Discussion](#)

## BACKGROUND & VOCABULARY

# Background Information

Following the Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, Fidel Castro, the communist leader of Cuba, became convinced that at some point the United States would attempt to remove him from power. As a result, he grew increasingly defiant of American policymakers and courted the leaders of the Soviet Union to bolster the strength of his small island country. In 1962, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev offered to place Soviet nuclear missiles on Cuba just 145 kilometers (90 miles) off the coast of Florida. Castro eagerly accepted Khrushchev’s offer, believing nuclear missiles in Cuba would deter American aggression and secure Cuba’s safety.

An American spy plane eventually discovered the existence of missile sites off the coast of Cuba, sparking what would come to be known as the Cuban Missile Crisis. President John F. Kennedy demanded that all nuclear missiles be removed from Cuba and blockaded the island to prevent further deliveries of nuclear warheads. During the thirteen-day standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union, the world teetered on the brink of nuclear war. Eventually, Soviet Premier Khrushchev acquiesced to Kennedy’s demands, agreeing to remove the missiles from Cuba publically if the United States military would promise not to invade Cuba and secretly remove missiles from Turkey, averting potential disaster and ending the Cuban Missile Crisis.

## Prior Knowledge

["Understanding of the Cold War and the causes of American-Soviet tensions","Understanding of the Bay of Pigs invasion","Understanding of and experience in using historical thinking and producing arguments/persuasive writing","Basic understanding of the concepts of deterrence and containment"]

## Recommended Prior Activities

- None

## Vocabulary

Term	Part of Speech	Definition
communism	noun	type of economy where all property, including land, factories and companies, is held by the government.
democracy	noun	system of organization or government where the people decide policies or elect representatives to do so.



Term	Part of Speech	Definition
socialism	<i>noun</i>	system of organization or government where all property, industry, and capital is owned by the community, not individuals.
Soviet Union	<i>noun</i>	(1922-1991) large northern Eurasian nation that had a communist government. Also called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or the USSR.

---

## For Further Exploration

### Reference

- [Modern History Sourcebook: A Bipolar World](#)

### Websites

- [JFK Presidential Library and Museum: World on the Brink - John F. Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis](#)
- [Armageddon Letters](#)
- [Oracle Education Foundation: ThinkQuest: Robert Kennedy](#)

PARTNER



© 1996–2023 National Geographic Society. All rights reserved.