

THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS, 1962

- Chairman I'm here with four trainee teachers to discuss the question: 'How close did the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 come to being the end of the world?' Well, ladies and gentlemen – you're going to have to teach this next year: what do you think?
- Teacher 1 Just about as close as it has ever come. Both sides had enough nuclear weapons to kill every living thing on earth many times over, and the issue was so important that neither side could back down. The Americans could NOT accept ICBM bases only minutes away from Washington, and the Soviets had promised to defend Cuba, and their reputation was on the line. When the U2 plane spotted those missile bases on 14th October, we were literally only one decision away from the end of the world.
- Teacher 2 I think the critical days were after 16th October, when Kennedy set up the Committee of the National Security Council. Some of the options they considered were terrifying – bombing raids, invasion, nuclear strike – ANY of those could have sparked off a nuclear war. So actually, I think the decision to mount the blockade on 22nd October was the turning point. There was still tension, of course, but it gave the two sides something to argue about. From that point on, the world was safe. Neither side *wanted* a nuclear war – so as long as they were talking, there was no danger of fighting ...
- Teacher 3 ... except for Kennedy's inexperience. I know there's this myth about how WONDERFUL Kennedy was, but he was a mess-up really. He'd been elected on a 'get-tough-with-the-Commies' ticket. But he'd made a fool of himself over the Bay of Pigs in April 1961 – I mean, THAT was why Castro asked Khrushchev to defend Cuba – and he'd come home from the Vienna summit in June 1961 feeling that Khrushchev had made him look silly. For me, the heart-stopper was the 27th October, when the Cubans shot down the U2 spyplane. There was a real danger that Kennedy would go to war just to prove he wouldn't take any nonsense from the Commies.
- Teacher 4 But he DIDN'T go to war when the U2 was shot down! You only have to listen to the tapes from the White House to realise that Kennedy was NEVER going to press the button – rather he was scared witless of doing something to make the Russians press the button. He was saying tough things on the TV: 'we will not shrink from ... nuclear war' – but – have you seen the film *Thirteen Days*? – behind the scenes he was making offers and trying to do a deal. And what about Khrushchev's telegram! When American psychologists analysed it they decided it had been written by a man under great stress: Khrushchev was as scared as Kennedy! – Khrushchev, too, was talking big – threatening 'a fitting reply to the aggressor', but he backed down in the end, and on 25th October ordered the Russian ships to turn back.
- Teacher 3 I've always wondered, you know, whether Khrushchev didn't intend that from the very start. The Americans had missile bases in Turkey, and Khrushchev asked Kennedy to remove them at the Vienna Summit in 1961 – but Kennedy refused. I've always wondered whether Khrushchev never intended to finish the Cuban missile bases, but was just using them as a bargaining chip to get Kennedy to decommission the Turkish bases.

- Teacher 2 Well – it’s a theory, but I don’t think it holds water. If Khrushchev was just playing a brilliant game of poker, why did he send the second letter? And why did the Russians get rid of him a few months later?
I think it’s obvious that both sides gave themselves one HELL of a scare. Look what happened afterwards – they set up a telephone hotline, and they negotiated a nuclear test ban treaty.
Cuba was the beginning of the end of the Cold War, because both sides realised how close they had come to the precipice.
- Teacher 4 I’ve never thought that idea works. The Cuban Crisis was in 1962; the Cold War didn’t end until 1989. And in the intervening 27 years, BOTH sides went for stockpiling nuclear weapons big time.
The fact is that the Cuban crisis had proved that the people on both sides who said that having the ability to strike an aggressor back massively was the way to keep your own country safe were RIGHT. Cuba had proved that the nuclear deterrent worked – so they were hardly likely to throw it all away, were they?
- But the whole point about a nuclear deterrent is that it ceases to be a deterrent when you pull the trigger. So neither side was EVER going to start a nuclear war, either. Would YOU be the one to press the button and kill every living thing on earth?
- Teacher 1 I don’t agree. There were American generals who believed that they could WIN a nuclear war, and there were a number of occasions during the Cuba crisis when they might just have decided to risk it. We were VERY, VERY lucky!
- Chairman Hmm. I wonder which of you is right?