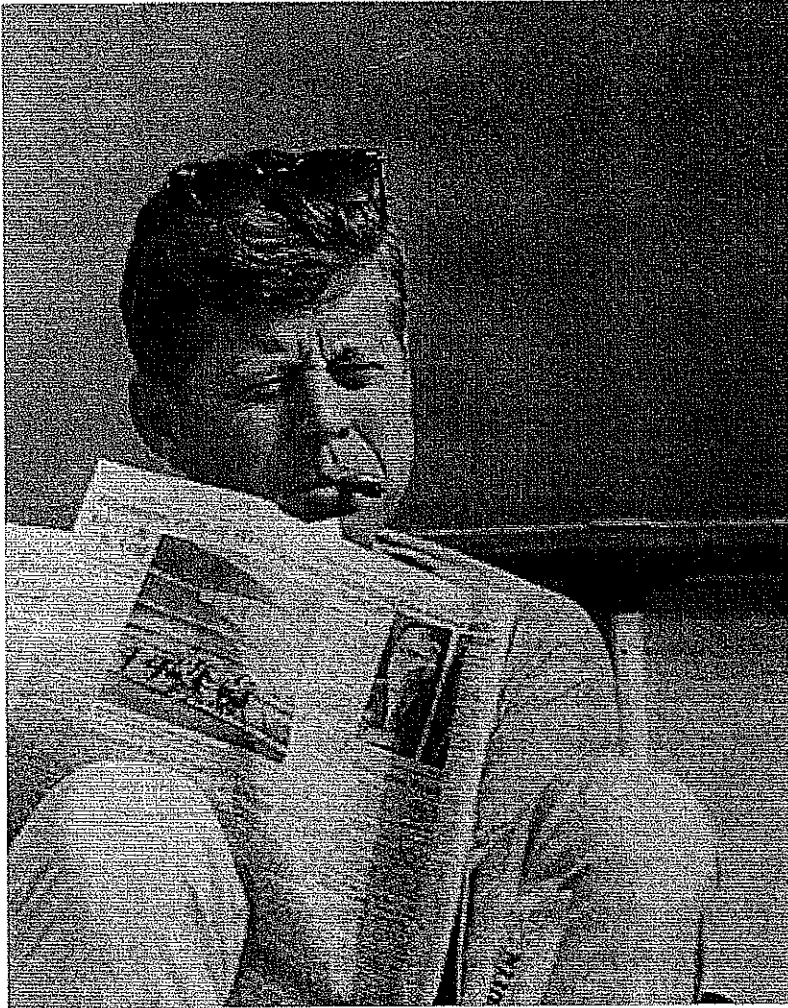


## John F. Kennedy: Foreign Affairs—Miller Center



Once in office, it was clear that Kennedy would likely face several international challenges that could come from any number of directions.

Recurring flare-ups in Berlin, periodical crises with Communist China, and an increasingly difficult situation in Southeast Asia, all threatened to erupt.

### **The Bay of Pigs**

It was Cuba, however, that became an immediate embarrassment largely of the administration's own making. Kennedy had only been in office two months when he ordered the implementation of a watered-down plan inherited from the Eisenhower administration to topple Cuban leader Fidel Castro. An invasion of Cuba was to be sponsored covertly and carried out by CIA-trained anti-Castro refugees. Assured by military advisers and the CIA that the prospects for success were good, Kennedy gave the green light. In the early hours of April 17, 1961, approximately 1,500 Cuban refugees landed at Bahia de Cochinos (Bay of Pigs) on Cuba's southern coast. A series of crucial assumptions built into the plan

proved false and Castro's forces quickly overwhelmed the refugee force. Moreover, the Kennedy administration's cover story collapsed immediately. It soon became clear that despite the President's denial of U.S. involvement in the attempted coup, Washington was indeed behind it.

### **Vienna and Berlin**

The misadventure cost Kennedy dearly. Still recovering from this humiliating political defeat, Kennedy met with Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev in Vienna in June 1961. Khrushchev renewed his threat to "solve" the long-running Berlin problem unilaterally, an announcement that in turn forced Kennedy to renew his pledge to respond such a move with every means at his disposal, including nuclear weapons. In a surprise move two months later, in mid-August 1961, the Soviets and East Germans constructed a wall separating East and West Berlin, providing the Cold War with a tangible incarnation of the Iron Curtain.

### **Missiles in Cuba**

By the fall of 1962, Cuba again took center-stage in the Cold War. In an effort to neutralize the massive American advantage in nuclear weapons, Khrushchev ordered a secret deployment of long-range nuclear missiles to Cuba along with a force of 42,000 Soviet troops and other associated weaponry. For months, despite close American scrutiny, the Soviets managed to keep hidden the full extent of the buildup. But in mid-October, U.S. aerial reconnaissance detected the deployment of Soviet ballistic nuclear missiles in Cuba which could reach most of the continental United States within a matter of minutes.

Kennedy consulted with his top advisers over a period of several days. These meetings were conducted in utmost secrecy in order to maximize the range of responses available. This group, came to be known as the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, or ExComm, examined the options available to respond to the Soviet threat. Among those options were air strikes on the missile bases, a full-scale invasion of Cuba, or a naval blockade of the island. Kennedy eventually chose a blockade, or quarantine, of Cuba backed up by the threat of imminent military action. In announcing his decision on national television on October 22, 1962—breaking the extraordinary secrecy surrounding the crisis to that point—Kennedy warned that the purpose of the Soviet missiles in Cuba could be "none other than to provide a nuclear strike capability against the Western Hemisphere" and that he would protect the United States from such a threat no matter what the cost. The lines, suddenly, were drawn very firmly indeed, and the world held its breath.

After several days of action and reaction, each seeming to bring the world closer to the brink of nuclear war, the two sides reached a deal. Khrushchev would order the withdrawal of offensive missiles and Kennedy would promise not to invade Cuba; Kennedy also promised to withdraw American ballistic nuclear missiles based in Turkey targeting the Soviet Union. Difficult negotiations aimed at finalizing the deal dragged on for several weeks but, on November 20, 1962, Kennedy finally ordered the lifting of the naval blockade of Cuba.

## To the Moon

### Fly Me to the Moon

November 21, 1962

President Kennedy, NASA personnel, and White House advisers

On November 21, 1962, the White House Cabinet Room became the setting for a pivotal and historic meeting on the course of the U.S. space program. The main participants in the meeting were President John F. Kennedy and James Webb, head of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. At issue was the very purpose of NASA and its Apollo program, the project that sought to land a man on the moon before the end of the decade.

Kennedy was also instrumental in the success of his country's space program. An enthusiastic proponent of it, he vowed to have Americans on the moon by the end of the decade. His vice president, Lyndon Johnson, was from Texas, and was the head of the subcommittee in the House of Representatives in charge of funding the space program. Kennedy agreed that although the rockets would be launched from Cape Canaveral in Florida, the headquarters of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) would be located in Houston, Texas. Kennedy would not live to see the manned lunar landing in which took place in July 1969.

## The Developing World

By an executive order in 1961, President Kennedy created the Peace Corps, a reaction to the growing spirit of activism evident throughout the Western world. Through social and humanitarian services, Peace Corps volunteers sought to improve the social and economic conditions throughout the world. In September 1961, shortly after Congress formally endorsed the Peace Corps by making it a permanent program, the first volunteers left to teach English in Ghana. Contingents of volunteers soon followed to Tanzania and India. The program proved enduring; by the end of the twentieth century, the Peace Corps had sent over 170,000 American volunteers to over 135 nations.

Concerns abounded that communism would take root in other impoverished countries in Latin America. To counteract this, Kennedy instituted the Alliance for Progress, a plan to improve the region's social and economic fortunes. This charter—and the U.S. financial aid that came with it—improved America's standing in the region, though few Latin nations agreed with the U.S. embargo on Cuba or cooperated with it.

## Southeast Asia

### Status Report on Vietnam

January 8, 1963

President Kennedy, Cabinet Officials, and Legislative Leaders

The later stages of Kennedy's presidency saw him tested by the growing conflict in Vietnam. America had been sending military advisers there since the mid-1950s to help prevent a Communist takeover of the Southeast Asian nation. In 1961, Kennedy increased this allotment and ordered in the Special Forces, an elite army unit, to train the South Vietnamese in counter-insurgency warfare. But war continued to spread, and by the end of Kennedy's presidency, 16,000 American military advisers were serving in Vietnam.

As with other aspects of his administration, it is not clear how Kennedy would have handled America's growing commitment to Vietnam had he lived out his term in office. Kennedy had announced plans, in the summer of 1963, to reduce the number of advisers, but this did not necessarily mean a reduction in the American commitment. The announcement was designed to put pressure on the South Vietnamese government to institute reforms. Instead, the regime of President Ngo Dinh Diem continued its repression of political opponents. Diem was assassinated in November 1963 in a military coup, an act that failed to heighten the nation's political stability.

### **Limiting Nuclear Testing**

Just weeks before his death, Kennedy secured an agreement, with Great Britain and the Soviet Union to limit the testing of nuclear weapons in the earth's atmosphere. Not only did it mean the reduction of hazardous nuclear "fallout," it also signaled the success of Kennedy's efforts to engage the Soviet Union in constructive negotiations and reduce Cold War tensions. In the wake of the close call over Cuba, Kennedy considered this agreement his greatest accomplishment as President.