

# The Cold War Continues: The Cuban Missile Crisis

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

As the Cold War entered its second decade, the United States sought to contain communism abroad. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who took office while the nation was engaged in a war in Korea, and his Democratic successor, John F. Kennedy, pursued an active and interventionist foreign policy that brought the world to—and back from—the brink of nuclear war.

This tutorial examines the continuation of the Cold War in four parts:

## 1. The Korean War

While the tension between the United States and the Soviet Union over the “iron curtain” that divided Eastern, communist Europe from Western, democratic Europe continued, it was their confrontation on the Korean Peninsula that turned the Cold War hot for the first time.

Korea, which had been occupied by Japan during World War II, was divided by the Soviet Union and the United States at the 38th parallel after the war. The U.S.S.R. oversaw the northern half of the peninsula, while the United States controlled the southern portion.

The division of Korea produced results similar to those in Germany. Two independent governments were created on the peninsula: a communist North Korea with ties to the Soviet Union and a capitalist (though undemocratic) South Korea that was aligned with the United States. The Soviet Union displayed little interest in extending communist influence to South Korea, but North Korea’s leader, Kim Il Sung, wanted to reunify the peninsula under his rule.

On June 25, 1950, the North Korean army, supplied with Soviet arms and supported by Soviet advisors and pilots, invaded South Korea. Recognizing the invasion as a significant test of America’s **containment** policy, President Harry Truman acted quickly.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Containment

The U.S. strategy that sought to limit the expansion of communism abroad during the Cold War. On June 27, the Truman administration persuaded the United Nations (UN) Security Council to denounce

North Korea's actions and authorize the use of force to defeat the invaders.



#### DID YOU KNOW

As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, the Soviet Union could have vetoed the action, but it was currently boycotting UN meetings because the UN had given a seat on the Security Council to Taiwan instead of the People's Republic of China.

Although the United Nations authorized an international military response to the invasion, U.S. forces did most of the fighting. They first established a defensive line in the southern part of the peninsula, near the town of Pusan. Next, a U.S.-led invasion behind North Korean lines at Inchon on September 15, 1950, turned the North Korean advance into a retreat. As North Korean forces withdrew across the 38th parallel, UN forces under the command of U.S. General Douglas MacArthur followed. MacArthur's goal was not only to drive the North Korean army out of South Korea but also to destroy communist North Korea as well.

As UN forces approached the Yalu River (i.e., the border between China and North Korea), the Chinese sent troops to support North Korea and caught the UN forces by surprise. Following a costly retreat from North Korea's Chosin Reservoir, the swift advance by Chinese and North Korean forces, and a second invasion of South Korea, General MacArthur urged President Truman to use nuclear weapons against China. Because he did not want to begin a broader war in Asia, Truman refused.



Territory changed hands quickly during the early stages of the Korean War. UN forces established a defensive line around Pusan in September 1950. The Inchon landing reversed the tide of the war, and UN forces advanced to the Yalu River, where Chinese forces counterattacked.

By the end of 1951, UN forces recovered from the Chinese counterattack and advanced, back to the 38th parallel. Shortly thereafter, the war became a stalemate, and peace talks began. An armistice was agreed to on July 27, 1953. It established a demilitarized zone between North and South Korea along the 38th parallel.



#### DID YOU KNOW

North and South Korea have never signed a peace treaty to end the Korean War. The demilitarized zone still exists today.

Approximately 5 million people died during the war. Most of them were Korean civilians. Approximately 36,500 U.S. soldiers died in the conflict.

## 2. Eisenhower's "New Look" Policy

During the election of 1952, Republican candidate **Dwight D. Eisenhower**, who led American forces in Europe during World War II, campaigned on a promise to end the Korean War. At the same time, he was committed to continuing to oppose communism abroad.



#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

##### Dwight D. Eisenhower

Republican U.S. president from 1953 to 1961, whose Cold War foreign policy led to a massive buildup of American nuclear power and the military-industrial complex and who reluctantly defended the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision against state challenges.

When Eisenhower took office, he emphasized one of the components of containment policy: When a nation became communist, nearby countries would soon follow it in doing so. Historians refer to this concept as **domino theory**.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Domino Theory

The theory that if communism made inroads in one nation, the surrounding nations would also succumb.

The domino theory likened communism to a dangerous infection. When a nation fell into the communist camp, neighboring countries would follow it, collapsing like a row of dominoes, one after another. In this way, entire regions would succumb to Soviet influence.

To prevent this and to manage the long-term costs of containing communism, Eisenhower and his administration promoted a containment policy known as the **New Look**.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### New Look

President Eisenhower's foreign policy approach during the Cold War that emphasized nuclear weaponry and covert operations over conventional warfare.

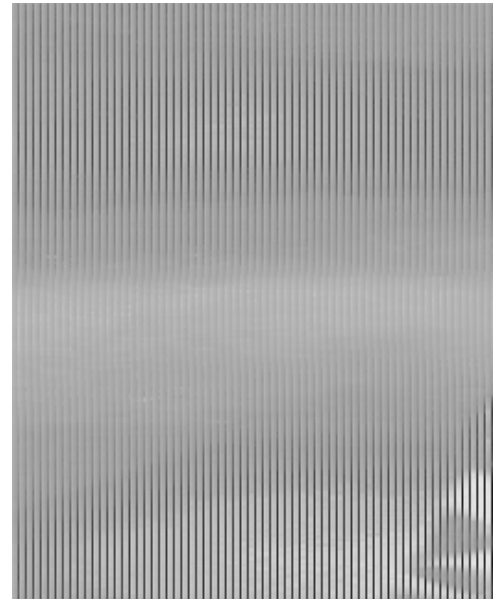
Informed by Eisenhower's determination to combat communism while maintaining a balanced budget, the New Look consisted of two key facets:

- Greater emphasis on nuclear weapons and technology rather than conventional armed forces
- Increased reliance on covert operations for foreign intervention

## 2a. Greater Emphasis on Nuclear Weapons and Technology

During Eisenhower's administration, the federal government and private industry spent enormous amounts of money on the research and development of more powerful weapons. The administration also stockpiled more nuclear weapons while reducing other military expenditures.

➞ **EXAMPLE** During his presidency, Eisenhower cut the size of the armed forces by almost half. However, by the time he left office in 1960, the American nuclear arsenal had grown to include 18,000 warheads (compared to 1,000 in 1953).



Dwight D. Eisenhower had not run for office before running for president in 1952.

Eisenhower and his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, relied on the deterrent value of “**massive retaliation**”—a large nuclear response to any Soviet attack on the United States or its allies—to justify increases in the nuclear arsenal.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Massive Retaliation

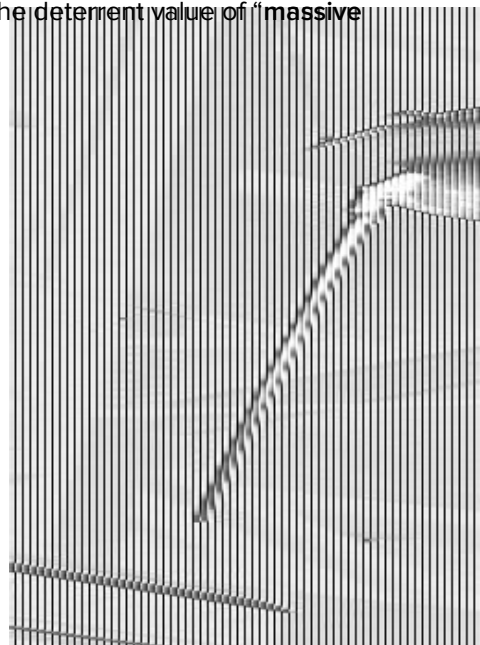
A defense strategy that called for launching a large-scale nuclear attack in response to Soviet aggression.



#### DID YOU KNOW

Critics of “massive retaliation” referred to it as “brinkmanship,” diplomacy that succeeds only in bringing the world to the brink of a nuclear war. They further maintained that such a war would result in the “mutual assured destruction” (MAD) of the Soviet Union and the United States.

Following the Soviet Union’s launch of Sputnik, the first man-made satellite, in October 1957, the United States invested in researching other technologies with potential military applications. For example, in September 1958, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act, which provided over \$775 million to educational programs focused on math and science.



The launch of the Soviet satellite Sputnik frightened some Americans, who feared that Soviet technology had surpassed that of the United States.

## 2b. Increased Reliance on Covert Operations

The Eisenhower administration relied on covert operations, engineered by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), when it was necessary to take action against governments, communist or otherwise, that threatened American interests. In doing so, the administration looked only to its own interests and those of its allies. This sometimes had disastrous consequences for nations that did not fall into either of those categories.

➞ **EXAMPLE** In 1953, the CIA helped Great Britain overthrow Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh of Iran. Mossadegh had attempted to nationalize his country’s oil industry, which was claimed by British oil interests. In response, the CIA branded Mossadegh a communist and engineered a coup (dubbed “Operation Ajax”) that replaced him with Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah, as the leader of Iran. He reversed Mossadegh’s reforms and assumed control of the Iranian government with the help of a U.S.-trained secret police force. The United States also supplied Pahlavi’s government with billions of dollars in aid.

In January 1961, President Eisenhower delivered his farewell address to the American people. He warned them of the development of a **military-industrial complex**, and the danger of a continued military buildup against communism.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Military-Industrial Complex

The matrix of relationships between the federal government, defense industries, and universities, all of whom benefited from increased investment in weapons research and other war-related initiatives.



#### MAKE THE CONNECTION

By the end of the 20th century, some historians, including Michael Sherry, argued that the United States existed under a “shadow of war” during the Cold War. The recent “War on Terror,” which began in 2001, has also contributed to the belief that Americans continue to live under threats of external aggression and internal subversion. Can you think of ways in which the military-industrial complex has expanded to address these challenges?

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### 3. John F. Kennedy and “Flexible Response”

Eisenhower’s address did not point out that his administration played a key role in developing the military-industrial complex that he warned against. The actions of his successor, Democrat **John F. Kennedy**, who won a narrow victory over Eisenhower’s vice president, Richard Nixon, showed how dangerous the military-industrial complex and containment policy could be.



#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

##### **John F. Kennedy**

Democratic U.S. president from 1961 until his assassination in 1963, who continued America’s hard-line stance against communism during the Cold War and who supported greater federal attention to African American civil rights.



John F. Kennedy takes the oath of office on January 20, 1961.

In his inaugural address (in which he famously stated, “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country”) Kennedy promised that the United States would continue to protect the interests of the “free world.” Like Eisenhower and Truman, Kennedy fought the Cold War on several fronts through a policy known as **Flexible Response**.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Flexible Response**

President Kennedy’s foreign policy approach during the Cold War that proposed the use of a combination of strategies, tactics, and capabilities to contain communism.

Flexible Response indicated Kennedy’s reluctance to deploy nuclear weapons and scaled back Eisenhower’s “New Look” by requiring the use of capabilities besides conventional or nuclear warfare to counter Soviet aggression. These included greater emphasis on diplomacy and economic aid to allies. Flexible Response



held that the United States could better respond to Soviet aggression with an equal level of counteraggression, thereby limiting the risk of nuclear war.

Kennedy established the Agency for International Development to oversee the distribution of foreign aid. He also founded the Peace Corps, which recruited young Americans to work on development projects in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. He believed these programs would encourage developing nations to align themselves with the United States rather than the Soviet Union.

Flexible Response also supported research in new technologies with potential military applications, which expanded the growth of the military-industrial complex.

When Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first human to successfully orbit Earth in April 1961, the Kennedy administration urged Congress to not only put a man into space but also land an American on the moon. The subsequent Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo programs led to the development of a variety of military technologies, including high-powered rockets that increased the nation's long-range missile capability.



**On May 5, 1961, Alan Shepard became the first American to travel into space. Millions across the country watched television coverage of his mission, including Vice President Johnson, President Kennedy, and Jacqueline Kennedy in the White House.**

To enable the United States to better respond to insurgent and nationalist forces in foreign nations, the Kennedy administration encouraged the creation of the Green Berets, a U.S. Army Special Forces unit trained in counterinsurgency.

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## 4. The Cuban Missile Crisis

Kennedy's multifaceted approach to the Cold War was exemplified by his response to events in Cuba, an island in the Caribbean that had been firmly within the U.S. sphere of influence since the War of 1898.



In January 1959, Cuban insurgents led by **Fidel Castro** overthrew the corrupt and dictatorial regime of Fulgencio Batista, who had been supported by the United States. Subsequent reforms implemented by the Castro regime, which included the nationalization of land owned by Americans and a trade agreement with the Soviet Union, angered the Eisenhower administration.



#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

##### **Fidel Castro**

Leader of the Cuban revolutionary movement who overthrew the corrupt dictator Fulgencio Batista and whose communist political and economic reforms and alliance with the Soviet Union alienated the United States.

As an alternative to a U.S. military invasion of Cuba, the CIA developed a strategy similar to what it had used in Iran and elsewhere: It prepared a small force of Cuban exiles to land at the Bay of Pigs on the Cuban coast.



After taking office, Kennedy agreed to carry out the CIA's plans, which had been formulated during the Eisenhower administration. On April 17, 1961, approximately 1,400 Cuban exiles stormed ashore from the Bay of Pigs. Fearing domestic criticism and Soviet retaliation, Kennedy did not provide air support for the landing, which enabled the Cuban army to easily defeat the invaders.

The Bay of Pigs incident was a foreign policy disaster for President Kennedy, but it also highlighted Cuba's military vulnerability. The following year, the U.S.S.R. sent troops and technicians to Cuba to strengthen it against future U.S. incursions. On October 14, 1962, U.S. spy planes took aerial photographs that confirmed the presence of ballistic missile sites in Cuba. The United States was now within reach of Soviet nuclear warheads. The **Cuban Missile Crisis** had begun.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Cuban Missile Crisis**

Diplomatic confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union over the presence of missile sites in Cuba.



(a)



(b)

This low-level U.S. Navy photograph of San Cristobal, Cuba, shows one of the sites built to launch intermediate-range missiles at the United States (a). As the date indicates, it was taken on the last day of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Following the crisis, Kennedy met with the reconnaissance pilots who flew the Cuban missions (b).

Source: (a) Modification of work by the National Archives and Records Administration and (b) modification of work by the CIA.

On October 22, Kennedy demanded that Soviet Premier **Nikita Khrushchev**, who had replaced Joseph Stalin after his death in 1953, remove the missiles. He also ordered a naval quarantine of Cuba to prevent Soviet ships from approaching.



#### PEOPLE TO KNOW

##### **Nikita Khrushchev**

Leader of the Soviet Union from 1958 to 1964 during the height of the Cold War.



#### DID YOU KNOW

Kennedy chose the word “quarantine” instead of “blockade” because the Soviet Union might consider a “blockade” as an act of war.

As Soviet ships headed for Cuba, U.S. armed forces were ordered to prepare for war. Kennedy spoke to the nation on national television, stating his intention to defend the Western Hemisphere from Soviet aggression.

With the world on the brink of nuclear war, the administration’s Flexible Response policy helped defuse the situation. On October 26, 1962, Khrushchev agreed to remove the Soviet missiles from Cuba in exchange for Kennedy’s promise not to invade the island. A crucial part of the agreement was not made public: Kennedy promised to remove American missiles from Turkey, which were as close to Warsaw Pact nations in Europe as the Cuban missiles were to the United States.

The Cuban Missile Crisis showed how close the Cold War could bring the world to nuclear war. In the aftermath of the crisis, the United States and the Soviet Union took limited steps to prevent a similar showdown in the future.

➞ **EXAMPLE** A telephone “hotline” that linked Washington, DC, to Moscow was installed, and, in 1963, Kennedy and Khrushchev signed the Limited Test Ban Treaty, which prohibited nuclear weapons tests in Earth’s atmosphere.

However, the rise of Fidel Castro and the subsequent missile crisis poisoned relations between the United States and Cuba in ways that continue to this day.

### Additional Resource

Explore the [JFK Library Cuban Missile Exhibit](#)



## SUMMARY

The United States, once reluctant to become involved in international affairs, was an active cold warrior by the early 1960s. A containment policy was pursued by successive presidential administrations, Democratic and Republican. During the 1950s, the Eisenhower administration employed a “New Look” foreign policy, which expanded the containment policy by dedicating greater resources to a nuclear arsenal and foreign espionage. Kennedy’s Flexible Response policy sought the goals of containment through slightly different means. As the Cuban Missile Crisis brought the world to the brink of nuclear war, Kennedy’s approach helped defuse the situation even though the tension between the United States and the Soviet Union persisted.

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## TERMS TO KNOW

### Containment

The U.S. strategy that sought to limit the expansion of communism abroad during the Cold War.

### Cuban Missile Crisis

Diplomatic confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union over the presence of missile sites in Cuba.

### Domino Theory

The theory that if communism made inroads in one nation, the surrounding nations would also succumb.

### Flexible Response

President Kennedy’s foreign policy approach during the Cold War that proposed the use of a combination of strategies, tactics, and capabilities to contain communism.

**Massive Retaliation**

A defense strategy that called for launching a large-scale nuclear attack in response to Soviet aggression.

**Military-Industrial Complex**

The matrix of relationships between the federal government, defense industries, and universities, all of whom benefited from increased investment in weapons research and other war-related initiatives.

**New Look**

President Eisenhower's foreign policy approach during the Cold War that emphasized nuclear weaponry and covert operations over conventional warfare.

**PEOPLE TO KNOW****Dwight D. Eisenhower**

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**Fidel Castro**

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