Path to the Brink
A Chronology of the Cuban Missile Crisis

Jan 1, 1959  Fidel Castro assumes power in Cuba.
May 7, 1960  Cuba establishes diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union.
Aug 28, 1960  The United States imposes a trade embargo against Cuba.
Apr 17-19, 1961  A CIA-backed invasion of Cuba in the Bay of Pigs fails.
Sept 4, 1962  President Kennedy warns that “the gravest issues would arise” if the USSR places offensive weapons in Cuba.
Oct 16, 1962  President Kennedy is told that Soviet missiles have been spotted in Cuba and he calls a meeting of select advisers – the Executive Committee of the National Security Council (ExComm). The ExComm debates a range of options including: (1) no response, (2) negotiated settlement, (3) blockade, (4) air strikes, (5) invasion.
Oct 17, 1962  Surveillance finds evidence of intermediate-range ballistic missile sites in Cuba – missiles that could strike much of the continental United States.
Oct 18, 1962  Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko meets with President Kennedy and assures him that the USSR has only been providing aid to improve the “defensive capabilities of Cuba.” The U.S. Joint Chiefs recommend airstrikes and invasion.
Oct 21, 1962  President Kennedy approves the blockade option, calling it a “quarantine.” Direct appeals from the White House convince major newspapers to hold their stories about the crisis.
Oct 22, 1962  The U.S. initiates an alert of the B-52 bomber force (1/8th of the force is airborne at all times).
Oct 23, 1962  Seventeen congressional leaders from both parties are briefed on the crisis. Senators Russell and Fulbright argue for airstrikes or an invasion.
Oct 24, 1962  10:00 – The U.S. naval quarantine of Cuba goes into effect. U.S. Strategic Air Command raises its readiness posture to DEFCON 2 for the first time in U.S. history.
Oct 25, 1962  10:25 – Intelligence reports indicate that all Soviet ships bound for Cuba have stopped or turned around.
Adlai Stevenson presents photographic evidence of Soviet missiles in Cuba to the UN Security Council.
Oct 26, 1962

04:00 – Vandenberg AFB conducts a prescheduled missile test without additional approval from Washington, DC.

21:00 – The State Department receives a private message from Moscow, believed to be composed by Khrushchev himself. It has become known as the SOFT MESSAGE, and states in part:

You and I should not now pull on the ends of the rope in which you have tied a knot of war, because the harder you and I pull, the tighter the knot will become...and then the knot will have to be cut... I propose we, for our part, will declare that our ships bound for Cuba are not carrying any armaments. You will declare that the United States will not invade Cuba with its troops and will not support any other forces which might intend to invade Cuba. Then the necessity of the presence of our military specialists in Cuba will disappear.

Unbeknownst to the ExComm, Robert Kennedy and Anatoly Dobrynin meet at night in the Soviet Embassy. Robert Kennedy indicates that U.S. Jupiter missiles in Turkey could be considered as part of a settlement.

Oct 27, 1962

11:00 – A formal letter from Khrushchev is received by the White House and is broadcast publicly over Radio Moscow. The message, known as the HARD MESSAGE, says in part:

You are disturbed over Cuba...But...you have placed destructive missile[s] in Turkey, literally next to us...I therefore make this proposal: We are willing to remove from Cuba the means which you regard as offensive...Your representatives will make a declaration...that the United States...will remove its analogous means from Turkey...

A U-2 is shot down over Cuba. Another U-2 from Alaska strays into Soviet airspace – nuclear-armed U.S. fighters scramble to escort the U-2 to safety.

16:00 – The ExComm decides to answer only Khrushchev’s Soft Message and sends the response that evening. After the meeting, a smaller group meets in the Oval Office and decides to reinforce the letter with an oral message sent via Dobrynin. The message reaffirms that while there can be no public deal involving the Jupiters in Turkey, the U.S. will in fact remove them once the Cuba crisis is over. The Dobrynin message is not shared with the ExComm.

Oct 28, 1962

09:00 – A message from Khrushchev is broadcast on Radio Moscow. Khrushchev declares: “the Soviet government...has issued a new order on the dismantling of the weapons which you describe as ‘offensive,’ and their crating and return to the Soviet Union.”

Nov 20, 1962

The naval quarantine of Cuba ends.

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