

## Thirteen Days: John F. Kennedy, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and Purpose

- **Compelling Question**
  - How can you achieve your purpose?
- **Virtue:** Purpose
- **Definition** – Purpose is my answer to the question "why do I exist?" It is the reason for which I exist; it is my goal, that thing to which my actions are directed. It is our answer to the question "what are you for?"
- **Lesson Overview**
  - In this lesson, students will learn about how President John F. Kennedy achieved his purpose of protecting the United States in the Cuban Missile Crisis. They will also understand how they can be purposeful in their lives.
- **Objectives**
  - Students will analyze President Kennedy's purposeful decisions during the Cuban Missile Crisis.
  - Students will apply their knowledge of purpose to their own lives.
- **Background**
  - President John F. Kennedy faced a great crisis when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev started building nuclear sites in Cuba. Khrushchev's plan was to house forty nuclear missiles that could reach the continental United States as well as building bases for 40,000 support troops only several dozen miles from Florida. In 1961, early in his administration, Kennedy had launched the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion to oust Communist Cuban leader Fidel Castro. The failure was a huge embarrassment for the new president but he took responsibility for the attack and learned a lesson about taking precipitate action without significantly considering all of the possible consequences and alternatives. Kennedy's administration suffered a blow in prestige in global affairs especially in the view of the Soviet Union in the Cold War. In August of that year, Khrushchev tested Kennedy's resolve by blocking off East Berlin from West Berlin and building a barrier that would become the Berlin Wall. Kennedy was not willing to start a war over the issue and again Khrushchev thought that the American president was weak and would not go to war to stop the Soviets from pursuing virtually any policy they wanted.

But, Kennedy would not be so easily bullied. He had been born in 1917 and came of age during World War II in which he emerged as a national hero. He learned the tragic results of appeasing dictators during Hitler's rise to power in Europe, and when the Cold War quickly emerged in the 1940s, Kennedy agreed with the predominant view that the U.S. must contain Soviet expansion and aggression around the globe. He was elected to the House of Representatives and then to the Senate before winning the presidency in 1960. He was an ardent Cold Warrior, and while he sought to avert a world-destroying nuclear world war, he would do anything short of nuclear war to stop the Soviet Union. His purpose was to protect the free world from Soviet aggression in the most peaceful manner possible.

- **Vocabulary**
  - Crisis
  - Nuclear
  - Missiles
  - Continental
  - Disastrous
  - Oust
  - Communist
  - Precipitate
  - Appeasing
  - Predominant
  - Ardent
  - Avert
  - Civilian
  - Aggressive
  - U-2
  - Analysts

- Missile silos
- ExComm
- Ascertain
- Airstrike
- Installation
- Blockade
- Decisive
- Quarantine
- Intervening
- Escalating
- Combative
- DEFCON
- Annihilation
- Steely
- Avert
- **Introduce Text**
  - Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.
- **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
  - As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
    - What challenges are you facing?
    - What fears or concerns might you have?
    - What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?
- **Observation Questions**
  - What was President Kennedy’s role in the Cuban Missile Crisis?
  - What was Kennedy’s purpose?
  - What decision did Kennedy make in the Cuban Missile Crisis? Why? Do you believe it was the right decisions? Why or why not?
  - How did President Kennedy’s purposeful decision in the Cuban Missile Crisis help protect freedom?
- **Discussion Questions**
  - Discuss the following questions with your students.
    - What is the historical context of the narrative?
    - What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
    - How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
    - How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
    - How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
    - What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
    - Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
    - How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?
- **Additional Resources**
  - Blight, David G. and David A. Welch. *On the Brink: Americans and Soviets Re-examine the Cuban Missile Crisis*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1989.
  - Dallek, Robert. *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy, 1917-1963*. Boston: Little Brown, 2003.
  - Fursenko, Aleksandr, and Timothy Naftali. *“One Hell of a Gamble”: Khrushchev, Castro, and Kennedy, 1958-1964*. New York: Norton, 1997.
  - May, Ernest R., and Philip D. Zelikow, eds. *The Kennedy Tapes: Inside the White House During the Cuban Missile Crisis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.

## Handout A: Thirteen Days: John F. Kennedy, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and Purpose

### Background

President John F. Kennedy faced a great crisis when Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev started building nuclear sites in Cuba. Khrushchev's plan was to house forty nuclear missiles that could reach the continental United States as well as building bases for 40,000 support troops only several dozen miles from Florida. In 1961, early in his administration, Kennedy had launched the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion to oust Communist Cuban leader Fidel Castro. The failure was a huge embarrassment for the new president but he took responsibility for the attack and learned a lesson about taking precipitate action without significantly considering all of the possible consequences and alternatives. Kennedy's administration suffered a blow in prestige in global affairs especially in the view of the Soviet Union in the Cold War. In August of that year, Khrushchev tested Kennedy's resolve by blocking off East Berlin from West Berlin and building a barrier that would become the Berlin Wall. Kennedy was not willing to start a war over the issue and again Khrushchev thought that the American president was weak and would not go to war to stop the Soviets from pursuing virtually any policy they wanted.

But, Kennedy would not be so easily bullied. He had been born in 1917 and came of age during World War II in which he emerged as a national hero. He learned the tragic results of appeasing dictators during Hitler's rise to power in Europe, and when the Cold War quickly emerged in the 1940s, Kennedy agreed with the predominant view that the U.S. must contain Soviet expansion and aggression around the globe. He was elected to the House of Representatives and then to the Senate before winning the presidency in 1960. He was an ardent Cold Warrior, and while he sought to avert a world-destroying nuclear world war, he would do anything short of nuclear war to stop the Soviet Union. His purpose was to protect the free world from Soviet aggression in the most peaceful manner possible.

### Narrative

In early September, 1962, Kennedy and several advisers spent hours preparing a statement addressing an apparent build-up of ground-to-ground offensive missiles and an attending disturbing build-up of Soviet combat forces. In a statement that his press secretary read to reporters, Kennedy warned that the Cuba would "not be allowed to export its aggressive purposes by force or the threat of force." Kennedy stated that while there was no immediate military threat to the United States, the administration was monitoring the situation carefully.

By October 1, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) received news from the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) that the missiles might be nuclear weapons. On October 5, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director John McCone argued for U-2 spy plane flights over Cuba to ascertain whether Cuba had nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev sent a deceitful message that the "weapons that the USSR is sending to Cuba will only be of a defensive character." Four days later, the president authorized the U-2 flights, and when good weather permitted on October 14, the U-2 launched. Flying at nearly 75,000 feet above Cuba for six minutes, the U-2 camera snapped almost 1,000 high-resolution photographs of the island and returned to the United States. In the meantime, Soviet Ambassador to the U.S., Anatoly Dobrynin assured the administration that the Russians were "not shipping offensive weapons."

The U-2 photographs were developed and showed unmistakable evidence to CIA analysts of several nuclear missile silos under construction in Cuba. They quickly drew up a report and sent it to National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy who was shocked at the news when he received it late at night on October 15. He decided not to wake President Kennedy, but to deliver the news to him the following morning. Bundy presented the CIA analysis and materials to Kennedy in his bedroom at 8:45 a.m., and Kennedy ordered a White House meeting before noon. He called his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, and said, "We have some big trouble. I want you over here."

On October 16, at 11:45 a.m., President Kennedy met with thirteen advisors in the Cabinet Room for over an hour. The assembled group would come to be known as "ExComm" for Executive Committee. Kennedy turned on the room's tape recorder, and the discussions began. After attempting to ascertain when the missiles would be ready and Khrushchev's motivations, the president laid out four possible American responses that would be debated over the next thirteen days: 1. a targeted airstrike against the missile installations; 2. a general airstrike on Cuba; 3. a

blockade to keep Soviet ships from landing the missiles; 4. an invasion of Cuba. At a meeting that evening, Kennedy was concerned that an air strike would not be one hundred percent effective but could also lead to war. Still, it was a decisive move and still a favorite option.

The administration kept secret the information that the Soviet Union was preparing Cuba to be a base for nuclear war against the U.S., and the president kept up a normal schedule. The members of ExComm continued meeting and exploring the possible courses of action. On October 18, the JCS urged an invasion of Cuba as the best way to assure success. Kennedy resisted an invasion and war because “nobody knows what kind of success we’re going to have with this invasion.” Thousands would be dead on both sides, the attack might fail, and the Russians might join the fight with the Cubans. World War III could be the result. During several meetings in the next two days, the airstrike and invasion were hotly debated with no conclusion.

When the president and National Security Council (NSC) met for almost three hours on the morning of Saturday, October 20, the president began to lean in favor of a blockade, or quarantine, of the island of Cuba which fulfilled his purpose of avoiding war but also preventing the Soviets from placing nuclear missiles there. Kennedy and his advisors then prepared a televised address to the American people and the world for Monday, October 22, while spending the intervening time privately speaking with members of Congress, allies, and the media. Congressional leaders were outraged and more bellicose than Kennedy expected, and he suffered from “tremendous strain” rebuking their calls for war.

In Monday night’s televised address, Kennedy told 100 million American viewers and others about the crisis. He expressed his purpose of introducing a quarantine around Cuba and holding out the possibility of additional escalating actions if the Soviets did not turn their missile-carrying ships back. The next day, Kennedy received a combative message from Khrushchev but decided with ExComm that the quarantine would begin on Wednesday, October 24. After the meeting, he told his brother, Bobby, “If they get this mean on this one, it’s just a question of where they go about it next. No choice. I don’t think there was a choice.” Kennedy’s purpose was not to back down to the Soviets because it would only embolden even stronger Russian actions.

On Wednesday morning, October 24, Soviet ships approaching the U.S. warships stationed around Cuba would arrive by noon. The DEFCON (Defense Condition) level was changed from three to two. DEFCON level one meant the United States was at war. Robert Kennedy described his brother as the morning wore on. “These few minutes were the time of greatest worry by the President. His hand went up to his face and covered his mouth and he closed his fist. His eyes were tense, almost gray, and we just stared at each other across the table.” Six Soviet ships bore down on Cuba until finally they turned back. Secretary of State Dean Rusk turned to Bundy and whispered, “We’re eyeball to eyeball and I think the other fellow just blinked.”

Nevertheless, the crisis was not over. By the following day, a dozen Soviet ships had turned back, but more were still coming, and the ExComm members were most concerned that the tense standoff was allowing the Russians to complete the missile installations on Cuba. That night, Kennedy received a letter from Khrushchev that offered to recall the ships and stop work on the missile sites if the U.S. would simply promise not to invade Cuba. Kennedy noticed his adversary did not promise to remove the missiles and withheld a response.

On Saturday afternoon, October 27, a second Khrushchev message arrived with the same deal but demanding the removal of American Jupiter missiles from Turkey as a quid pro quo for the Cuban missiles. ExComm considered the proposal for four hours that afternoon and evening. They went around and around tersely until the members hit upon the idea of responding to the first message and ignoring the second. Simultaneously, Robert Kennedy met with Dobrynin and informed him off-the-record that the president would remove the missiles from Turkey but only if it was not part of the deal and not revealed publicly. President Kennedy and the other members of ExComm were exhausted, depressed, and tense as they contemplated nuclear annihilation and waited for the Soviet response.

Kennedy received the Soviet message announcing that it had accepted the deal on the morning of Monday, October 29. The pall was lifted, and the two countries hammered out a few points of contention. President John Kennedy had pulled the U.S. from the brink of nuclear war—it was the closest the world came to nuclear destruction after World War II. Kennedy emerged from this crisis successfully. He combined a steely resolve to protect American

interests and lives, a determined purpose to avert a war that would destroy countless millions on both sides, and careful decision-making based on evidence and good counsel. It was Kennedy's finest hour and revealed his defining purpose in action like no other time of his administration.