Title: Cuban Missile Crisis
Grade Level: Advanced High School
Objectives: Understand the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962. Understand how the United States and the Soviet Union came to the brink of nuclear war.

National History Standards:
Standard 1: Chronological Thinking; Standard 2: Historical Comprehension; Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation; Era 9:1B: Explain the causes and international and local consequences of major cold war crises like the Cuban missile crisis.

Time: 90 minutes

Background:
Following World War II, an ideological, economic, and military rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union led to a global competition known as the cold war. In 1949, the cold war became a nuclear arms race when the Soviets detonated an atomic bomb. No longer was the United States the only nation in possession of nuclear weapons. In an understatement, a secret report prepared by the Pentagon noted: “The United States has lost its capability of making an effective atomic attack upon the war-making potential of the USSR without danger of retaliation in kind.”

In 1952, the United States exploded its first hydrogen bomb—a device 1,000 times more powerful than the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima; the Soviets followed in 1953. By the late 1950s, both the Soviet Union and the United States had targeted each other’s capitals and other major cities for nuclear attack. And both sides had developed rocket-launched nuclear warheads (ballistic missiles) that could not be intercepted and destroyed. As the two rivals raced to outmatch each other, their nuclear arsenals grew.

In October of 1962, President John F. Kennedy learned that the Soviet Union was deploying nuclear missiles in Cuba, threatening the United States. He demanded that the missiles be withdrawn and indicated his willingness to risk nuclear war if they were not. U.S. ships blockaded Cuba. B-52 bombers loaded with nuclear weapons flew in holding patterns just beyond Soviet airspace, ready to attack. The United States and the Soviet Union stood on the brink of nuclear war. The crisis abated only when the Soviets agreed to remove the missiles and the United States quietly removed similar medium-range missiles from Turkey. The faceoff was a turning point in the cold war: the superpowers continued to develop nuclear weapons, but began to seek ways to avoid a nuclear exchange.
“Within the past week, unmistakable evidence has established the fact that a series of offensive missile sites is now in preparation on that imprisoned island.”

—President John F. Kennedy, address to the nation, October 22, 1962
Lesson:

Warm-up: Discuss with students the background material above and use the map provided to help them understand the threat and impact of a nuclear attack.

Activity: Tell the class that today they are taking on the role of Central Intelligence Agency analysts in 1962. Hand out copies of the surveillance images along with the key to interpreting them. Give the class a few minutes to analyze the aerial reconnaissance photos of Cuban missile installations and make notes about what they think they see. Ask the students to consider the following questions: What are the origins and purposes of these images? What is the value of the pictures? Do they represent an immediate threat to the United States?

Then pose the important question: Does the evidence you see warrant notifying the president? This should lead to an in-depth discussion of the consequences that would result from notifying the president.

Finally, have the students analyze President John F. Kennedy’s October 22, 1962, radio/television address to the nation making the case for military action against Cuba.

Students should consider the following questions as they analyze the speech: What audiences does the president address? What country/countries posed a threat, according to Kennedy? How does Kennedy characterize/describe the degree of danger facing the United States? Cite specifics. How does he make the case for the proposed action to be taken by the United States? What specific evidence is presented? How does Kennedy outline America’s responsibility for reacting to these dangers? Reference the speech as appropriate. How does Kennedy involve the world community? How does he discuss liberty/freedom? Cite specific examples. Are there references to past dangers that faced America? Which ones? Why does the president use these examples in his speech?

Follow-up Activity:
Have students research similar situations in American history and analyze how other presidents have presented their cases for military action to the nation. For example: James Polk and the Mexican War, Harry Truman and the Korean War, Lyndon Johnson and the Vietnam War, George H. W. Bush and the Gulf War, George W. Bush and the Iraq War.
Missile site in Cuba

Courtesy of U.S. Air Force Museum

Range of ballistic missiles in Cuba

Courtesy of John F. Kennedy Library
1. One of six launch stations for SA-2 Guideline missiles
2. Radar installation and launch control vans
3. Roads
4. Additional missiles
Bibliography

General

Section I: War of Independence

Section II: Wars of Expansion

Section III: Civil War

Section IV: World War II

Section V: Cold War/Vietnam

Section VI: September 11 and Its Aftermath
Americans at War, produced by The History Channel
An introduction to the themes of the exhibition

War of Independence
First-Person Accounts, produced by Pyramid Studios:
- Lydia Minturn Post, Long Island housewife, 1776
- James Collins, teenage soldier, no date
- Doonyontat, Wyandot chief, 1779
- Elijah Churchill, recipient of the first Purple Heart, 1783

Mexican War
First-Person Accounts, produced by Pyramid Studios:
- José María Tornel y Mendivil, Mexican secretary of war, 1837
- George Ballentine, English volunteer for the United States, 1853
- Juan Bautista Vigil y Alarid, acting governor of New Mexico, 1846
- Ulysses S. Grant, American soldier, 1885

Civil War
First-Person Accounts, produced by Pyramid Studios:
- Louis Myers, Third West Virginia Infantry, 1862
- William G. Christie, Minnesota soldier, 1863
- Eugenia Phillips, spy for the South in Washington D.C., 1861
- Spottwood Rice, African American Union soldier, 1864

World War I
World War I Overview, produced by The History Channel

World War II
World War II Cartoons, produced by The History Channel
World War II Overviews in the Newsreel format, produced by The History Channel
- From World War I to World War II
- The North Atlantic and North African Theater
- The European Theater
- The Pacific Theater
The USO in World War II, produced by The History Channel
First-Person Accounts, produced by Pyramid Studios:
- George Hynes, U.S. Army, a last letter home, 1942
- Robert Morris, U.S. Coast Guard, fighting in Italy, 1943
- Robert Sherrod, journalist, the beach at Tarawa, 1943
- Ann Darr, Women Airforce Service Pilots, 1997
- Daniel Inouye, Medal of Honor recipient, 2000

Vietnam
Excerpt from Huey Helicopter—Air Armada, The History Channel documentary, 2002
First-Person Accounts, produced by Arrowhead Film & Video:
- Hal Moore, commander of a Seventh Cavalry Regiment battalion, 2003
- Fred Castleberry, veteran of the Twenty-fifth Infantry Division, 2002
- Clarence Sasser, recipient of the Medal of Honor, 2004
(produced by Pyramid Studios)