Overview of President Kennedy, the Cold War, and Cuba

The late 1950s were marked by a series of Cold War crises that strained superpower relations. In 1956 the Soviets brutally repressed a democratic uprising in Hungary. The United States did nothing for fear of starting World War III. A year later, the Soviets tested the first intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capable of reaching U.S. soil. In 1958 an American U-2 spy plane was shot down while taking photographs of Soviet military installations. And in 1960, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev threatened to start a war over control of the German city of Berlin. War was averted, but the Soviets built the Berlin Wall—a wall of barbed wire and concrete—to divide democratic West Berlin from communist East Berlin.

By 1961 Cold War tensions were perhaps most serious in the island nation of Cuba, south of Florida in the Caribbean Sea. Fidel Castro and his Communist revolutionary followers had overthrown a corrupt dictator and risen to power in Cuba on New Year's Day, 1959. Weeks later, Castro suspended most civil rights, established military rule across the island, and embraced the Soviet Union and Communist China as allies. Thousands of Cubans felt betrayed by Castro and fled to the United States.

When President John F. Kennedy took office in 1961, he made it clear that he would not back down before the Soviet threat. In his inaugural address, Kennedy said the United States would "bear any burden" and "pay any price" for the cause of freedom worldwide. He vowed to take the lead in the Cold War against the Soviet Union, continuing the U.S. foreign policy, dominant since World War II, of containing Soviet communism around the globe.

During his first week in office, Kennedy learned of a plan to overthrow Castro by sponsoring an invasion by Cuban exiles at a site called the Bay of Pigs. This plan had been conceived by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) during the last months of the term of Kennedy's predecessor, Eisenhower. Kennedy's key advisers said the CIA plan would work and should go forward. Somewhat reluctantly, Kennedy finally agreed.

The Bay of Pigs operation was a disaster. Few of the Cuban exiles participating in the invasion had any significant military training, and their equipment consisted of World War II–era U.S. military castoffs. Most significantly, the CIA had told the exiles that they would have the support of U.S. troops. Kennedy, however, had pledged that he would not directly involve U.S. forces. The CIA believed that Kennedy would change his mind when American prestige was at stake, but the president did not. Less than 72 hours after the exiles landed at the Bay of Pigs, Castro's soldiers, using Soviet-supplied tanks, guns, and ammunition, had completely defeated them. Embarrassed by the failure of the invasion, Kennedy quickly approved another plan—called Operation Mongoose—to use the CIA to disrupt the Cuban economy and possibly to assassinate Fidel Castro. The Soviets and the Cubans responded by planning a secret military buildup on the island. The stakes for Cuba in the Cold War rivalry were high, and in October 1962, the superpower competition erupted in what many experts call the most serious and dangerous crisis of the Cold War.