

# The Stormy Sixties, 1960–1968

And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.

*President John F. Kennedy, 1961*

**Prologue:** Youthful President John F. Kennedy launched his administration with high hopes and great vigor. Young people seemed particularly attracted to the tough-minded yet idealistic style of Kennedy's presidency. Yet Kennedy's record in office, before his tragic assassination in 1963, was spotty. He presided over a botched invasion of Cuba in 1961 and in the same year took the first fateful steps into the Vietnam quagmire. In 1962 he emerged victorious from a tense standoff with the Russians over the emplacement of Soviet missiles in Cuba. Sobered by this brush with the prospect of nuclear holocaust, Kennedy initiated a new policy of realistic accommodation with the Soviets—while the Soviets, determined never again to be so humiliated, began a massive military buildup. At home, the black revolution, led most conspicuously by Martin Luther King, Jr., exploded. Lyndon Johnson, ascending to the presidency after Kennedy's death, won election in his own right in 1964 and promptly threw his support behind the cause of civil rights. In a remarkable burst of political leadership, Johnson persuaded the Congress to pass a vast array of social welfare legislation, known collectively as the Great Society programs. But Johnson's dreams for a happier America were blasted by the mounting unpopularity of the war in Vietnam, which had drawn half a million U.S. troops by the mid-1960s. Bedeviled by the Vietnam problem, Johnson withdrew from the 1968 presidential race, paving the way for the election of Richard Nixon.

## A. The Cuban Missile Crisis

---

### I. President Kennedy Proclaims a "Quarantine" (1962)

*After the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion in 1961, the United States watched Castro's Cuba for further trouble. Officials in Washington knew that the Soviet Union was sending Castro immense quantities of weapons, which Moscow repeatedly claimed*

---

<sup>1</sup>*Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy: 1962* (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Service, 1963), pp. 807–808 (October 22, 1962).

were defensive.\* In mid-October 1962, high-flying U.S. spy planes returned with startling photographic evidence that Soviet technicians were installing about forty nuclear missiles with a striking range of about twenty-two hundred miles. Rather than forewarn Premier Nikita Khrushchev in Moscow, Kennedy quietly consulted with members of Congress and then went on radio and television with a bombshell address that caught the Soviets off guard. In this excerpt, what options did he leave for himself if the initial "quarantine" should fail? What were the risks in Kennedy's strategy? Were they worth it?

Acting, therefore, in the defense of our own security and of the entire Western Hemisphere, ... I have directed that the following *initial* steps be taken immediately:

*First:* To halt this offensive buildup, a strict quarantine on all offensive military equipment under shipment to Cuba is being initiated. All ships of any kind bound for Cuba from whatever nation or port will, if found to contain cargoes of offensive weapons, be turned back. This quarantine will be extended, if needed, to other types of cargo and carriers. We are not at this time, however, denying the necessities of life, as the Soviets attempted to do in their Berlin blockade of 1948.

*Second:* I have directed the continued and increased close [aerial] surveillance of Cuba and its military buildup. ...

*Third:* It shall be the policy of this Nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union.

*Fourth:* As a necessary military precaution, I have reinforced our base at Guantanamo [Cuba], evacuated today the dependents of our personnel there, and ordered additional military units to be on a standby alert basis.

*Fifth:* We are calling tonight for an immediate meeting of the Organ of Consultation under the Organization of American States, to consider this threat to hemispheric security and to invoke Articles 6 and 8 of the Rio Treaty in support of all necessary action. ... Our other allies around the world have also been alerted.

*Sixth:* Under the Charter of the United Nations, we are asking tonight that an emergency meeting of the Security Council be convoked without delay to take action against this latest Soviet threat to world peace. Our resolution will call for the prompt dismantling and withdrawal of all offensive weapons in Cuba, under the supervision of U.N. observers, before the quarantine can be lifted.

*Seventh and finally:* I call upon Chairman Khrushchev to halt and eliminate this clandestine, reckless, and provocative threat to world peace and to stable relations between our two nations. I call upon him further to abandon this course of world domination, and to join in an historic effort to end the perilous arms race and to transform the history of man.

---

\*The Soviets were correct in the sense that so-called offensive weapons aimed at the United States were defensive in that they would deter an invasion of Cuba.