

Today we are continuing with the story of PRESIDENT JOHN F KENNEDY, who became President in January 1961 and died in November 1963. When we left his story on Monday, it was April 1961, and JFK had been humiliated by the failure of the BAY OF PIGS invasion of Cuba.

JFK responded to that failure by picking himself up, and focussing on making America a better country, particularly for black people. His brother ROBERT KENNEDY (known as 'BOBBY'), who had been made Attorney General, in charge of law and order in the USA, started going after criminal organisations like the MAFIA, and organisations that had been turned into criminal organisations, like the TEAMSTERS UNION. Joseph Kennedy - John and Bobby's father - was alarmed because Joseph Kennedy had promised the Mafia that if they helped JFK get elected, he would go easy on them. But the Kennedy boys were doing the precise opposite and trying to drive organisations like the Mafia out of existence.



JFK - who said in his inaugural speech, when he became President 'Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country' - started thinking about what the United States could do for the world. In March 1961, he founded the PEACE CORPS (pronounced 'core') which would send Americans who volunteered across the world for two years to help deprived countries develop. And in September 1962, JFK announced that the United States would land a man on the moon before the decade was over - something that I told you about on July 21, on the day that Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin landed on the moon in 1969.

The communist government of the SOVIET UNION had been led to believe by the 'Bay of Pigs' that JFK was weak, and could be bullied. That was a big mistake, and led to one of the biggest crises (pronounced 'kry - sees': crises is the plural of 'crisis', which means a very difficult and challenging moment) that the world has ever known: THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS.

On October 14 1962, American spy planes flying over Cuba took photos which showed that the Soviet Union had started building a nuclear missile site in Cuba. Ever since 1945, and the first and only use of nuclear weapons in war (the explosions at Hiroshima and Nagasaki - which I told you about on July 16) the Americans and the Soviet



Union had engaged in a NUCLEAR ARMS RACE, constructing more and more devastating

nuclear weapons that they could use on each other, and missiles that could be used to shoot those nuclear weapons at each other.

By 1962, the Americans knew that if they ever fired nuclear missiles at the Soviet Union, the Soviet Union would lose hundreds of cities and millions of people - but they would still have enough missiles left to fire at the United States, and destroy hundreds of American cities and millions of American lives. And the Soviets knew the same was true of them - if they engaged in a 'FIRST STRIKE' against the United States, firing thousands of nuclear missiles at the United States, they might do a lot of damage, but the United States would still be able to strike back and do a huge amount of damage to the Soviet Union. So no one dared use nuclear weapons against their enemy, because they knew if they did, they would destroy the enemy, but they would also be destroyed. This reality - of what was known as **MUTUALLY ASSURED DESTRUCTION** - actually kept the world incredibly peaceful. Both the Americans and the Soviets tried desperately hard not to get into fights with each other, that might escalate and might result in a nuclear exchange that would destroy both countries (and the world).

But if the Soviets managed to install nuclear weapons in Cuba, that would change everything. Cuba was only a few miles away from America - so if the Soviets could launch nuclear missiles at the United States from Cuba, they would hit the United States before anyone would know they had been launched. And if they hit the United States before anyone knew they were launched, there was a chance that the Soviet Union would be able to destroy America before the Americans could get their act together to launch nuclear missiles at the Soviet Union in revenge. So it was completely unacceptable to the Americans to allow nuclear weapons to be installed in Cuba, and they had to stop this happening. But how?

On October 22 1962, JFK gave a televised speech to the American people, telling them what had happened, and announcing that the American Navy would create a **BLOCKADE** around Cuba, and would stop any ships from landing in Cuba if they were carrying material that could be used against the United States. The Americans also asked for a meeting of the **UNITED NATIONS' SECURITY COUNCIL** on October 25 so that the world could be shown what the Soviets were trying to do.



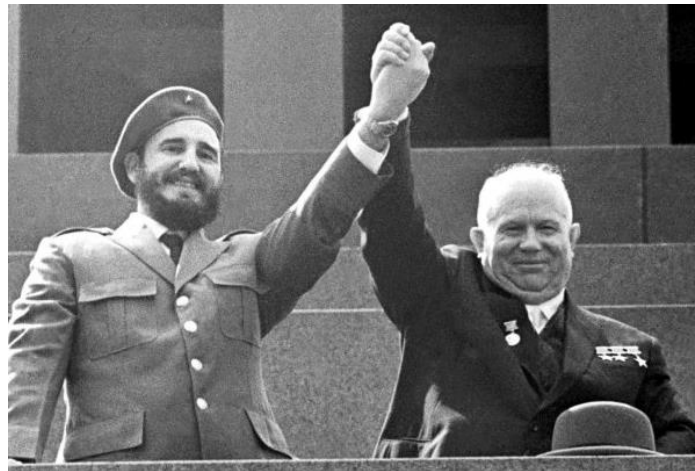
The American Ambassador to the United Nations was **ADLAI STEVENSON**, the man who had run against President Eisenhower in 1956 and lost. Kennedy's people regarded Stevenson as weak, but he rose magnificently to the occasion, challenging the Soviet Ambassador to the United Nations to deny that the Soviets were installing nuclear missiles in Cuba:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yGm0Jz1ZweE>

The Soviets would not respond, and the world held its breath, waiting to see what would happen if a Soviet ship tried to break the American blockade of Cuba. If they did, they would be fired on, and maybe the ship would be sunk and many Russian sailors would die - and what then? Would the Soviets retaliate? Would war break out between the Americans and the

Russians, with the result that the world would be destroyed as they fired nuclear weapons at each other?

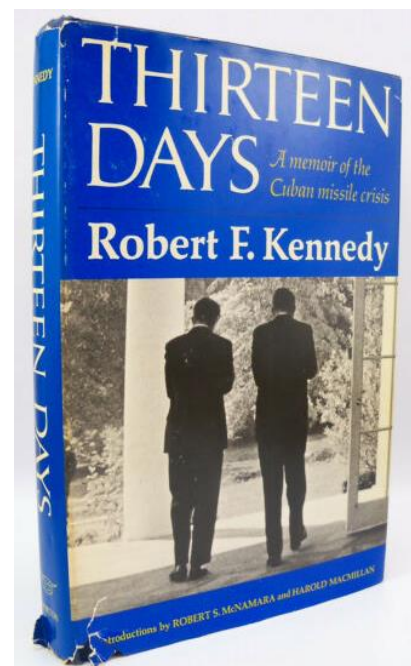
Well, we are still here - so that's not what happened. But the Cuban Missile Crisis is the closest the world has ever come to a nuclear war breaking out. So why didn't it happen? It didn't happen because on October 26 1962, the Soviet leader, NIKITA KHRUSHCHEV (who I told you about on October 1) sent a letter to JFK, offering to make peace and to withdraw the missiles from Cuba. But then in October 27 1962 a very different, and much more hostile, message was received from



Khrushchev, saying that the missiles in Cuba would only be withdrawn if the Americans dismantled nuclear missiles that they had installed in Turkey and which were pointing at the Soviet Union. JFK was willing to make the trade, but he could not accept creating the impression that the Americans could be bullied by the Soviet Union into giving up its weapons, anywhere in the world.

Then JFK's brother Bobby had the brilliant idea - why not just ignore Khrushchev's second message, and respond to the first, much friendlier one? A letter was drafted and released, saying that the Americans accepted the Soviet's proposal to withdraw nuclear weapons from Cuba in return for the blockade being lifted (and in private, the Soviets were told that after a decent interval, the missiles in Turkey would be removed as well). Khrushchev let everyone know he was happy with the deal that had been struck - he was getting very nervous about the situation he had helped to create getting out of control and a nuclear war breaking out. The Cuban Missile Crisis was over. If you want to know about this hugely dramatic time in the history of the world I would recommend that you watch the film of the book that Bobby Kennedy later wrote about the Cuban Missile Crisis - THIRTEEN DAYS. Here is the trailer for the film:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-yfIoHXOO9E>



The result of the Cuban Missile Crisis was to make JFK hugely popular, both in the United States and abroad. He had faced down the Soviets, and had secured peace for the world. On June 26 1963, JFK visited West Berlin, a couple of years after the Berlin Wall had been put up separating East from West Berlin (something I told you about on November 10). A million people turned out to hear from declare that he would never stop standing up for the freedom of the people of Berlin, on both sides of the Wall because 'ICH BIN EIN BERLINER' ('I am a Berliner'):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Ha9GJwIus8>

(Actually, 'ein Berliner' is a kind of doughnut made in Berlin - so when JFK said 'Ich bin ein Berliner' he was actually saying 'I am a doughnut'. He should have said 'Ich bin Berliner'. But the crowd didn't seem to mind and went wild at JFK's words of support.)

It looked like JFK was a certainty to be re-elected President in November 1964, and he started thinking about his plans for his second term. Those plans would include a civil rights act for black Americans who still suffered discrimination and injustice, almost 100 years after the end of the AMERICAN CIVIL WAR. But they would also involve making peace with the Soviet Union. JFK wanted nothing to do with the military's plans to involve America in a war in VIETNAM. He had allowed the military to send advisors to the SOUTH VIETNAMESE government, to help train their soldiers to deal with the rebel VIETCONG who wanted to overthrow the South Vietnamese government and allow South Vietnam to be taken over by the communist NORTH VIETNAM. But JFK recognised it was impossible to get a positive result in Vietnam and he wanted to get the military advisors recalled and get out of Vietnam. And JFK also wanted to do something about the CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY that had let him down so badly over the Bay of Pigs invasion (and had failed completely to find out about the Soviet's plans to put nuclear missiles in Cuba before it happened). He thought the CIA was too powerful and too stupid at the same time - a dangerous combination. He wanted to get rid of the CIA and find some other way of finding out what America's enemies were up to.



But JFK's plans regarding Vietnam and the CIA never happened. The CIA is still with us, and from 1965, America got involved in a hugely expensive and damaging war in Vietnam, trying to defend the South Vietnamese government. About 60,000 young Americans lost their lives in that conflict. Here is some brief video footage of the wall that was later put up in tribute to all those Americans who died in the VIETNAM WAR:

<https://youtu.be/9vrC5P69QFQ?t=58>

The deaths of all those young men can be traced back to one death: the death of JFK on 22 November 1963. This was an event which so important and had so many huge consequences for the world we live in, that we need to talk about in a separate email, on Friday.