On 18 October, Kennedy met Gromyko, the Soviet foreign minister, who insisted that the USSR was only aiding the ‘defensive capabilities’ of Cuba.

Kennedy favoured a ‘quarantine’ or naval blockade of Cuba to stop Soviet equipment getting through, which would display US firmness. On 22 October Kennedy announced a blockade on TV and also demanded the immediate withdrawal of Soviet missiles. Dean Rusk described it as the two superpowers confronting each other ‘eyeball-to-eyeball’.

On 25 October the Soviet ships were slowed down and turned back. Two days later, a U-2 spy plane was shot down over Cuba.

Under pressure to take military action, Kennedy responded to Khrushchev’s proposal from the day before by saying (in public) that the US would not invade Cuba if the USSR removed its missiles, and (in secret) that the US Jupiter missiles would soon leave Turkey.

On 28 October, Khrushchev accepted Kennedy’s proposals and announced on Radio Moscow that the Cuban missiles would be dismantled. Kennedy welcomed this as an ‘important contribution to peace’.

The crisis gave Kennedy a much-needed foreign policy success, strengthening his presidency. He could claim to have removed the Soviet nuclear threat from the American ‘backyard’ and prevented a superpower nuclear exchange. 10 days later, he would reap the rewards at the US Congressional elections; the Democrats won their biggest majority at the Senate for 20 years.

However, Kennedy had pledged not to attempt to remove Castro from Cuba; he had accepted that the island would remain under Communist control. He had also agreed to remove US missiles from Turkey, a decision taken without the knowledge of the Turkish government.

Khrushchev could claim credit for safeguarding Castro’s regime by obtaining the US pledge not to invade Cuba. He chose peace over brinkmanship, but the Soviet military never forgave Khrushchev. They perceived the Cuban crisis as a failure.

Castro was furious because he had not been consulted by Khrushchev about the removal of the missiles. He was also angry because he had expected the US military base at Guantanamo Bay to be removed.