

## TEACHERS' / STUDENTS' NOTES

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Director: Roger Donaldson Certificate: 12 Running time: 145 minutes

### **INTRODUCTION - THE CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS, 1962**

For thirteen extraordinary days in October 1962, the world stood on the brink of an unthinkable catastrophe. Across the globe, people anxiously awaited the outcome of a harrowing political, diplomatic and military confrontation that threatened to end in a nuclear exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union. The Cuban Missile Crisis was the closest the world ever came to nuclear war. The United States armed forces were at their highest state of readiness ever and Soviet field commanders in Cuba were prepared to use battlefield nuclear weapons to defend the island if it was invaded. Luckily, thanks to two men, President John F Kennedy and Premier Nikita Khrushchev, war was averted.

In 1962, the Soviet Union was desperately behind the United States in the arms race. Soviet missiles were only powerful enough to be launched against Europe. US missiles were capable of striking the entire Soviet Union. In April 1962, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev conceived the idea of placing intermediate-range missiles in Cuba. A deployment in Cuba would double the Soviet strategic arsenal and provide a real deterrent to a potential US attack against the Soviet Union or Cuba. In mid-July of 1962 the Soviet Union began its buildup of offensive weapons in Cuba. Fidel Castro was looking for a way to defend his island nation from an attack by the US.

## WHAT HAPPENED?

Find a list of the key events of the Cuban Missile Crisis. Is this the story that is told in the film *Thirteen Days*? If it isn't, then why not? What else has been included? What has been missed out? Below are some comments by the film makers:

*I saw the Cuban Missile Crisis not just as a chapter in history but as a great story - the ultimate cinematic political thriller with the fate of the world in the balance.*

*That's where the real tension lies - in how the decisions were made, and how these young men handled the toughest dilemma anyone could face.*

*When you meet these people, who in some ways have come to seem larger than life, and you hear their fears in their own words, you get a very frightening sense of the incomprehensible fire power and military might that each side was marshalling. The nuclear guns were loaded on both sides in a stare down of global proportions, and there's never been anything like it.*

**Roger Donaldson, director**

There are many, many accounts of the Cuban Missile Crisis. *Thirteen Days* now joins that vast body of work as one view of the event. It is drawn from the record, but narrowed and focused and dramatised to create a coherent, accessible and entertaining story. We don't offer this film as the final word or definitive document, but rather as a departure point to encourage conversation and exploration of leadership in the nuclear age whose awful spectre we all still live under.

**Peter Almond, producer**



What are the main elements that these two film makers emphasise about the story? How might these elements of the story of the Cuban Missile Crisis differ from those that are important to elements which might be used by a historian? Peter Almond stresses that the film should be seen as a departure point for conversation and exploration. He suggests that the film could lead to discussion about leadership. What other aspects of the Crisis could the film, *Thirteen Days*, lead us to talk about?

## DRAMA, STORY AND HISTORY

One of the main problems a film-maker may face when producing a film about a historical event is that the audience will 'know the ending'. If we take *Thirteen Days* as an example, we know that the Cuban Missile Crisis was resolved and that nuclear war did not break out. Yet the whole film revolves around the drama of the real possibility that war might break out during those days in 1962.

Think of other historical films which also faced the same problem: *Gandhi* (we know that *Gandhi* gets assassinated) - *Titanic* (we know the boat sinks!) - *Braveheart* (we know that Wallace is captured and executed). What keeps us, the audience, interested? What makes us enjoy films where we know what will happen at the end?

Before you see *Thirteen Days*, write down what type of film you were expecting and where you think you got these expectations from; was it through seeing the trailer of the film, or a poster or what a friend had told you? Having seen the film, which of these expectations do you think were fulfilled?

Roger Donaldson, the director, describes the film as a political thriller. Have you seen any other films that might fit into this genre? What were the main features of these films?

## VIEWS OF HISTORY

As a typical Hollywood film, *Thirteen Days* presents the events of the Cuban Missile Crisis from the historical point of view of the USA. However, history is not one-sided! Look again at the key events which you used earlier to compare with the story told in *Thirteen Days*. If you were retelling the story from the point of view of the Soviets or the Cubans how would it be different? Just as we are shown the events unfolding in the White House, there must have been similar dramas occurring in the Kremlin and in Havana. What would the different perspectives on these events be in those two places? Would the story still be called *Thirteen Days*? How, within a filmed version of the story, would the dramatic events be shown? If we talk of heroes as an essential part of any story, how could either Castro or Khrushchev be seen in a heroic way?

## THE CRISIS

The events that are shown in the film *Thirteen Days* reveal just how close the world came to nuclear war. Key to the solution of the Crisis was the reaction of John F Kennedy, his brother Robert and Nikita Khrushchev.

From your own study of the Crisis and your viewing of the film, can you answer the following questions:

1. *Why do you think that the Soviet Union wanted to install missiles in Cuba?*
2. *What were the main reasons for the Americans seriously considering military action to remove the missiles from Cuba?*

3. *What were President Kennedy's main objections to his military advisers' suggestions for the three possible solutions to the Crisis?*
4. *Why would America not wish to appear 'weak' in the eyes of the world at this particular point in history?*
5. *In what ways did the Missile Crisis relate to America's view of Fidel Castro and the political situation in Cuba?*

*Thirteen Days* only represents the American point of view of the Crisis. We see the Crisis develop through the eyes of the president and his brother and also Ken O'Donnell, the presidential aide. How are these characters presented to us? How are they made sympathetic to us as members of a film audience?

## RESEARCH

A number of different websites are listed at the end of this study guide. Visit each site and see how the thirteen days of the Cuban Missile Crisis is presented. As you look through each site think about who created it and what their particular attitude to the events might be. Two of the sites give actual documents from the Crisis itself. Look at these and think about how these documents would help:

- a) a historian
- b) a film maker
- c) someone who has just watched the film

## WEB LINKS

For more detailed information on the Cuban Missile Crisis as well as original source material visit the following websites:

The National Security Archive -

[www.nsa.gov/publications/publi000333.cfm](http://www.nsa.gov/publications/publi000333.cfm)

NSA and The Cuban Missile Crisis by Thomas Johnson and David Hatch

<http://library.thinkquest.org/11046>

This site gives an excellent overview of the Cuban Missile Crisis.

[www.marxists.org/history/cuba/subject/missile-crisis](http://www.marxists.org/history/cuba/subject/missile-crisis)

As the name suggests, an alternative view of what happened during the Cuban Missile Crisis which makes an interesting comparison to the more 'American' sites.

Official website

[www.thirteen-days.com](http://www.thirteen-days.com)