

Historians generally view the Cuban Missile Crisis as both positive and negative, depending on the perspective through which the event is viewed. Primarily though the crisis forced both the US and the USSR to come face to face with the real possibility of global nuclear war(an event that likely contributed to later arms control negotiations such as the Hotline Agreement) and the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (Jordan 2016). These measures were implemented because leaders saw how easily miscommunication or panic could escalate into irreversible catastrophe.

Yet the crisis was negative in the sense that it revealed how fragile global systems of control truly were. Both superpowers came within minutes of launching nuclear weapons. Many events during the crisis unfolded outside of presidential control, such as the shoot-down of Major Rudolph Anderson's U-2 and the misinterpreted U.S. depth charges near the Soviet submarine B-59 (Jordan 2016.) Many scholars believe yes, global nuclear war was a very real possibility if not for the actions of Vasili Arkhipov. Soviet protocol required three officers to approve the launch of the B-59's nuclear torpedo. Captain Savitsky and the political officer, Maslennikov, had already voted to fire. Arkhipov was the only one in disagreement, and because unanimity was required, the launch never occurred (Newsthink 2022.)

This torpedo, if it was fired, would have hit the U.S. ships maintaining the blockade. The U.S. The Navy had standing orders to respond, and the U.S. was already at DEFCON 2, one step from nuclear war (Jordan 2016.) As described afterward by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Arkhipov's refusal avoided "a chain reaction that would have resulted in nuclear war" (Newsthink 2022.) Thus, Arkhipov's calm judgment-under extreme heat, pressure, and lack of communication-almost certainly prevented a nuclear holocaust.

Arkansas was home to 18 Titan II ICBM silos, including the massive launch complex at 374-7 near Damascus, which housed the most powerful warhead the United States ever deployed (Christ 2025.) Active from the early 1960s into the late 1980s, these missiles were part of a nationwide Cold War strategy of land-based nuclear deterrence.

The 1980 Damascus Titan II explosion is one of the clearest examples of this. A technician merely dropping a wrench socket punctured the missile's fuel tank, causing a leak that later led to a catastrophic explosion that hurled a 740-ton silo door hundreds of feet into the air (Christ 2025.) The warhead survived intact only because its safety mechanisms functioned perfectly. This was not the first serious accident; in 1978, oxidizer leaks at the same Arkansas complex created a toxic cloud 3,000 feet long that prompted civilian evacuations (Christ 2025.) Throughout the nation, leaks, fires, and equipment failures were known problems with the Titan II system (Schlosser 2013). As one crew member interviewed in Command and Control observed, the system depended on "everything working perfect all the time". This was an increasingly dangerous expectation as liquid-fueled ICBMs grew more complex and volatile (PBS 2017). Overall, I do believe that for the most part the nation had these nuclear weapons under a very secure hold, but since there were multiple cases where these catastrophes were very close to occurring there were clearly some large holes.