The Berlin Crisis of 1961

Slusser, Robert M.

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Slusser, Robert M.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/69452

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2418684

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
While the Soviets were unfolding their strategy in the Berlin campaign, the Western allies were undergoing a period of anxiety and self-questioning. The general assumption among them was that a time of testing lay ahead, but that its onset was not yet imminent. The President's parting words to Khrushchev at Vienna—"It will be a cold winter"—were an indication that he expected only a gradual build-up of tension in the conflict over Berlin. The President and his advisers assumed they had ample time to frame a counterstrategy. At worst, it was thought likely that Khrushchev would make good on his threat to call a peace conference on Germany immediately after the Communist Party Congress in October.¹

The cautious pace in Washington was the product of several factors, of which the most important were the existence of conflicting views within the administration as to how best to respond to the Soviet challenge and the need to coordinate any response with America's major allies. It was not until mid-July, for example, that a reply to the Soviet memorandum on Germany handed to the President at Vienna was ready. The slowness in replying to this memorandum is all the more striking when it is contrasted with the prompt U.S. reply to the companion Soviet memorandum on disarmament, which was sent on June 17. As a spirited, if provocative statement of the Western position and a critique of the Soviet proposals, the note deserves careful attention.²


The U.S. note on disarmament of June 17

Central to the U.S. June 17 note was an analysis of the Soviet position on a test ban agreement. Point by point the note took up the proposals set forth in the Soviet memorandum of June 4, as well as earlier in the test ban talks at Geneva, and rejected them as unworkable. After consideration of the Soviet demands for a three-man head to the control body ("involves a built-in veto over the operation of the control system"), a limit of three on-site inspections per year ("a completely inadequate sampling"), the use of Soviet nationals to head any control post established on Soviet territory ("fundamentally contrary to the aim of objective international surveillance"), and a majority of Soviet nationals on the staff of on-site inspection teams ("would frustrate completely the purpose of on-site inspection of suspicious events"), the note criticized as scientifically unfounded the Soviet refusal to accept Western proposals for a three-year moratorium on small underground nuclear tests ("amounts to a demand for a permanent unpoliced ban").

Turning to the Soviet demand that the test ban talks be merged in comprehensive negotiations on disarmament, the note dismissed it curtly as "unacceptable." In explaining this stand the note alluded significantly to pressure on the United States government to end the de facto test ban moratorium by resuming nuclear testing:

The delay in reaching a test ban agreement which would result from merging the test ban negotiations into the comprehensive disarmament negotiations suggests that the Soviet Union is attempting to continue a situation in which the United States accepts an unenforced commitment not to test. This would leave the Soviet Union, with its closed society, its government unaccountable either to a parliament or to an informed public opinion, and its actions shrouded in a veil of secrecy, free to conduct nuclear weapons tests without fear of exposure. For almost three years, the United States has been willing to assume the risk of not testing nuclear weapons without the certainty that the Soviet Union has likewise stopped its testing. The national security and defenses of the free world do not allow this risk to be assumed indefinitely.3

Failure to move forward from the unpoliced de facto test ban to one provided with adequate controls, in the U.S. view, "would mean the further proliferation of nuclear weapons and the testing of such weapons by an ever-greater number of countries. In view of the ease of clandestine nuclear testing under an unpoliced ban, it means that each government will face an increasing need to take whatever steps may be necessary in its own defense, including nuclear testing."4

Taking a wider view, the note saw in the Soviet position evidence of a retrograde attitude toward its responsibilities as a great power for the peace and security of the international community:

3Ibid., p. 194.
4Ibid., p. 195.
Framing a Western Position

... the Soviet Government apparently desires to return to a period of history when the sovereign state admitted no limitation to its actions. The positions maintained by the Soviet Union at Geneva appear to mean that, even with all that is at stake, the Soviet Union is not ready to abate in some small degree its regime of secrecy and jealously-guarded sovereignty.

This attitude offers small prospect for a constructive outcome of the Geneva test ban negotiations. It also offers little hope for the development of the kind of world, under an international rule of law, in which general disarmament can take place.\(^5\)

Important in itself, conclusion of a test ban treaty, the note maintained, would “brighten the prospects for agreement in other areas of conflicting interests.”\(^6\)

However one may judge the soundness of the arguments set forth in the June 17 note, it must be recognized that its self-righteous attitude and sweeping condemnation of the Soviet position were bound to sting the Soviets into a retort for which, objectively regarded, the note provided ample ground. More significant, the passages in the note referring to the mounting pressure on the United States to resume testing fitted perfectly into the Soviet strategy of goading the United States into precisely this step, and may well have served as the immediate occasion for the counterthreat of a Soviet resumption of testing in Khrushchev’s speech of June 21. It is understandable, perhaps, that no one in Washington recognized the link between the disarmament negotiations and the on-rushing Berlin crisis, but it remains surprising that at a time when caution was the watchword of the day and every word directly relating to Berlin and Germany was being carefully weighed, a statement on disarmament which was almost certain to provoke the Soviets and to generate a strong counteraction should have been dispatched so promptly and with so little apparent realization of its probable consequences.

Tightening the Western alliance

The Berlin crisis of 1961, as we have noted, was a contest not merely between the United States and the Soviet Union but between the two opposing alliance systems grouped around them. Recognizing that the ties linking the nations of the Western alliance faced a period of intense strain, Kennedy took a number of steps during the initial phase of the crisis designed to strengthen them.

Immediately after his Vienna meeting with Khrushchev, the President flew to London for a discussion with British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan. Far more than the tentative encounter between the two men at Bermuda in April, this stopover on Kennedy’s homeward journey marked the start of what, in Schlesinger’s phrase, was to be “Kennedy’s closest personal relationship with

\(^{5}\)Ibid.

\(^{6}\)Ibid.
The “considerable temperamental rapport” with which the two men were to develop was all the more valuable in that their basic views on policy toward the Soviet Union often diverged rather widely. The British leader, with his roots in the pre-1914 Edwardian past and his deep horror of war resulting from the experience of two world holocausts, felt strongly that virtually no possible gains were sufficiently vital to justify the risk of nuclear war.

The discussion at No. 10 Downing Street, conducted on a personal and informal basis at Macmillan’s suggestion, ranged widely, with special attention being devoted to the nuclear test ban talks and disarmament. Uppermost in the minds of both men, nevertheless, was the looming threat to the Western position on Berlin. On this subject a partial meeting of minds was achieved. Macmillan, despite his preference for negotiations with the Soviets, agreed that a proposal to initiate East–West talks now would be taken in Moscow as a sign of weakness. He therefore fell in with Kennedy’s urging of the immediate need for accelerated military planning on Berlin and for the adoption of contingency plans to counter possible Soviet actions. In the words of the joint communiqué issued at the end of their meeting: “The situation in regard to Germany was reviewed and there was full agreement on the necessity of maintaining the rights and obligations of the allied governments in Berlin”.

U.S.–British contacts were extended with the arrival in Washington on June 14 of Lord Home, British foreign secretary. Finding that U.S. officials were as yet only in the opening phase of what seemed likely to be a prolonged discussion on the policy to be pursued in Berlin, Lord Home turned matters over to a subordinate and flew on to Chicago, where on June 17 he gave a speech affirming Western resolution. As the Berlin crisis developed, a perceptible shade of difference was to emerge between the views of Lord Home and those of his chief, Prime Minister Macmillan.

A foreign visitor who was to play a significant role at a later stage in the Berlin crisis, Italian Prime Minister Amintore Fanfani, paid a visit to the White House on June 12–13 as the result of an initiative within the White House staff which deliberately bypassed the professional diplomats in the State Department, distrustful of the Italian statesman’s professed willingness to collaborate with the Italian socialists and other parties to the left of center (the “opening to the left”). Balancing cautiously between East and West, the Italian government had signed a three-year trade agreement with the Soviets just before Fanfani left for the United States.
Framing a Western Position

Fanfani's visit served to strengthen U.S.–Italian relations, increase Italy's stature as a partner in NATO, and deepen its commitment to the goals of the Western alliance.

A state visit not directly related to the Berlin crisis but of cardinal importance in strengthening the Western position within the overall context of international relations was the meeting at the White House on June 21–22 between the President and Prime Minister Hayato Ikeda of Japan. Whether by coincidence or design, the visit occurred just over a year after an episode which marked an abysmal low in U.S.–Japanese relations—the cancellation by the Japanese government of a projected visit to Tokyo by President Eisenhower in the wake of widespread anti-American riots in Japan. As if to make amends for the past and to underline the resurgence of U.S.–Japanese amity, the gathering at the White House for Ikeda's visit included former President Eisenhower.

The joint communique issued at the end of the Japanese Premier's visit emphasized the common security problems faced by both nations in Southeast Asia and the Pacific area and their support for the United Nations as an instrument for peace and international security. Of immediate significance in the context of the Berlin crisis was a passage affirming a common stand on disarmament and a nuclear test ban: "The President and the Prime Minister recognized the urgent need for an agreement on a nuclear test ban accompanied by effective inspection and control measures, agreeing that it is of crucial importance for world peace. They also expressed their conviction that renewed efforts should be made in the direction of general disarmament."

As the nation most intimately acquainted with the horrors of atomic warfare, Japan's position on these questions was a matter of particular significance. The close understanding resulting from the visit by Ikeda was, therefore, a valuable contribution to the strengthening of the Western position as the showdown over resumed nuclear testing drew closer.

The President's underlying concept of the way in which the United States could most effectively use its manpower and resources to combat communist subversion and aggression found expression in an address to the Eighth National Conference on International Economic and Social Development on June 16. Sustained and intelligently administered foreign aid, Kennedy argued, was the indispensable key to countering the communist tactics of support for and identification with the national liberation movement in underdeveloped nations:

In 1952, the Communists were seeking to expand their influence primarily through military means. In 1952, the United States was concerned about Korea-type control and invasions with actual military forces. Now, however, we have seen an entirely different concept, which the Communists have very frankly and generously explained to us at great length: Mr. Khrushchev's speech in January—he reiterated it again in Vienna—the so-called

war of liberation, which is not the Korean type of war, where an armed force of one side passes across en masse the frontier of another country, but instead the seizure of power internally by what he considers the forces of liberation but which are, as we know in many cases, forces which are Communist controlled and which are supported from outside the country, but which are internal in their operation. It is for these reasons and because of this change in the Communist strategy which they believe offers them the best hope of success that this work [foreign aid] is more important today than it's ever been before.15

The U.S. contribution, Kennedy urged, should be material support for governments intent on improving the well-being of their people:

I think that we should recognize that the efforts to seize power in these countries, particularly those that are bordering the periphery of the Communist bloc, can be stemmed only—particularly in those countries where poverty and ignorance and illiteracy are the order of the day—can be stemmed only by one thing. And that is governments which are oriented and directed towards assisting the people and identified with causes which mean a better life for the people of those countries. Quite obviously we cannot stem any tide which is inevitable. But I do not believe it inevitable that the governments in those areas should adopt policies which are reactionary. I think it's inevitable that they will adopt policies which are progressive and I think we should assist them. If we're not prepared to assist them, then quite obviously they cannot carry this burden, in many cases, by themselves. And if we're not prepared to assist them, whatever efforts they make will be doomed to failure. So I think that what we want to see in these areas are governments which are concerned with the life of their people, which are making a genuine effort, which are making and putting forward programs which over a period of time promise a better life for the people. And then we should be prepared to play our part and that is what we are suggesting in this program, and that in my opinion is in the best interest of our country at this time.16

As for military support to weak governments fighting subversion, the sound course, in the President's opinion, was to "train and equip the local forces upon whom the chief burden of resisting local Communist subversion rests."17

Another occasion effectively used by the President to expound his ideas on East-West relations was the entry into force on June 23, 1961, of the multilateral Treaty on Antarctica. With obvious application to the stalemated test ban talks in Geneva, Kennedy said:

This is a significant treaty in several respects. First and foremost it provides that the vast Antarctic continent shall be used for peaceful purposes only. Accompanying this provision is the important provision whereby the parties have the right to send observers anywhere in Antarctica at any time to see

15Ibid., p. 461.
16Ibid., pp. 461–62.
17Ibid., p. 463.
that the Treaty is not being violated, and the right of overflight of all areas of Antarctica. It could very well provide valuable experience in the field of international inspection in other situations.\textsuperscript{18}

In these and similar statements the President refrained from direct comment on recent speeches by Khrushchev, Ulbricht, and other communist spokesmen. It fell to Secretary of State Dean Rusk at his news conference on June 22 to discuss and rebut some of the charges and claims made by Khrushchev in his speech of the preceding day.\textsuperscript{19} Brushing aside Khrushchev's distortions of the historical record—"Chairman Khrushchev's description . . . of the alleged origins of World War II will scarcely impress any serious historian"—Rusk directed the major part of the conference to a clarification of U.S. policy on Germany. "The essential thing," he said, "is that the three Western Powers, as the President put it, are in Berlin not by sufferance but by right, and those rights can't be terminated by unilateral action taken by the Soviet Union. You start from there. And our commitments to the people of West Berlin are very strong and very far-reaching."\textsuperscript{20}

As to Khrushchev's claim that in announcing plans for signing a separate peace treaty with East Germany the Soviets were doing nothing more than to follow the U.S. example with regard to the peace treaty with Japan, Rusk provided a succinct and inclusive rejoinder to this frequently voiced Soviet complaint:

There are several important differences between the Japanese Peace Treaty and this proposal to sign a treaty with the so-called East German Republic. In the case of Japan, there was a representative, elected government representing a unified nation with which to sign a peace treaty. There were 49 nations, I believe, which did in fact sign that peace treaty. The Soviet Union was consulted by the then Ambassador [sic], John Foster Dulles, in the early stages and had an opportunity to consult freely prior to the meeting of the Japanese Peace Conference in San Francisco. They did not avail themselves of the full opportunity that was there for them for consultation.

At the conference itself the Russians attended, and the conference proceeded to sign a treaty. That treaty did not purport to, nor did it, affect any tangible rights of the Soviet Union in Japan. The situation in Berlin involves quite a different situation, with the United States and France and the United Kingdom exercising very specific rights and obligations in West Berlin. There was nothing like that in the Japanese situation at all. Nor did we have a representative government in Germany to decide for all of Germany and certainly not a representative government in the so-called East German Republic. I think the situations are quite different.\textsuperscript{21}

\* \* \* 

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., p. 472.\textsuperscript{19}Department of State Bulletin, 45 (1961): 51–57 (hereinafter cited as \textit{DSB}).\textsuperscript{20}Ibid., p. 55.\textsuperscript{21}Ibid., pp. 56–57.
Khrushchev's challenging speech of June 21 had the effect of accelerating Western efforts to reach agreement on a common policy with regard to Berlin, but the pace still remained painfully slow, primarily because the U.S. administration itself was engaged in an extensive internal debate over what course to pursue. Without waiting for a resolution of the debate, two Western leaders voiced their nations' firm commitment to defense of the Western position in Berlin at this time. Speaking in the House of Commons on June 27, Macmillan indicated a willingness to negotiate with the Soviets over West Berlin, but not at the expense of the freedom of the inhabitants of the city:

Her Majesty's Government, in concert with their allies, have over the years made a number of comprehensive proposals for the just and equitable solution of the problem of Germany and Berlin. . . . All these proposals have been rejected by the Soviet Government, who prefer instead to manufacture an artificial crisis for the purpose of gaining their own ends. We and our allies have certain obligations in Germany, and we do not intend to abandon them. Among these obligations is the preservation of the freedom of the people of West Berlin. The Soviet Government must come to realize that we intend to defend this, and that we cannot countenance proposals inconsistent with it. If they wish to discuss the issue with us, we are prepared to do so, but they must understand that it can only be on the basis that I have described. The House will appreciate from what I have said that there is no question whatever of any modification of British commitments in Berlin.22

If the Soviets had seriously desired negotiations on Berlin at this time, Macmillan's statement would have provided them with an opening, for he included among the Western proposals one advanced in 1959, which, as the Survey of International Affairs points out, "had contained an element of conversations if not of negotiations between the two German governments."23 The Soviets, however, let the opportunity slip past.

Macmillan's emphasis, as usual, was on the need for a reasonable approach and on the willingness of the British government to undertake negotiations, once their fundamental commitment to West Berlin was recognized by the Soviets. Characteristic too was his description of the Berlin crisis as "artificial," with the implication that it need not be taken too seriously.

A far more alarmist note was sounded on June 29 by British Foreign Secretary Lord Home in a speech in London, in which he warned that the British people faced an "extremely dangerous" world situation as the result of the Berlin crisis and predicted that the next six months "are going to be one of the most difficult and dangerous periods through which this country has passed since the last war."24 Lord Home's statement, which was clearly intended to prepare British public opinion for a period of heightened inter-

24NYT, June 30, 1961, p. 2.
national tension, provided a revealing indication of the still prevailing view in the West, even among those who feared the worst, that a fairly extensive period lay ahead before the crisis reached its climax. Macmillan himself, speaking before a Conservative party meeting at Bowood on July 1, took a line considerably closer to that of Lord Home than was customary for him. The West, he said, “cannot countenance interference with Western rights” in Berlin, and he hinted at the possibility of war if the Soviets forced the issue: “Let there be no mistake. This is an issue on which the peoples of the Western world are resolute. It is a principle which they will defend.”

In France, President de Gaulle was meanwhile exhorting his nation and its allies to achieve unity in the face of the impending threat. At Verdun on June 28, he said: “It is by remaining united, first among Frenchmen and then between free peoples, our friends, our allies, that we have all the chances of turning aside the storm.” The following day he repeated the advice in varied terms: “Clouds are piling up over Europe. It is time for the West to close ranks.” At a rally in Épinal on June 30 he spelled out his warning even more clearly: “We are on the eve of a serious international crisis. . . . in the face of this danger there is no better guarantee for France than unity and no better guarantee for the free world than solidarity.”

Washington searches for a policy

Shortly after he returned from Vienna, Kennedy, in accordance with a standard practice in his administration, established a “task force” to help frame policy and develop initiatives on the Berlin problem. The Berlin task force’s immediate assignment was to prepare a reply to the Soviets’ Vienna note on Germany, a task which occupied most of its attention during June and early July. Meanwhile, under the mounting pressure from abroad, the internal debate in the U.S. administration grew sharper, reaching its first major climax toward the end of June. On the morning of June 28 the President at his regular press conference presented a statement which summed up the administration’s thinking on the legal aspects of the Berlin issue. “It is of the greatest importance,” Kennedy said, “that the American people understand the basic issues involved and the threats to peace and security of Europe and of ourselves posed by the Soviet announcement that they intend to change unilaterally the existing arrangements for Berlin.”

Calling the crisis over Berlin “Soviet-manufactured,” the President identified three major Soviet objectives in their drive: first, “to make permanent the

26NYT, June 29, 1961, p. 2.
28NYT, July 1, 1961, p. 2.
29Schlesinger, p. 383.
30JFK, 1961, p. 476.
The Berlin Crisis of 1961

partition of Germany”; second, to “bring an end to Allied rights in West Berlin and to free access for that city”; and third, to create a situation “in which the rights of the citizens of West Berlin are gradually but relentlessly extinguished.”

“This is not just a question of technical legal rights,” he continued, “... It involves the peace and the security of the peoples of West Berlin. It involves the direct responsibilities and commitments of the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. It involves the peace and the security of the Western world.”

Notably absent from the President’s summing up of the Western position was any direct reference to the West German government, its vital stake in West Berlin, its interest in German reunification, and its role in the Western alliance. A consistent neglect of this aspect of the task of tightening the Western alliance runs through this entire phase of the Berlin crisis. A certain degree of personal incompatibility between the young President and the venerable West German chancellor, Dr. Konrad Adenauer, and between the Washington administration and West German ambassador to the United States, Dr. William Grewe, may account in part for this oversight, the consequences of which were to make themselves felt during the crisis.

Reverting to one of his major concerns at the Vienna meeting, the President warned against misjudging the unity and resolve of the Western nations: “There is danger that totalitarian governments not subject to vigorous popular debate will underestimate the will and unity of democratic societies where vital interests are concerned. . . . The Soviet Government has an obligation to both its own people and to the peace of the world to recognize how vital is this commitment.”

In a second prepared statement at the June 28 press conference the President expressed disappointment over what he termed “the Soviet Union’s refusal to negotiate seriously on a nuclear test ban at Geneva,” and warned that the stalemate there “raises a serious question . . . about how long we can safely continue on a voluntary basis a refusal to undertake tests in this country without any assurance that the Russians are not now testing.” He had accordingly, he continued,

... directed that the President’s Science Advisory Committee convene a special panel of eminent scientists to take a close and up-to-date look at the serious questions involved, including two questions in particular. First, what is the extent of our information on whether the Soviet Union has been or could be engaged in secret testing of nuclear weapons?

Second, to the extent that certain types of tests can be concealed by the Soviet Union, what technical progress in weapons could be under way in that area without our knowledge?
The panel, to be headed by Stanford physicist W. K. H. Panofsky, was given the mandate

... to consider whether or not the Soviet Union could be conducting clandestine nuclear tests during the moratorium, and what progress the U.S.S.R. could make through such tests. The group was also asked to consider what progress the United States could make if it resumed nuclear testing, and what would happen if both sides resumed testing. In connection with the last question the panel was specifically asked to estimate the possibility of the Soviet Union's overcoming the United States' lead in nuclear weapons. 36

In answer to a question later on in the press conference the President acknowledged that he had not seen "... any information, nor did the previous administration have any knowledge, which would state that the Soviet Union has been testing—information either by seismography or by any other means." 37

It appears, however, that as of this date reports from scientists in other countries told a different story. According to the Survey of International Affairs: "At the end of June reports were beginning to come in from the seismographic research institutes of Japan, Finland and Sweden of seismic events within Soviet territory which the Japanese and the Swedes at least believed to be nuclear, of low-yield nuclear weapons." 38

Turning to a third area in which Soviet and American rivalry was manifesting itself, the President provided a statement on peaceful economic competition. As we have seen, this was a theme which Khrushchev had stressed in his speeches at Alma Ata on June 24 and 25, and in addressing himself to it the President showed a shrewd ability to recognize and encourage an aspect of Soviet policy which, if pursued, might serve to divert it from more dangerous issues. Kennedy maintained that this was a form of international competition in which the United States had nothing to fear: "I believe that we can maintain our productive development and also our system of freedom. We invite the U.S.S.R. to engage in this competition which is peaceful and which could only result in a better living standard for both of our people." 39

Among the questions which the President parried at the June 28 press conference was one concerning possible plans for "a partial mobilization to meet the threat in Berlin." 40 Both the President and his questioner were well aware, no doubt, that in its July 3 issue, which appeared on the newsstands on June 26, two days before the press conference, Newsweek had published a story de-

---

40Ibid.
tailing the alleged contingency plans of the Department of Defense for the Berlin crisis, including partial mobilization. In a report on the incident on June 30, the Washington Post attributed to administration officials a description of the Newsweek story as being "accurate enough to cause grave concern about the disclosure of future and more important recommendations from the Joint Chiefs [of Staff] to the President," adding that the President had called on the FBI to investigate what was termed a "critical leak" of the nation's contingency plans for Berlin.

While disavowing official cognizance of the partial mobilization plan, the President indirectly acknowledged its validity by referring directly to its immediate source, a report on Berlin prepared at his direction by a task force headed by former Secretary of State Dean Acheson. It was the Acheson report which formed the central item in a meeting of the National Security Council which took place on June 29, a meeting which can be regarded as the formal opening of high-level U.S. planning for the Berlin crisis. Detailed and apparently accurate accounts of the meeting were published in the American press almost immediately,\(^41\) and, in addition, fairly extensive summaries of the meeting have been provided by Sorensen and Schlesinger.

The best summary of the Acheson report is provided by Schlesinger. "Acheson's basic thesis," he writes,

was that West Berlin was not a problem but a pretext. Khrushchev's démarche had nothing to do with Berlin, Germany or Europe. His object, as Acheson saw it, was not to rectify a local situation, but to test the general American will to resist; his hope was that, by making us back down on a sacred commitment, he could shatter our world power and influence. This was a simple conflict of wills, and, until it was resolved, any effort to negotiate the Berlin issue per se would be fatal. Since there was nothing to negotiate, willingness on our part to go to the conference table would be taken in Moscow as evidence of weakness and make the crisis so much the worse.\(^42\)

The basic cause of such Soviet daring, Acheson maintained, was Khrushchev's belief that all-out war had become an increasingly remote possibility:

Khrushchev had only dared precipitate the crisis ... because his fear of nuclear war had declined. Our problem was to convince him that this complacency was misplaced and that we would, in fact, go to nuclear war rather than abandon the status quo. This called for the build-up—prompt, serious and quiet—of both our conventional and nuclear forces. If Khrushchev signed his treaty with East Germany, we should not quibble about this or about changes in access procedures. But, the moment there was interruption of access itself, we must act: first an airlift—and then, if that could not be sustained against Soviet counter-measures, a ground probe in force too large to be stopped by East German troops alone. Acheson cited a Joint


\(^{42}\)Schlesinger, p. 381.
Framing a Western Position

Chiefs of Staff estimate that two Allied divisions could hold out indefinitely inside East Germany against an enemy of three or four divisions. The point would be, not to defeat the communist forces in the field, but to persuade Moscow that we had the resolve to go on, if necessary, to nuclear war. There was a substantial chance, Acheson said, that the necessary military preparations would by themselves cause Khrushchev to alter his purpose; but he added frankly that there was also a substantial possibility that nuclear war might result.43

Almost as an afterthought Acheson conceded the possibility that negotiations, under certain circumstances, might be useful: "He even sketched the outlines of a settlement, suggesting that Khrushchev's treaty be accompanied by an exchange of declarations assuring the western position in Berlin, along with certain western concessions—perhaps guarantees against espionage and subversion from West Berlin, perhaps even recognition of the Oder–Neisse line—thrown in to make the result more palatable to Moscow."44

But the major emphasis in the report and in what Schlesinger describes as Acheson's "brilliant and imperious oral presentation" was on the need to stand firm in the test of wills precipitated by Soviet action. The Acheson report, Schlesinger adds, "helped fix the debate for a time in terms of a clear-cut choice between negotiation and a military showdown."45

As a major policy step, to prepare for the test of strength and to convince Khrushchev of the seriousness of the national purpose, Acheson recommended that the President should proclaim a national emergency under which he could move toward full combat status by calling up one million reserves, extending terms of service in the armed forces, and bringing back dependents from Germany, thereby putting the troops there in a state of battle preparedness.46

Within the administration, according to Sorensen, Acheson's recommendations were initially supported by the Departments of State and Defense.47 Schlesinger provides a more precise analysis of the State Department's internal divisions and notes that some of the administration's top experts on Soviet policy, including Ambassadors Thompson and Harriman, disagreed with Acheson, arguing that Khrushchev's goals might well be more limited than was envisaged by Acheson, and that a "quiet military buildup," accompanied by the preparation of specific proposals on Berlin, would probably be more effective.48

As to the President himself, Schlesinger and Sorensen agree that he tended to side with the critics of the Acheson report. Favoring a policy of negotiation, Kennedy recognized at the same time the wisdom of building up Western mili-

43 Ibid., pp. 381–82.
44 Ibid., p. 382.
46 Sorensen, p. 589.
47 Ibid.
48 Schlesinger, p. 383; Sorensen, p. 589.
The Berlin Crisis of 1961

Military strength in Berlin and West Germany, not only in order to convince the Soviets of Western firmness but to avoid the dangerous dilemma posed by the existing U.S. and NATO contingency plans for Berlin. As Sorensen puts it: "In the event of blocked access [to West Berlin], under these plans, a series of military 'probes' down the Autobahn would be attempted. But with the West lacking both the intention and the capacity to wage a conventional war on the ground, these probes were too small to indicate a serious intent and would surely be quickly contained by the Soviets or even by the East Germans alone. Then the plans called for nuclear weapons."49

Regarding the strategy underlying these plans as "weak and dangerous," Kennedy advocated instead "a rapid buildup of combat troops in Central Europe,"

with a contingent large enough to convince Khrushchev that our vital interests were so deeply involved that we would use any means to prevent the defeat or capture of those forces. This required a force large enough to prevent any cheap and easy seizure of the city by East German guards alone, which would weaken our bargaining power—and large enough to permit a true "pause," a month instead of an hour before choosing nuclear war or retreat, time to bring up reserves, to demonstrate our determination, to make a deliberate decision and to communicate at the highest levels before the "ultimate" weapons were used.50

To guard against the possibility that Khrushchev might be tempted to speculate on Western disunity, Kennedy advocated a similar military increase by other Western nations.51

**Kennedy and Khrushchev: efforts toward contact**

While the Western alliance and the Soviets were girding themselves for a showdown, unofficial explorations were taking place with regard to the possibility of direct but informal contact between the top men on each side. The explorations grew out of the working level agreement at the Vienna meeting to arrange a joint television debate in the United States and the Soviet Union.

The debate itself (or rather its American phase, since the Soviets subsequently reneged on their promise to reciprocate), took place over the National Broadcasting Company television network on June 24, on the program, "The Nation's Future." Adzhubei and Kharlamov represented the Soviet side, Harrison Salisbury and Pierre Salinger the American. Since all four participants were closely linked with the press it was natural that much of the sixty-minute program should be spent debating the position of journalism in the United States and the Soviet Union. The U.S. team reproached their Soviet counterparts with lack of freedom to criticize their government, while the

50Ibid., p. 588.
51Ibid.
Soviet spokesmen retorted with charges of journalistic sensationalism in the United States. Salinger, who as White House press secretary spent much of his time trying to persuade U.S. newspaper editors not to publish stories which the administration considered damaging to the nation's security, taxed the Soviets with the secrecy which surrounded major events in their country, for example, the preparations for the Gagarin flight on April 12.

At the close of the program Kharlamov summed things up gracefully: "I think we have had a good discussion here. Regardless of our differences on particulars, partly due to mutual ignorance or misunderstanding, it is better to seek mutual understanding than to seek war. It is better to seek cooperation in order to prevent war than to emphasize the differences that exist among us."52

Though it reached a large audience in the United States, the television debate was less significant for future U.S.–Soviet relations than the personal contacts it helped to foster. On the day following the debate, when the Russian team were guests at Pierre Salinger's home, Kharlamov made use of the occasion to report the "grave concern" felt in the Soviet Union over the lack of progress in the disarmament negotiations. Reflecting the budgetary pressures on the Soviet leadership, he told Salinger: "We are both spending too much on missiles. It is time we spent more on goods the people can use. But your new President is even harder to bring to the bargaining table than Eisenhower. Our patience is great but not inexhaustible."53 In reply Salinger assured the Russian that "President Kennedy was most eager to break the disarmament stalemate, and his negotiator, John J. McCloy, had instructions to explore the widest possible area of agreement."54

One of the Soviet guests at the party, Georgi M. Bolshakov, editor of the English-language Soviet magazine USSR, proffered some gratuitous advice on American foreign policy: "You Americans have too many [allies] and they're always fighting among themselves. You ought to decide which ones are important and get rid of the rest of them."55

The comment is interesting for its implied contrast between the two opposing power blocs as they approached the test of strength over Berlin and for its tacit—and erroneous—assumption that the Soviets in this respect enjoyed a more favorable position than the United States.

The most significant result of the television debate came on the following day, Monday, June 26, when Adzhubei, Kharlamov, and Bolshakov were guests at the White House for an hour-long discussion with the President. Taking his cue from Khrushchev's June 25 speech in Alma Ata, Kennedy adroitly steered the conversation around to the subject of U.S.–Soviet eco-

54 Ibid., p. 187.
55 Ibid.
nomic rivalry. Khrushchev, as we have seen, had compared the United States to an “aged runner” and had predicted that the Soviet Union would overtake it in economic output by 1970.

Having first stressed that he wished Adzhubei to convey his remarks to his father-in-law, Khrushchev, the President said: “I don’t think you can do that [outstrip the U.S. by 1970] at your present rate of growth. You’re like the high-jumper. He can raise the bar a foot at a time until he reaches a certain height, say six feet. But for the next foot he must raise it by inches, and after that by fractions of inches.”

When Adzhubei retorted that “you use one set of figures to measure our growth and we use another,” the President clinched his point: “I’m not minimizing your effort. You’ve made remarkable economic advances. This is the kind of peaceful competition I would like to see us have. But you must do more than you are to see that the peace is kept. Do that and we’ll all be around in 1978 [sic] to find out whether Mr. Khrushchev’s estimates are correct.”

When Adzhubei questioned Western peaceful intentions because of the presence of American troops in West Berlin (conveniently overlooking the twenty-two Soviet divisions in East Germany), the President took advantage of the opening to define American policy on this point: “Our force of 10,000 is token in nature. It is a symbol of our commitment to West Berlin—a commitment we fully intend to maintain.”

In the course of the discussion Kennedy asked Adzhubei to convey a personal message to Khrushchev reaffirming the American policy stand outlined at the Vienna meeting.

The discussion between Kennedy and Adzhubei evidently made a strong impression on Khrushchev, who was always acutely sensitive to questions of personal prestige and the recognition by foreign leaders of what he considered the respect due Soviet officials. In a speech on June 28, which was otherwise highly belligerent in tone, Khrushchev included a passage toward the end expressing appreciation for the President’s gesture in arranging the meeting with Adzhubei and his colleagues (more of this presently). Later, when the first climax of the Berlin crisis was past, Khrushchev was to tell Kennedy, in his first personal letter to him, that he had planned to write to him shortly after the Kennedy–Adzhubei meeting, but had been temporarily discouraged from doing so by the “belligerence” of Kennedy’s July 25 speech.

56 Ibid.
57 Ibid. Salinger evidently mistook the date postulated by Khrushchev for overtaking the United States.
58 Ibid., p. 188.
59 Washington Post, June 28, 1961, p. A–15. Salinger, who was present at the White House discussion, does not confirm this report, but it is inherently probable in view of Kennedy’s overriding concern to convey his position to Khrushchev with the utmost clarity. It was in all likelihood his chief reason for arranging to see Adzhubei and his colleagues. See also the account of the meeting in Hugh Sidey, John F. Kennedy, President (New York: Atheneum, 1963), p. 213 (hereinafter cited as Sidey).
60 Sorensen, p. 552.
Even before the initiation of the private correspondence between the two statesmen, therefore, a kind of dialogue had been established between them, as a result of their intense curiosity about each other and the concern each felt for the security of the nation with which he was entrusted. The availability of virtually instantaneous newspaper, radio, and television reports of the public utterances of the two leaders and their associates made it possible for them to engage in an indirect but effective exchange of ideas, in which a theme stated by one would be picked up by the other, developed, then tossed back for further elaboration. Khrushchev's introduction of the economic competition theme in his Alma Ata speeches is an excellent example of this process. Noting the theme, Kennedy at once recognized its potential as a means of steering U.S.-Soviet rivalry into peaceful, nonmilitary channels. Having prepared himself by obtaining statistics on the U.S. and Soviet rates of economic growth, he introduced the subject in his discussion with Adzhubei on June 26 and had a formal written statement on it ready for his news conference on the 28th. As we shall see, Khrushchev in turn responded to Kennedy's overture, even at a time when he was otherwise at his most belligerent (speech of July 8). Though the economic-rivalry theme was to be temporarily drowned out by the increasing stridency on both sides, the effort had not been wasted, for it helped keep alive the prospect of a turn away from threats of war, toward a more genuinely peaceful world.

61Sidey, p. 213.