The Western Riposte,
June 29-July 25

For President Kennedy the first half of July was a period of intense absorption in the Berlin problem, as the search for a viable policy was pursued in a series of conferences and consultations, both formally in Washington, where the National Security Council met on July 13 and 19, and informally but no less intensively at the President's summer home at Hyannis Port, Massachusetts, where a group of advisers met with him on July 8 to weigh the alternatives.

The reply to the Vienna note on Berlin

Highly frustrating to the President was what he considered the slow pace of the Berlin Task Force and the State Department in drafting a reply to the Soviet note of June 4 on Berlin. When a month had gone by with no visible evidence of progress, he called for the text of the latest draft to review. The results were discouraging. In Sorensen's words: "He found, to his dismay, not a clear, concise response which all Americans, Germans and Russians could understand, but a compilation of stale, tedious and negative phrases, none of them new. The whole document could have been drafted in one-quarter as much time and with one-tenth as many words."

Hoping to speed up the process of preparing a reply, at the same time sharpening and strengthening the draft, Kennedy asked Sorensen to produce "a shorter, simpler version." But he had not reckoned with the need to clear the draft within the bureaucratic complexities of the U.S. government and with the nation's principal allies. The shorter version prepared by Sorensen, he learned,

1 For the assertion that the Berlin Task Force was charged with drafting the reply to the Soviet note, see Schlesinger, p. 383. Sorensen, *Kennedy*, p. 587, attributes the drafting to the Department of State.
2 Sorensen, p. 587.
"could not be substituted for the formal note without starting all over again with inter-Allied and interdepartmental clearances."

It took another two weeks—until July 17—before the Western replies to the Soviet note on Berlin were finally ready. Each of the three Western allies sent a separate note, though the British and French notes were so similar in structure and content that they indicate a high degree of consultation during the drafting process.

Common to all three notes was the denial of the Soviet charge that the status of West Berlin and the policies of West Germany constituted a threat to peace, coupled with the assertion that it was in fact the announced Soviet intention to end Western rights in Berlin by signing a separate peace treaty with the communist regime in East Germany which constituted the real threat to peace. All three notes maintained that West Berlin was not, as asserted by the Soviets and their East German followers, situated on or a part of East German territory, citing in support the war-time and postwar agreements on the status of Berlin to which the Soviet Union was a signatory. All three asserted that no unilateral Soviet action could terminate Western rights in Berlin.

The final paragraph of all three notes (as originally drafted—the U.S. note was subsequently "improved" by the somewhat incongruous addition of several paragraphs from Sorensen's alternate draft) stated the Western powers' willingness to negotiate with the Soviets over Berlin and the German question, but insisted that this could only be done on the basis of self-determination for the Germans and respect for the rights of all nations concerned (the French note substituted "the interests of peace in Europe"). The notes concluded with a warning to the Soviets not to present the West with a fait accompli, which could have "unforeseeable consequences," and expressed the hope that the Soviets would join the West in the search for conditions "in which a genuine and peaceful settlement of outstanding problems can be pursued."

Since most of the weight of defending the Western position in Berlin fell on the United States, it was appropriate that the American note should be more detailed and circumstantial than the other two. It not only summarized the postwar historical record of negotiations between the Soviets and the Western powers on Germany but also cited recent developments, for example, Ulbricht's veiled threats against West Berlin's life line to the West in his June 15 news conference. In the strongest single passage in any of the three notes the United States charged that the Soviet government was threatening to "try to obtain what it wants by unilateral action" unless the Western powers accepted its proposals, and then continued:

3Ibid.

The Soviet government thus threatens to violate its solemn international obligations, to determine unilaterally the fate of millions of Germans without their consent, and to use force against its World War II Allies if they do not voluntarily surrender their rights and vital positions. The Soviet Government must understand that such a course of action is not only unacceptable, but is a more serious menace to world peace, for which it bears full responsibility before all mankind. 5

Considering the complexities of the issues involved, the grave threat to peace inherent in the Soviet challenge and the need to coordinate the far from uniform views of the three allied powers, completion of the Western replies within just over a month (the French were not officially informed of the Soviet position until June 16) must be regarded as a noteworthy achievement. By contrast the West German government, which was much more immediately concerned, took nearly six months to prepare its reply to the Soviet note of February 17. Nor can the U.S. note properly be described as “a compilation of stale, tedious, and negative phrases, none of them new” or “a tired and turgid rehash of documents left over from the Berlin crisis of 1958–59.” The substitute text which Sorensen drafted and which Kennedy read at his news conference on July 19 was, by contrast, a public relations text aimed at influencing the reader’s emotions but fearful of boring him with the specific facts and dates needed to build a case in international law. And the Sorensen/Kennedy statement of July 19 fell far short of the State Department note in its failure to identify clearly the underlying issue in the conflict—the Soviet threat “to use force against its World War II Allies if they do not voluntarily surrender their rights and vital positions.”

Kennedy addresses the nation, July 25

As matters turned out, however, neither the official Western replies nor the shorter, more rhetorical statement drafted by Sorensen constituted the really operative Western response to the Soviet challenge. As the Survey of International Affairs correctly observes: “The notes made no notable impact in Moscow or in the DDR [East Germany].” The real and effective Western response took the form of a radio and television address to the nation by the President on the evening of July 25, in which he outlined the specific measures—military, diplomatic, and financial—which his administration proposed to take to meet the Soviet challenge not only on Berlin but throughout the world. The decisions announced in Kennedy’s July 25 speech had been

6 Sorensen, p. 587.
7 Schlesinger, p. 384.
8 SIA, 1961, p. 238.
reached at a conference on the afternoon of July 19, and reflected the final resolution of the heated debates which had been going on within the administration ever since the President returned from Vienna. (There were actually two high-level conferences on the afternoon of July 19: the first, at which the President announced to a small group of top advisers the decisions he had reached the preceding day on strategy in the Berlin crisis, followed by the second, a formal session of the National Security Council at which the decisions already reached were “decided” for the record.)

After prolonged wrestling with the alternative courses of action proposed to him by his advisers, ranging from Acheson’s clearcut recommendation for a hard line backed up by the proclamation of a national state of emergency to Rusk’s preference for some form of negotiation, the President had reached a decision which incorporated elements from both opposing schools of thought but which, in his view, offered a sounder basis than either for a workable long-term strategy of confrontation with the Soviets. U.S. military power would be strengthened, but in ways which would not be directly provocative to the Soviets; the Western military presence in Germany and West Berlin would be built up to a point where it could more effectively discourage a rash Soviet gamble on a quick local triumph; the door to the negotiating chamber would be invitingly left ajar; and the American people would be warned, firmly rather than in an alarmist tone, that they faced a long and difficult haul for the future.

Basing himself on the decisions of the July 19 conference, Kennedy, in his July 25 speech, called for an additional $3.5 billion in military appropriations, bringing to $6 billion the increase in the military budget for the current fiscal year since his administration took office in January. The new increases fell entirely in the non-nuclear, “conventional” area of the budget. They included $3,247,000,000 for the armed forces, to provide for an increase in army strength from 875,000 to 1 million, and increases of 29,000 and 63,000 in the navy and air force respectively; doubling and trebling the draft; calling reserve units to active duty; increasing the airlift capacity of the air force; strengthening the air force and navy by retaining or reactivating ships and planes; and adding nearly $2 billion for procurement of weapons, ammunition and equipment. As a separate category the President called for $207,600,000 to organize civil defense, thus carrying out the recommendation of his speech of May 25.

Although at first glance it might appear that the military increase called for by Kennedy on July 25 was the counterpart and response to Khrushchev’s announcement of a one-third increase in the Soviet military budget on July 8, and thus represented a calculated but short-term move in the strategic game being played over Berlin, in actuality the U.S. military build-up of the summer of 1961 was an integral part of the long-range strategic plan which had been in process of development since the very outset of the Kennedy administration. The President himself made this point explicit in his July 25 speech: “The new
preparations that we shall make to defend the peace are part of the long-term buildup in our strength which has been under way since January."\(^{11}\)

While there was indeed an element of direct response to Soviet challenge in the underlying concepts of U.S. strategy, the challenge was one which, in U.S. eyes, had been hurled by Khrushchev at the very outset of the new phase in U.S.–Soviet relations marked by the advent of the Kennedy administration, most specifically in Khrushchev's January 6 speech, with its pledge of Soviet support for wars of "national liberation." The challenge had been explicitly renewed, Kennedy and his advisers felt, at the "somber" confrontation between him and Khrushchev at Vienna in early June. Thus Khrushchev's July 8 announcement merely served to harden and confirm an already well-advanced U.S. strategic plan in which the Berlin crisis was seen as the most immediately threatening aspect of a worldwide Soviet–U.S. confrontation.

Since the U.S. response to the Soviet challenge was primarily military rather than diplomatic, it was appropriate that the principal architect of most of the specific measures adopted by the United States in the Berlin crisis of 1961 was not the man officially charged with directing the nation's foreign policy, the secretary of state, but its director of military policy, the secretary of defense, Robert McNamara. Working in close association with the President, McNamara from the outset of the new administration had been striving to achieve a more flexible overall military capability, in which in any given international crisis involving U.S. interests the President would not be limited to the stark choice between "holocaust or humiliation."\(^{12}\) Or, as McNamara explained to the Senate Armed Services Committee two days after the President's July 25 speech: "We feel very strongly that the U.S. defense establishment must have a greater degree of flexibility in responding to particular situations. We need to expand the range of military alternatives available to the President in meeting the kind of situation which may confront us in maintaining our position in Berlin."\(^{13}\)

The shrewd and well-informed Washington correspondent of the New Yorker, Richard H. Rovere, recognized at the time the real significance of the relationship between Khrushchev's challenge and the U.S. response. Kennedy, Rovere wrote two days after the July 25 speech,

\(^{11}\)DSB, 45 (1961): 268. For the view that the U.S. military build-up announced by Kennedy on July 25 was a direct response to Khrushchev's July 8 speech, see Horelick and Rush, p. 124.

\(^{12}\)Kennedy's term, cited by Sorensen, p. 587.

quests he made to the Congress yesterday and of the Presidential decisions he announced in his speech of two nights ago, only the plan to call up reservists as needed was not among those he had been intending to make at the beginning of next year, Berlin or no Berlin. The objective is to achieve the freedom and flexibility of maneuver for which General Maxwell Taylor, now Mr. Kennedy's closest military adviser, has been calling ever since the days of Charles E. Wilson, George M. Humphrey, and "massive retaliation." *Behind the military purpose lies a diplomatic one—the restoration of American and Western initiative.* Khrushchev gave the President a chance to ask for these measures now—to make his budget requests for fiscal 1963 in fiscal 1962—and he has done so, and Congress is not likely to deny him, as it very well might have done in the absence of what it regarded as a clear and present danger.\(^\text{14}\)

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If McNamara helped more than any other single figure to shape the military-strategic policy outlined in Kennedy's July 25 speech, the speech itself and the policies it set forth reflected Kennedy's own deepest convictions.\(^ \text{15} \) In it he succeeded in making clear, in a way which neither the July 17 note nor his July 19 press conference statement had done, the real issues at stake in the crisis as he saw them:

The immediate threat to free men is in West Berlin. But that isolated outpost is not an isolated problem. The threat is worldwide. Our effort must be equally wide and strong and not obsessed by any single manufactured crisis. We face a challenge in Berlin, but there is also a challenge in southeast Asia, where the borders are less guarded, the enemy harder to find, and the danger of communism less apparent to those who have so little. We face a challenge in our own hemisphere and indeed wherever else the freedom of human beings is at stake.\(^ \text{16} \)

Briefly, but effectively, he summarized the historical and legal situation of West Berlin and defined his government's policy on the question: "We cannot and will not permit the Communists to drive us out of Berlin, either gradually or by force."\(^ \text{17} \)

It was not enough to assert Western rights and pledge their defense, however: at stake was the real possibility that war might break out over Berlin. Kennedy, no less than Khrushchev earlier, felt it essential to absolve his nation in advance from any responsibility for this dread calamity, if it should follow upon the actions he proposed to take. Khrushchev had argued, for example, in his July 8 speech, that if war came it would be because the West insisted on


\(^{15}\)For a list of passages added to the speech at the suggestion of various advisers, not always to its improvement, see Sorensen, p. 591.

\(^{16}\)DSB, 45 (1961): 267.

\(^{17}\)Ibid., p. 268.
using force to challenge the allegedly peaceful measures taken by the Soviet Union and its allies. In a key passage in his July 25 speech, Kennedy tackled the same problem, but reached a diametrically opposed conclusion:

There is peace in Berlin today. The source of world trouble and tension is Moscow, not Berlin. And if war begins, it will have begun in Moscow and not Berlin.

For the choice of peace or war is largely theirs, not ours. It is the Soviets who have stirred up this crisis. It is they who are trying to force a change. It is they who have opposed free elections. It is they who have rejected an all-German peace treaty and the rulings of international law. And as Americans know from our history on our own old frontier, gun battles are caused by outlaws and not by officers of the peace.  

But the President immediately balanced this show of firmness by an appeal for peaceful negotiation: "In short, while we are ready to defend our interests, we shall also be ready to search for peace—in quiet exploratory talks, in formal or informal meetings. We do not want military considerations to dominate the thinking of either East or West."  

Reluctant to close without a last appeal to his countrymen for their sympathetic understanding and support, and an implied appeal to the Soviets to avoid misjudging the West, the President just before delivery of the speech added a final section in which he spoke with unusual directness of the burden of responsibility resting on him and—one of his principal concerns—the danger of war by miscalculation:

I would like to close with a personal word. When I ran for the Presidency of the United States, I knew that this country faced serious challenges, but I could not realize—nor could any man realize who does not bear the burdens of this office—how heavy and constant would be those burdens.

Three times in my lifetime our country and Europe have been involved in major wars. In each case serious misjudgments were made on both sides of the intention of others, which brought about great devastation. Now, in the thermonuclear age, any misjudgment on either side about the intentions of the other could rain more devastation in several hours than has been wrought in all the wars of human history.

Therefore I, as President and Commander in Chief, and all of us Americans are moving through serious days. . . . In meeting my responsibilities in these coming months as President, I need your good will and your support—and above all, your prayers.  

Khrushchev's July 8 speech, though it did not trigger the U.S. military build-up announced by the President on July 25, had not been without its

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18 Ibid., p. 272.
19 Ibid.; emphasis supplied. According to Sorensen, p. 591, the second sentence had been used by the President at the July 19 meeting, and was added to the July 25 speech on his (Sorensen's) suggestion. It represents a key and abiding element in Kennedy's thinking about Soviet–American relations.
20 DSB, 45 (1961): 273. For the drafting of this passage, see Sorensen, pp. 591–92.
effect, however. At a meeting with his top military and diplomatic aides on July 8, following receipt of an advance text of Khrushchev’s speech, the President ordered a review of U.S. military strength, the preliminary results of which were announced by McNamara two days later: “Currently we are [as] strong—if not stronger—than any potential aggressor. But in the face of the inescapable realities that confront us, such as threats to dispossess us of our rightful presence in Berlin, we can do no less than re-examine our needs.”

On the following day Deputy Secretary of Defense Gilpatric disclosed that the Joint Chiefs of Staff were considering “sizable” increases in the armed forces over the course of the next six months, at the request of the President.

Though the July 25 speech was not deliberately planned as a direct response to Khrushchev’s announcement of an increase in the Soviet military budget, however, by its timing and content it could hardly fail to appear in that guise to the Soviet leadership, and, as we shall see presently, there is strong evidence that Khrushchev himself so interpreted it.

Cross-currents in U.S. policy toward the Soviets

At the very time when the United States and Soviet Russia appeared to be heading for a violent clash over Berlin, business-as-usual negotiations between the two powers were proceeding in three separate fields—air communications, cultural exchange, and disarmament. In part, these “untimely” contacts were the result of a simple bureaucratic lack of coordination—the diplomatic right hand not knowing what the military-strategic left hand was doing. The air communications and cultural exchange talks, for example, can be explained on this basis. In regard to the bilateral disarmament talks, however, the apparent lack of coordination reflected the deliberately broad and complex policies of Kennedy himself, who never forgot his own maxim: “We do not want military considerations to dominate the thinking of either East or West.” A glance at the relevant data will help clarify the situation.

The air communications talks

The Soviet–U.S. negotiations on a Moscow–New York air link, held in Washington from July 18 to August 7, 1961, represented the realization of plans going back to the first U.S.–Soviet cultural exchange agreement of January 27, 1958. Section XIV of that agreement had provided that: “Both parties agree in principle to establish on the basis of reciprocity direct air flights between the United States and the Soviet Union. Negotiations on terms and con-

23 For a summary of the historical background of the negotiations, see NYT, Aug. 8, 1961, p. 1.
ditions satisfactory to both parties will be conducted by appropriate representa-
tives of each Government at a mutually convenient date to be determined later.”

Nothing having been done to implement this provision during the term of
validity of the 1958 agreement, it was repeated verbatim in the 1960–61 agree-
ment signed on November 21, 1959.

At their meeting in 1959 Khrushchev and Eisenhower agreed that formal
talks on the subject should be opened, but after the collapse of the Paris sum-
mit meeting in May 1960 and the shooting down by the Soviets of an RB–47
reconnaissance plane on July 1, 1960, the United States requested that the
talks be postponed.

Following the release of the surviving RB–47 crewmen, the Kennedy admin-
istration in February 1961 inquired whether the Soviets still wished to initiate
talks and received an affirmative response in June. On July 7 the State De-
partment announced that the United States and the Soviet Union had agreed to
conduct talks “on the establishment of reciprocal commercial air services be-
tween New York and Moscow.” The talks, it was announced, would get
under way in Washington on July 18, with James M. Landis, special assistant
to the President, as chairman of the U.S. delegation, and Col. Gen. Yevgenii F.
Loginov, chief of the Main Administration of the Civil Air Fleet under the
USSR Council of Ministers, as head of the Soviet delegation. Pan-American
World Airways, which had been certified by the Civil Aeronautics Board to
operate a U.S.–Moscow route, was to be represented at the talks in an observer
status. Confirmation and additional details were provided by a second State
Department announcement on July 15.

The talks, held in Washington from July 18 to August 7, resulted in the
initialing of an agreement which the State Department announced on August
7, with the comment, “The Department issued the announcement, even though
the formal agreement has not been completed, because the Soviet Government
chose to inform the Soviet press of it in Moscow.”

The tentative agreement, pushed through despite the mounting tension over
Berlin, fell victim to the international crisis, when the State Department an-
nounced on August 21 that the agreement would not be signed “in the light of
the overall world situation.”

27 Ibid., p. 197.
29 Smith, Defense of Berlin, p. 299; NYT, Aug. 22, 1961, p. 1; Radio Moscow, Aug. 22,
1961. Neither the announcements of Aug. 7 and 21 nor the text of the agreement itself were
published in the DSB.
The cultural exchange negotiations

When the Kennedy administration took office in 1961 the two-year exchange agreement with the Soviet Union, signed on November 21, 1959, was still in effect. Preliminary negotiations for a renewal of the agreement for 1962–63 were held in Washington from July 27 to 31, 1961. In announcing the talks the State Department referred to "a frank discussion of the problems involved in carrying out specific exchanges," an indication that the talks had not gone smoothly. The announcement noted, nevertheless, that: "It was agreed that proposals for a new exchange agreement would be discussed during the next several months, with negotiations tentatively scheduled to begin in November."30

Like the air communications talks, however, the negotiations on cultural and other exchanges fell victim to international tension. It was not until the end of January 1962 that talks were finally resumed in Washington for renewal of the exchange agreement for the years 1962–63.31

The bilateral disarmament talks

The first phase of the Soviet–U.S. bilateral talks on disarmament, which had been announced on March 30, 1961, took place in Washington on June 19–30. There appeared to be little promise for an eventual meeting of minds, since the two sides could not even agree on the purpose of the talks. The U.S. approach was to press for agreement on a basic statement of principles for future disarmament negotiations, while the Soviets insisted that the first and indispensable step was to reach accord on the basic provisions of a specific disarmament plan.32 Both sides accepted the idea that a primary goal should be agreement on the composition of a negotiating body for disarmament talks, but while they had no difficulty in finding a mutually acceptable list of ten nations, five from each bloc, to serve as members of a disarmament conference, they were far apart in their recommendations for "neutral" nations to be invited to participate.33

In an effort to break the deadlock which appeared to be developing at the very outset of the talks, President Kennedy, on June 30, held a half-hour discussion in the White House with Soviet Ambassador Menshikov and V. A. Zorin, the Soviet negotiator.34 Following the White House meeting it was announced that the talks would resume in Moscow after a two-week recess.35

32 See McCloy's summary of the negotiations in his report to the President dated Oct. 6, 1961, in Documents on Disarmament, 1961, pp. 520–21.
34 NYT, July 1, 1961, p. 1.
The second phase of the talks got under way in Moscow on July 17 and continued until July 29. At first the prospects seemed no more favorable than they had in Washington, but a break occurred on July 27, when the Soviet side for the first time agreed to discuss a statement of basic principles. At this point McCloy was in Sochi, where he had flown on July 25 at Khrushchev's invitation. There on July 27 he was made the recipient of something far more weighty than a Soviet concession in the bilateral disarmament talks, however: nothing less than Khrushchev's emotional reaction to Kennedy's speech of July 25, an event which signaled the opening of the next phase in the Soviet campaign on Berlin.

36 Documents on Disarmament, 1961, p. 521.