Blockade

ON THE AFTERNOON OF JULY 15, 1945, four days after the first meeting of the Allied Kommandatura, President of the United States Harry S Truman landed at Gatow airfield in Berlin. He had come to the former German capital to take part in the final wartime conference of the Big Three scheduled to begin at Potsdam the following day.

As a code name for the Potsdam Conference, Prime Minister Churchill had suggested the word TERMINAL. The war against Germany was over. The three Allied heads of government were meeting in a final gathering on conquered soil to survey the wreckage. To Mr. Churchill, and to Stalin and Truman who quickly agreed, the word TERMINAL would commemorate the end of the perilous journey which each nation had undertaken.

It quickly became apparent, however, that TERMINAL had an ironic significance. With the common enemy destroyed, the reason for the Allied coalition no longer existed. Like Hitler's Europe, the Grand Alliance was also at an end. The co-operation which had held firm throughout the war would not continue into the peace, and a time of mutual understanding yielded to a time of mutual distrust.
For Churchill himself, the Potsdam Conference also marked the end of his tenure as Great Britain's Prime Minister. Midway through its proceedings, the great Englishman was turned out of office by the British electorate. The courageous spirit who had rallied the Western world in the darkest days of 1940 no longer was thought fit to lead His Majesty's Government in the new world which was beginning.

As noted in the previous chapter, Prime Minister Churchill had sought to hold the Potsdam Conference more than a month before; at a time when American and British armies in Europe were at their greatest strength, when large areas of the Soviet zone were still in Allied hands and consequently, when the overall bargaining position of the West was exceedingly strong. His suggestion, however, had been rejected in Washington.

The major item on the agenda at Potsdam was Germany. Marshal Stalin arrived for the Conference determined not only to press the claim of the Soviet Union for crippling reparations but to effect major territorial revisions at Germany's expense as well. Great Britain arrived equally determined to halt Russia's westward expansion, hoping to create once more in Germany a viable buffer between East and West. The United States, caught in between, pursued the ideal of friendly accommodation, seeking compromise when possible and hoping through its sincerity to reach a lasting accord with the Communist regime.

The results of the Potsdam Conference relate more to the final settlement in Germany than to Berlin itself. Specifically, it was agreed that the economy of Germany would be decentralized, that her production would be rigidly controlled and that her development would be limited mainly to "agriculture and peaceful domestic industries." Politically, while local selfgovernment in Germany was to be encouraged, it was decided that supreme authority should remain vested in the Allied Control Council. The trials of those labeled major war criminals were to begin at the earliest possible date. Territorially, "pending the final determination of Poland's Western frontier," the provinces beyond the Oder-Neisse were turned over to Polish administration. East Prussia, as Stalin demanded, was divided between Poland and the Soviet Union. Last, and most onerous perhaps, the nine million German people living in the lands ceded to the various nations of Eastern Europe were to be cleared from those lands and
transferred in an "orderly and humane manner" to the four occupied zones of Germany itself.\(^1\)

While he was at Potsdam, President Truman participated in a modest ceremony in the courtyard of the American Headquarters in Zehlendorf marking the official raising of the American flag over Berlin. The date selected was July 20, 1945, the first anniversary of the abortive plot on Hitler's life, and the flag used was the one which had flown over the Capitol in Washington on December 7, 1941—the same flag previously raised over Rome, and later to be raised over Tokyo. The President made some brief, well chosen remarks on what General Clay remembers as an impressive occasion:

While the soldier is schooled against emotion, I have never forgotten that short ceremony as our flag rose to the staff. When in later days anyone suggested the possibility of our departure from Berlin before, of our own choice, we left a free Berlin, I could not help thinking that no one who had seen our flag raised by right of victory but dedicated to the preservation of freedom and peace could possibly see it withdrawn until peace and freedom had been established.\(^2\)

The following week, on July 26, the question of the French sector in Berlin finally was settled. At Yalta, Marshal Stalin had indicated he would not object to France joining in the occupation of Germany providing the territory France occupied came from that already designated for the Western powers. As we have seen, the French zone in Western Germany was established by splitting Baden-Wuerttemberg in the American zone and adding the Rhinish Palatinate and the Saar from the British. In the case of Berlin, however, the problem was more difficult, and when the Potsdam Conference assembled, the European Advisory Commission still had reached no solution. The difficulty was caused by American insistence that the French sector in Berlin should be made up of territory given jointly by all three powers, not just the United States and Great Britain alone. Since this was not in accordance with the decision of Stalin at Yalta, the Russians refused to agree. The issue was not resolved until July 26, midway through the Potsdam Conference, when the British announced that they would give the French two boroughs from their own sector in Berlin. This amounted to a splitting of the British sector while the American and Russian sectors remained the same and everyone quickly agreed.
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Under this new arrangement, the Russians still had eight boroughs, the Americans six, the British now four, and the French two. Two weeks later, on August 12, 1945, the French officially took control of their two boroughs.\(^*\)

With the French now installed in Berlin, the occupation regime was complete. The French representative to the Allied Kommandatura, General Geoffroi de Beauchesne, was admitted as a voting member and the task of governing the city went forward on a four-power basis.

At first, Western policy in Berlin was characterized by a desire to get along with the Russians at almost any price. The two earlier meetings of General Clay with Marshal Zhukov were indicative of the approach which was to be followed by Western occupation officials for more than a year. "We were going to get along with the Russians and we were quite willing to start off on their terms." Clay sums up the attitude as follows:

> Our government had accepted the principle of four-power control and we had determined on our part to try in every way to allay Soviet suspicion, to create the mutual understanding that might make it successful. It is possible that this desire to make a success of quadripartite government led us in the early months to take compromise positions which merely deferred the real issues. ... \(^3\)

In spite of Western attempts to be agreeable, difficulties soon arose. At first, these differences were not serious and many in the Allied occupation thought that they were only local aberrations. The Allies, for example, immediately had to deal with the original Communist appointees to the city government who had been selected by the Russians when they had Berlin to themselves. After the Western powers arrived, a number of these appointees continued to take their orders from the Soviet Military Administration. For this reason, the mayor of the borough of Steglitz in the American sector, and other

\(^*\) Reinickendorf and Wedding, located in the northwestern part of the city. Interestingly, during the course of the negotiations over the French sector, one of the proposals put forward by the United States for the redivision of Berlin would have given the Russians the borough of Neukölln located adjacent to Tempelhof airfield. Had the proposal been accepted, it would have made the later airlift virtually impossible since the Russians easily could have obstructed the approach to Tempelhof simply by constructing a number of tall buildings in their sector. See W. Phillips Davison, \textit{The Berlin Blockade} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), p. 31. Also see Mosely, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 601–2.
borough mayors in the French and British sectors, finally had to be removed from office. Similarly, in the borough of Schöneberg in the American sector, a majority of the government officials were known Communists and received their orders directly from the local secretary of the Communist Party. Colonel Frank Howley, the Deputy American Commandant, was certain that the local secretary's orders came from the Central Party Headquarters in East Berlin, but in keeping with the American policy to avoid an open split with the Russians, he did not expose the tie. Ten of the borough officials were later arrested, however, and two were convicted and sentenced to five years imprisonment for interfering with local officers carrying out the orders of the American Military Government.

Even with these occasional incidents four-power government in Berlin continued smoothly for almost a year. On November 30, 1945, the Allied Control Council officially approved an "Air Corridor Agreement" which clearly spelled out the rights of the Western Allies in the air corridors between Berlin and the Western zones. Significantly, this agreement is the only written accord ever concluded with the Soviet Union in which the right of Allied access was precisely defined. The detailed provisions of the agreement were negotiated at the "working level" by the four-power Allied Air Directorate located in Berlin. It was approved largely as a result of the persistence of the American Air Force personnel then engaged in flying into the isolated city. The fact that it was negotiated and approved suggests that had Generals Clay and Weeks shown a similar persistence earlier, other agreements on access could have been secured. Whether they would have been observed, of course, is another matter.

The first really serious conflict between East and West in Berlin developed early in 1946 over a proposed reorganization of the city.

* The Air Corridor Agreement authorized the Western powers three air corridors instead of the earlier two; each twenty miles wide, extending between Berlin and the cities of Hamburg, Hanover and Frankfurt. Flights through the corridors were to be unrestricted, and only minimal identification required (for safety purposes) from each aircraft upon entering the corridor. A four-power Air Safety Center was established in the American sector to handle the technical routing of planes through the corridors and to control their approach over Berlin. To simplify traffic patterns above the city, a special Berlin Control Zone was established. This zone extended twenty miles in every direction from the Allied Control Council building, and included all of the air space over the city up to an altitude of 10,000 feet.
government. A draft Constitution which allowed the Berliners the right to elect their own Mayor and many of the city officials was then in preparation. In anticipation of the election which was to follow the adoption of this Constitution, the Russians attempted to force a merger of the powerful Socialist party in Berlin (Social Democratic Party or SPD) with the local Communist party.

Traditionally, Berlin, the most highly industrialized city in Germany, has been a Socialist stronghold. The thousands of workers who flocked there following the industrial revolution voted Socialist in economic protest against the misery which then existed. In the times of Bismarck and the Kaiser, Berlin had been noted for its leftist leanings and during the Weimar Republic the city repeatedly delivered thumping majorities for the local SPD candidates. In 1946, the Russians hoped to capitalize on this tradition and form a joint Socialist-Communist party (Socialist Unity Party or SED) under Communist leadership.

Initially, there was every indication that the Russians would succeed. Otto Grotewohl, then chairman of the SPD in Berlin, actively supported the merger. American and British military officials were apathetic, and most Berliners were far too busy fighting hunger and cold in the first postwar winter to be concerned with political maneuvers, especially when one of those doing the maneuvering was an occupying power.

Opposition to the merger did not solidify, in fact, until February 14, 1946, when a number of SPD officials from the various borough organizations in Berlin met informally in an unheated living room behind a textile shop. From this and subsequent meetings later in the month a determined few galvanized the party’s membership into active opposition. Kurt Schumacher, the great postwar leader of the Socialist Party (SPD) in the Western zones of Germany, flew to Berlin and campaigned vigorously against the merger.

On March 1, at a meeting of the party’s central committee, the rebellious delegates, over Grotewohl’s strenuous objections, voted that the proposed merger could not take place without the approval of the entire membership of the party in a special election. Until this point the Western Allies had remained completely neutral. There had been no effort whatever to counterbalance the pressure from the

* Later, Prime Minister of the “German Democratic Republic.”
Soviet authorities demanding merger. Colonel Howley has stated that even at the top level the American view on merger was divided.7

With a plebiscite suddenly in the offing, the West felt obliged to insure that the election was held in a democratic manner. To most in the Military Government, however, it was still a purely German affair and there was no direct intervention. On March 31, 1946, when the election was held, seventy-five percent of the registered SPD members in Berlin went to the polls. In the Western sectors, the vote ran approximately 19 to 2 against the merger. In the Soviet sector, no count was taken. Fearful of an impending defeat, the Russians closed the polls early, using the pretext of supposed “voting irregularities.”

Having lost in their attempt to merge the Social Democrats with the Communist Party in the Western sectors,8 the Soviets began to resist Allied efforts for city-wide elections in Berlin under the new Constitution. When the question arose in the Allied Kommandatura it was vetoed by the Soviet representative. The Western commandants then appealed the decision to the Allied Control Council, where, through the combined efforts of all three Western Commanders-in-Chief, Marshal Sokolovsky (Zhukov’s successor) finally relented and October 20, 1946, was selected as the date for the election—the first free elections to be held in Berlin since 1933.8

With the elections agreed upon, the Soviets made every effort to win. During the campaign, the Communist Party (now the SED) distributed more propaganda in the city than the three non-Communist parties combined. Food and coal were given away by local SED officials and notebooks, “compliments of the SED,” were presented to school children in every election district. In the Soviet sector itself, democratic parties were harassed, SPD meetings were prohibited, and voters were blatantly intimidated. The Western powers, although not intervening, did their best to insure that the Berliners would be allowed to vote unmolested, but this was not always an easy task.

The final election returns represented an overwhelming defeat for the Russians. Both the Soviet Union and its puppet party, the SED,

* In spite of their defeat in the Western sectors, however, the Russians went ahead and merged the SPD and the Communist Parties throughout their zone of Germany and in the East sector of Berlin. No referendum was held and no discussion was permitted. On April 21, the new Socialist Unity Party (SED) consisting of a rump element of the SPD and the Communists, was inaugurated throughout Soviet controlled territory.
were clearly repudiated. Even in the workers' boroughs of Neukölln and Wedding, where the infamous "rent barracks" of Berthold Brecht and Gerhart Hauptmann still stood and where Communist feeling traditionally ran high, the vote went against the SED. The city-wide results were as follows:

- **SPD (Social Democrats)**: 48.7%
- **CDU (Christian Democrats)**: 22.2%
- **SED (Communists)**: 19.8%
- **LPD (Liberal Democrats)**: 9.3%

Defeated at the polls, the Russians learned a simple lesson: the Berliners would never choose communism of their own free will. In spite of all the inducements which the Soviet regime had offered, the Socialist Unity Party (SED) had been vigorously rejected. As a result, Berlin would never have another city-wide election.

The city government which was installed in Berlin following the election in 1946 represented a coalition of all four parties. Dr. Otto Ostrowski of the SPD was chosen as Lord Mayor. At first, Ostrowski attempted to follow a middle course between East and West. Soon, however, Soviet pressure became too much and he agreed to sign an understanding with the Russians pledging his co-operation with the SED. When the news of Ostrowski's agreement was discovered, it was formally repudiated by an outraged city assembly in a vote of 85–20. The following week, Ostrowski resigned from office.

Following Ostrowski's resignation, Dr. Ernst Reuter (SPD) was elected as Lord Mayor by the city assembly. Reuter unquestionably was the leading anti-Communist in Berlin at that time. His political career began prior to the First World War. A Social Democrat, he had opposed the voting of war credits to the Kaiser in 1914. During the First World War he became a Communist, then broke with the party in 1922 to become one of the driving forces in the SPD during the Weimar Republic. He opposed Hitler's rise to power and spent the Nazi years in an enforced exile teaching politics and economics in Turkey. In 1946 he received permission to return to Berlin and became one of the leaders of the city's postwar Social Democratic Party.

The Communists never forgave Reuter's earlier apostasy in leaving the Party. Following his election as Lord Mayor, the Soviets exercised their veto in the Allied Kommandatura to prevent him from taking
office. The city assembly stood its ground, however, and refused to elect anyone in Reuter's place. For the next eighteen months Ernst Reuter remained the duly elected Lord Mayor of Berlin although barred from office by the Russians. In the interim, the two Deputy Mayors of Berlin—Louise Schroeder of the SPD and Ferdinand Friedensburg of the CDU—temporarily filled the gap. Symbolically, the Lord Mayor's quarters in Berlin's City Hall remained vacant.

The political situation in Berlin was but one indication of the rapidly deteriorating façade of East-West co-operation. On February 9, 1946, Marshal Stalin in a major speech from the Kremlin stated that the world revolution of communism was still marching forward. Indeed, the Soviet Union already was trying to incorporate its zone of Germany into the cordon of satellite states it was creating in Eastern Europe. As a result of Russian pressure, political life in the Soviet zone soon lost all traces of its democratic and Western elements. Communist control at all echelons of government became a political fact of life. Walter Ulbricht, Wilhelm Pieck and Otto Grotewohl, the latter following his defection from the SPD, became the principal instruments through which Soviet policy was administered. The political right of local self-determination guaranteed to the German people by the Potsdam Protocol was studiously ignored.

Moreover, the Soviets effectively thwarted Allied efforts toward Germany's economic reconstruction. In December of 1945, Marshal Zhukov vetoed a proposal in the Allied Control Council to open all zonal boundaries within Germany to free travel and commerce. Later, when the Western powers requested the Soviet Union to place East zone production into a pool with that of the other zones in order to pay for essential German imports—an arrangement provided for at Potsdam—the Russians refused to comply.

By late 1946, in fact, it had become evident that the Soviet Union did not intend to co-operate in the joint government of Germany, and repeated Soviet vetoes had reduced the Allied Control Council to virtual impotence. On September 6, 1946, American Secretary of State James F. Byrnes, in a major foreign policy speech at Stuttgart, bluntly informed the Soviets that as a result of their actions the Allied Control Council was "neither governing Germany nor allowing Germany to govern itself." Accordingly, Secretary Byrnes said, the American and
British zones in Western Germany would be merged for economic purposes effective January 1, 1947.

Indeed, Soviet motives had become increasingly plain. "Peoples Governments" already had been established in Poland, Rumania, and Bulgaria; and Hungary would soon fall completely into the Soviet orbit. In Greece, the Russians were openly promoting civil war against the established government; Turkey was being pressed for concessions in the Dardanelles which would jeopardize her independence.

To the credit of the Western world, President Truman soon responded with the vigor which was to characterize the next six years of his Administration. Originally, Mr. Truman had backed the earlier Allied efforts toward accommodation with the Soviet Union. Such a course, he felt, might lead to a permanent understanding between East and West. This had been the policy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and he did not intend to abandon it until it was proven ineffective. It soon became apparent to him that this was the case, and that American "co-operation" could only be continued at the price of surrendering Europe to communism. Thereupon Mr. Truman, in March of 1947, in what later came to be known as the Truman Doctrine, moved to stop Soviet aggression in Greece and Turkey by extending military and economic assistance to those nations. Four months later, in a commencement speech at Harvard, Secretary of State George C. Marshall announced the beginning of a program of large scale American economic assistance to promote European recovery. In an offer tendered to East and West alike, Secretary Marshall offered massive financial aid to those European nations whose economies had been disrupted by the war. The American offer was gratefully accepted by the nations of Western Europe, but there was an enforced silence among those of the East.

In the fall of 1947, General Clay returned to Washington to take part in the discussions on Marshall Plan aid for Germany. There, he warned the President and the National Security Council of the rising tide of Soviet pressure in Germany, and of possible Russian efforts to force the Allies out of Berlin. Walter Bedell Smith, formerly Eisenhower's Chief of Staff at SHAEF and now U.S. Ambassador to Moscow, concurred in Clay's analysis.

Shortly after Clay's visit to Washington, the fifth session of the
Council of Foreign Ministers convened in London, and the question of peace treaties with Austria and Germany headed the agenda. From the beginning, Russian Foreign Minister Molotov demonstrated that the Soviet Union would accept no agreement which would permit German recovery. In their final communique at the close of the conference, the Western Foreign Ministers stated that a treaty on Germany could not be reached except "under conditions which would not only enslave the German people but would seriously retard the recovery of all Europe." Significantly, no arrangements were made for a subsequent meeting.

As General Clay has recalled:

I am sure that all of us present in London, recognized that, with the Council adjourned, we were now engaged in a competitive struggle, not with arms but with economic resources, with ideas and ideals. It was a struggle in which we desired no territory but were determined that others should not acquire further territory through the use of oppressive power, fear to dull the hearts, and distorted information to capture the minds of people powerless to resist. There could be no escape from the struggle. We could hope with some assurance that it would not lead to physical force. We knew not how long it would last or what turn it would take.9

But it did not take long for the West to find out. In January, the Soviets imposed stringent curbs on civilian passenger traffic on interzonal trains in Germany. Shortly afterwards, and this time in direct violation of the verbal agreement between General Clay and Marshal Zhukov, Russian inspectors boarded American military trains and insisted on the right to check the identity papers of individual passengers. General Clay responded by placing armed military guards on the trains to bar the Soviets forcibly. Throughout February and March, the game of political cat-and-mouse continued. Frequently the Soviets would shuttle American military trains to a siding because the American train commander refused to allow the Soviet inspectors aboard. The trains usually were released after several hours of extended bargaining.10

At the same time, the Soviets began a concerted propaganda barrage in Germany against the Western powers. Western newspapers and periodicals were confiscated and burned in the Soviet zone. On February 17, 1948, Soviet military police seized all copies of Western
books at newstands and bookstores in East Berlin. News distribution agencies in the Soviet zone were placed under rigid Soviet control and only approved publications were allowed to be sold.

Soviet authorities also began to spread rumors that the Western Allies were leaving Berlin. Some of these were picked up and embellished by the more timid Military Government personnel in Berlin. The *New York Times* on October 12, 1947, reported: "It is a matter of common knowledge that many Military Government officials openly discuss the possibility of a three power withdrawal from this city." Needless to say, these discussions had a serious effect on the morale of the Western sectors.

Events in the Allied Control Council at this time likewise testified to the rising tension between East and West. On January 20, 1948, Marshal Sokolovsky demanded the immediate dissolution of the bizonal economic agreement between Great Britain and the United States which Secretary Byrnes had announced at Stuttgart more than a year before. At the following Council meeting on February 11, Sokolovsky accused the Western powers of seeking to include Germany in "a military and political Western bloc," a charge which General Clay hotly denied.

Elsewhere, the situation was also critical. On February 25, 1948, one more nation passed behind the Iron Curtain when the government of Czechoslovakia fell to the Communists in a carefully laid plot. On March 10, Jan Masaryk, the freedom-loving ex-Foreign Minister of Czechoslovakia, leaped to his death from the window of his apartment in Prague.

Shortly after the Czechoslovakia coup, General Clay advised Washington that something was about to happen in Germany. On March 5, he cabled:

*For many months, based on logical analysis I have felt and held that war was unlikely for at least two years. Within the last few weeks, I have felt a subtle change in Soviet attitude which I cannot define but which now gives me a feeling that it may come with dramatic suddenness. I cannot support this change in my own thinking with any data or outward evidence in relationships other than to describe it as a feeling of a new tenseness in every Soviet individual with whom we have official relations. I am unable to submit any official report in the absence of supporting data but my feeling is real. You may advise the Chief of Staff*
[General Bradley] of this for whatever it may be worth if you feel it advisable.\textsuperscript{11}

In notifying Washington that something was up, General Clay was acting purely on his own initiative. The intelligence reports which he saw daily contained nothing to arouse suspicion, and on the surface, the water was still calm. This was one of the rare cases in recent American history when the responsible Commander on the spot has not only sensed something that the intelligence "experts" had overlooked but also dared to communicate this feeling to his superiors.

In Washington, Clay's telegram caused intense alarm.\textsuperscript{12} As a result of Western demobilization immediately following the war, the military posture of the Allied camp was much like that of England and France in 1940. The United States was unable to send more than one additional division overseas without ordering a partial mobilization. Even then there was a serious question of where the transportation would come from. The atomic bomb remained the bulwark of Western defense but few gave serious consideration to its employment.

The concern which Clay's telegram caused in Washington put Allied forces in Germany on the alert, for the American Military Governor in the former Third Reich was not known for impetuous actions. Lieutenant General Lucius Dubignon Clay had come to Germany in April, 1945, as General Eisenhower's deputy for Military Government. Until then, he had spent most of the war in Washington, first as General Marshall's assistant for logistics (working under General Somervell), and then as deputy to James F. Byrnes in the Office of War Mobilization. On an earlier occasion in 1944, he had gone to Europe for several months to unsnarl a transportation bottleneck at the port of Cherbourg.

When he took over in Germany following the war, General Clay had little understanding either of the German people or of the Soviet Union. As a good soldier, he conscientiously followed the policy he had been given and earnestly endeavored to get along with the Russians. Political considerations were as alien to him as they were to Eisenhower and Marshall, and like many another career general, he was intolerant of dissent. But he was also a man of forthright courage and had the happy faculty of being able to recognize his own mistakes. As a result, Clay's opinion on Germany gradually changed. Slowly
recognizing the need for Germany to recover industrially, he began to advocate American economic assistance. Reluctantly, he also had begun to question Soviet actions and motives. Of all those involved in the postwar occupation, General Clay could honestly say that he had tried to make four-power government a success. In 1947, when it became apparent that the Soviets were intent on wrecking the occupation, he reacted with the same determination which had characterized his earlier career. He had learned from experience how to get along with the Russians. Throughout the storms which were about to descend on Berlin, Clay remained a beacon light to the Western cause.

And in Berlin at this time the situation was steadily worsening. On March 10, 1948, Marshal Sokolovsky, in an attack which consumed the entire meeting of the Allied Control Council, castigated the Western powers as "intolerant of genuine democracy." At the following meeting on March 20, he launched into a similar tirade, and then the entire Soviet delegation rose as one and stalked from the conference room. With the exception of a fleeting moment the following year, they would not return.

Following Sokolovsky’s walkout, Clay’s plea for a firm stand created apprehension and doubt in Washington. On March 30, the Department of the Army summoned the General to a teleconference and requested his views on a proposal to withdraw American dependents from Berlin. Clay was opposed. Such a move, he said, would be politically disastrous: "Withdrawal of dependents from Berlin would create hysteria accompanied by rush of Germans to communism for safety. The condition would spread in Europe and would increase Communist political strength everywhere." 13

The day after Clay’s reply to Washington, Lieutenant General Dratvin, Deputy Soviet Military Governor for Germany, advised the American Military Government in Berlin that effective April 1, the Russians would check the identification of all passengers on military trains passing through their zone. Baggage and freight shipments would be subjected to a similar check. Should the Americans refuse, the trains would be halted at the zonal border.

Clay notified Washington immediately, and again he suggested a firm stand: "We cannot permit our military trains to be entered by
representatives of other powers, and to do so would be inconsistent with the free and unrestricted right of access in Berlin which was the condition precedent to our evacuation of Saxony and Thuringia.

Clay proposed that a similar message be sent to the Soviet authorities and that a test train with a few armed guards be sent across the zonal border. Reluctantly, Washington agreed. Clay reports that he detected "some apprehension on the part of Secretary [of the Army Kenneth C.] Royall and his advisers that a firm stand . . . might develop incidents involving force which would lead to war." 14

Clay replied to the Secretary that "weakness on our part would cost important prestige and that if war were desired by the Soviet government it would not be averted by weakness. I do not believe," Clay added, "this means war." When Clay had finished, Washington's answer was written by General of the Army Omar Bradley, not Secretary Royall. Unlike others in Washington, Bradley shared Clay's opinion. "Thanks muchly," he told Clay. "This has been an arduous day and we appreciate your co-operation." 15

Meanwhile, in London, the British government already had decided on a show of force. "His Majesty's Government does not propose to stop running its military trains and will maintain armed guards on them, if necessary," a terse announcement from London stated.

On April 1, General Clay sent his test train with an armed guard detachment across the border. As had been feared, it was shuttled to a siding by the Soviets and left there. Several days later it withdrew under its own power. 16

In Washington indecision now prevailed. On April 2, General Clay was again "invited" to a teleconference by the Pentagon. Pressures were rising at home, he was told, for the return of the American dependents. "Many responsible persons," Washington said, "believed it unthinkable that they should stay in Berlin." In effect, the Department of the Army was getting nervous and sought Clay's advice.

"I reported," Clay states, "that we could support the Americans in Berlin indefinitely with a very small airlift and that we should not evacuate our dependents. . . . Evacuation in face of Italian elections and European situation is to me almost unthinkable. Our women and children can take it, and they appreciate import. There are few here who have any thought of leaving unless required to do so." 17

The day after Clay's cable, the Soviets closed the civilian freight
Blockade lines into Berlin from Hamburg and Nuremberg. The following week, on April 9, the Soviets announced that all German freight trains on the one remaining rail line (Berlin-Helmstedt) would require individual clearances from the Soviet Military Authority. Twenty-four hours afterwards, Secretary of the Army Royall sought Clay’s advice again. Was the General still sure that we should stay? The situation, according to Royall, was under constant discussion in Washington and, while the Army hadn’t changed its position yet, it wanted to know Clay’s views once more. In short, Clay was being asked if he still wanted to stick his neck out. The General’s reply left little doubt. We should stay in Berlin, he said, “unless driven out by force.”

We have lost Czechoslovakia. Norway is threatened. We retreat from Berlin. When Berlin falls, western Germany will be next. If we mean . . . to hold Europe against Communism, we must not budge. We can take humiliation and pressure short of war in Berlin without losing face. If we withdraw, our position in Europe is threatened. If America does not understand this now, does not know that the issue is cast, then it never will and Communism will run rampant. I believe the future of democracy requires us to stay. . . .

Clay’s reply seemed to settle the question for the moment. Throughout April and May his “Little Airlift” continued to bring in supplies for the American personnel. Soviet pressure, however, continued to increase. Shortly after his message to Royall, American Signal Corps personnel who manned the communication lines between Berlin and the Western zones were expelled from Soviet territory. The East Berlin police force was incorporated into that of the Soviet zone on April 13. On April 20, restrictions were placed on barge traffic between Berlin and the West, and in May, additional documentation requirements were placed on all freight shipments.

In June the crisis rose to a climax. On June 10, Soviet representatives, attempting to remove locomotives and rolling stock from the American sector, were repulsed by armed military police, and the following day, all rail traffic between Berlin and West Germany was suspended. Two days later it was just as suddenly restored. On June 12, the Soviets closed the Berlin-Helmstedt autobahn to “repair” the Elbe River bridge. On the sixteenth, the Soviet Commandant walked out of the Kommandatura, and the split of the quadripartite control
machinery was now complete. In addition to this the Communists had been undermining Allied currency, using a duplicate set of plates which had been given to the Russians in 1945. With these plates the Soviets had been able to print whatever quantity of occupation currency they desired, much of which was redeemable at face value by the United States Treasury. In the resulting wide-open money market, all Western financial assistance to Germany was being eaten up in an inflationary spiral. Accordingly, two days after the Soviets walked out of the Kommandatura, the United States, Great Britain and France announced a currency reform which would take place in the three Western zones of Germany. Berlin would not be affected.

The Soviets responded to the Western action by cutting all passenger traffic to Berlin and suspending all freight shipments out of Berlin except for the return of empty boxcars. This was followed on June 23 by a Soviet announcement of a currency reform of their own to be effective throughout the East zone and in all of Berlin. Later that same day, General Clay and the British Military Governor, General Sir Brian Robertson, acting on behalf of all three Western Allies, announced that the new West German currency would be introduced into the Western sectors of Berlin. To have allowed the new Soviet currency to be introduced into all of Berlin, they said, would mean turning the city over to the Russians.

The Soviets now had the excuse they were waiting for. At six A.M. the following day, June 24, 1948, all traffic to and from Berlin was severed. “Technical difficulties,” the Russians announced, interfered with the normal service. Simultaneously with this action, the Soviets also announced that the flow of electric current could be expected in the Western sectors of Berlin only between eleven P.M. and one A.M. With these announcements, the Berlin Blockade had begun.

For one day the fate of the city, and perhaps the fate of Western Europe, remained in the balance. Would the Western Allies evacuate Berlin? Whatever was to be decided, would have to be decided quickly. In the Western sectors the tension was slowly building to a peak. A Soviet radio bulletin announced that the water supply in West Berlin was about to fail. West Berlin housewives rushed to fill containers and were on the verge of really causing a breakdown when the American radio began broadcasting a reply. In a calculated gamble, the Berliners were told to use all the water they wanted.
“Give your baby a bath,” they were told. “Plenty of water is available.” Once they were reassured, the demand subsided and a temporary crisis was relieved.20

The larger crisis was still to be solved. What action should be taken? For the United States, the decision that day was made by one man—the man on the spot—Lieutenant General Lucius D. Clay. Because he acted wisely and because he acted rapidly the situation was saved.

Earlier in the day, General Clay met with his military staff in Berlin and found them divided. Some believed that the only sensible policy for the United States was to withdraw. “If your hand is in the fire,” one phrased it, “why not pull it out?” Others believed that the United States had to stay. There was no agreed staff recommendation and no consensus of opinion.

Acting on his own responsibility, General Clay then called for Ernst Reuter, the debarred Lord Mayor of Berlin. Would the Berliners, he asked Reuter, be able to hold out on the meagre supplies that could be brought in by air? Could they last through the winter, if necessary?

Reuter replied without hesitation. The Berliners, he said, were prepared to fight for their liberties and would not give in. Willy Brandt, who accompanied Reuter that day, reports that the Lord Mayor “couldn’t quite believe” that the city could be supplied by air. In spite of this, said Brandt, Reuter answered immediately, “and he spoke without any sharpness—‘We shall in any case continue on our way. Do what you are able to do; we shall do what we feel to be our duty.’” According to Brandt, General Clay and his advisers “were visibly impressed.”21

For Lucius Clay the matter was settled. He called Lieutenant General Curtis LeMay at Wiesbaden and instructed him to mobilize all the aircraft at his disposal and prepare to lift supplies into Berlin the following day. “With air commanders of the stature of Curtis LeMay,” Clay writes, “you have only to state what is wanted.” The following day, June 25, 1948, the Berlin Airlift became a reality. The first American C-47’s arrived at Tempelhof loaded with food.

Significantly, the decision to act in Berlin had been made by the commander on the spot. His staff had been divided, Washington had offered no encouragement, and the Allies, Great Britain and France, were still pondering what to do. With very little more to guide him than his own conscience and the opinion of a Socialist politician,
General Clay had resolved to begin the airlift. By so doing, he set in motion one of the great victories which the West was to achieve over communism.

As a matter of historical interest, at the very moment Clay was acting, the Pentagon was urging restraint. In a teleconference that day, the Department of the Army suggested to Clay that the introduction of Western currency in Berlin be slowed down if there was any possibility that it might worsen the situation. It was an assault to the rear which General Clay withstood. It was already too late, he told Washington, to halt the distribution of the new marks. The exchange was already underway.

Clay then exhorted the Department of the Army to stand firm in the crisis. “We do not expect armed conflict,” he stated. “Our troops are in hand and can be trusted. We both [himself and General Robertson] realize the desire of our governments to avoid armed conflict. Nevertheless, we cannot be run over and a firm position always induces some risk.”

He reminded Secretary Royall of the courageous resistance of the Berliners. “Every German leader . . . and thousands of Germans have courageously expressed their opposition to communism. We must not destroy their confidence by any indication of departure from Berlin.”

As for the dependents, “I still do not believe that our dependents should be evacuated. Once again we have to sweat it out. . . . If the Soviets want war, it will not be because of the Berlin currency issue but because they believe this the right time.”

In Washington, Clay’s stand was regarded with mixed emotions. The military departments feared that the Berlin confrontation could turn into a major war. Following a Cabinet meeting on Friday, June 25, Secretary of Defense James V. Forrestal, Secretary of the Army Royall, and Under Secretary of State Robert Lovett remained behind to discuss the Berlin situation with the President. They advised caution and restraint. The following day however President Truman came to Clay’s support, and at the President’s personal order, every available plane in the European Command was pressed into service and the airlift to Berlin put on a full-scale basis.

Over the weekend, discussions continued at the Pentagon. On Sunday afternoon, an emergency meeting of the various Secretaries and service chiefs was held in Secretary Royall’s office. Special studies
of the crisis were ordered prepared for the President. Royall, Lovett, and Forrestal, it was also decided, would meet again with Mr. Truman on Monday, and once more they asked for Clay’s advice.

In his diary entry of that day, Secretary Forrestal paints a grim picture of bureaucratic indecision. The comment of Walter Millis, editor of the *Forrestal Diaries*, is very much to the point:

This entry is striking in a number of ways. Where, one is forced to ask, was all the elaborate machinery which had been set up to deal with such situations—the CIA, which was supposed to foresee and report the approach of crisis; the National Security Council, which was supposed to establish the governing policy? The Berlin crisis had been long in the making, [Millis continues,] but when it finally broke, the response was this *ad hoc* meeting at 4:00 P.M. on a Sunday afternoon in the Pentagon, which . . . incidentally overlooked the potentialities of the airlift.24

Whatever doubts the bureaucrats may have had were resolved the following day. The White House meeting had been set for 12:30 P.M. Under Secretary of State Lovett recounted the details of Sunday’s conversation to the President. When he came to the specific question of whether to stay in Berlin, President Truman interrupted. There would be no discussion on that point, the President said. “The United States is going to stay. Period.”

On hearing the President’s statement, Secretary Royall incredulously inquired whether he had “thought through” the situation. Did the President realize that it might be necessary “to fight our way to Berlin”? Mr. Truman’s reply settled the issue. We would have to deal with that situation when it developed, he said. “We are in Berlin by terms of an agreement and the Russians have no right to get us out by either direct or indirect pressures.” There were no further questions.25

Two days later, on June 30, Great Britain announced her similar determination to remain in Berlin. Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin, speaking before a crowded House of Commons, stated that the decision to remain in Berlin could lead to a grave situation. “Should such a situation arise, we shall have to ask the House to face it. His Majesty’s Government and our Western Allies can see no alternative between that and surrender, and none of us can accept surrender.”
As for the Berliners, he said, “we cannot abandon those stout-hearted Berlin democrats who are refusing to bow to Soviet pressure. The morale of the large Berlin population is excellent, and their determination to put up with any degree of privation rather than be surrendered to exclusive Russian domination must carry our fullest support.”

Sir Winston Churchill, then leader of His Majesty’s Loyal Opposition, vigorously seconded Bevin’s statement. With one exception, a Communist member, the House unanimously supported the government.

The following month General Clay returned to Washington to give President Truman a first-hand report. At a meeting of the National Security Council on July 22, Clay stated that given enough planes, the United States could maintain its position in Berlin indefinitely. When Under Secretary of State Lovett asked him if he thought the Russians might try to block our airplanes, the General replied they would not do so unless they had decided to go to war. When Air Chief of Staff General Hoyt Vandenberg demurred from a further concentration of aircraft in Europe, the President overruled him and directed the Air Force “to furnish the fullest support possible to the problem of supplying Berlin.”

When the Council adjourned, President Truman requested General Clay to stay behind in his office for a further discussion. Together, they talked about Berlin and the Berliners and, as General Clay later recalled, “I left his office inspired by the understanding and confidence I received from him.”

* The decision to recall General Clay for consultations was an attempt by the President to illustrate his support for a firm stand in Berlin. Until this time, Clay had been carrying the ball alone and many in Berlin and West Germany once more had begun to wonder to what extent Washington was behind him. Clay reported this rising fear to Bradley, and the message was relayed to the President through Congressional channels. Mr. Truman’s invitation to Clay was the result.