Russia was caught off guard by the Marshall Plan. Moscow quickly realized that when the Marshall Plan began to function, the opportunity to communize western Europe by exploiting her economic miseries would be lost. Failing to prevent Allied co-operation for European recovery, Russia sought to retaliate by two moves. The first move was to set up a counterpart of a Marshall Plan under Russian auspices for her satellites. This was designed to cut off whatever flow of trade and commerce had been resumed between eastern and western Europe. This would also retard the restoration of the normal, prewar flow of commerce so essential to these countries in Europe.

The second and even more provocative move was to risk a military incident in Berlin designated to test our firmness and our patience. The British, French, and American forces were in close quarters with the Russians in Berlin. Each occupied separate zones in the former capital, which was surrounded entirely by German territory held by the Russians, and all movement of American, British, and French personnel and supplies to our areas in Berlin was through a narrow corridor controlled by the Russians. Under the provisions of the agreement between Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin, the military government to rule Germany was to be jointly directed from Berlin.

There has been a lot of discussion over the origin of the East-West division of Germany. Our military experts had been fully aware of the fact that Russia’s power would enable her, once our invading forces had drawn German strength from the Eastern Front, to drive deep into Germany. Therefore, boundaries that were agreed on long before the fighting came to an end reflected the expectations of the Allied military planners as to where their troops might find themselves at the war’s end.

For the first year after the war the British and Americans made every effort to make a joint control succeed. The Russians, however, with a good assist from the French, defeated these efforts. The French were fearful of Germany. Of course three German invasions in seventy years had given them ample grounds to fear the Germans. But their desire to see Germany dismembered led them to obstruct a number of joint-control measures at a time when such co-operation might still have been possible.

The Russians, on their part, seemed determined to treat their zone of Germany virtually as if it were Soviet conquered territory. They sealed off all contacts between their part of Germany and the areas occupied by us, the British, and the French, and this left little choice to the officials of the three governments in the western part of Germany. Arrangements had to be made for some restoration of normal economic activity, and in order to facilitate it, “bi-zonal” machinery was set up to cover both the British and American zones. Later the French joined in the arrangements.

Of the many reports I received on conditions in Germany, one of the summaries was given me by W. Averell Harriman, who was Secretary of Commerce at the time. Late in the summer of 1947, after a visit to Germany, Harriman said, “We are putting in too little too late. As a result, we have lost a considerable part of the expenditures made so far. The German economy has been living on its reserves, both human and material, and it is still on the decline. We shall have to increase our current expenditures in order to reduce the total cost over the years. . . . Material reserves are being rapidly consumed. There is inadequate fertilization for agriculture. Industry is using up its spare parts and stocks. Transportation has cannibalized bad-order locomotives and freight cars to keep others running. We shall face one crisis after another unless steps are taken promptly to turn the downward trend upward. . . . We cannot attain our basic objectives unless we are ready to move rapidly to reconstruct German life from its present pitiful and chaotic condition. The recovery of Germany in feeding and in industrial production has lagged far behind western Europe. We cannot revive a self-supporting western European economy without a healthy Germany playing its part as a producing and consuming unit.”

This was the lowest point in German postwar conditions. Increased appropriations soon became available, West German needs were included in Marshall Plan estimates, and the bi-zonal organization helped to restore some measure of industrial activity.

The Russians, meanwhile, became less and less tractable, and on
March 20, 1948, their representative finally walked out of the Allied Control Council. For most of Germany, this act merely formalized what had been an obvious fact for some time; namely, that the four-power control machinery had become unworkable. For the city of Berlin, however, this was the curtain-raiser for a major crisis.

On March 31 the deputy military governor of the Soviet Union, General Dratvin, notified our military government in Berlin that in two days, beginning April 1, the Russians would check all U.S. personnel passing through their zone for identification and would inspect all freight shipments and all except personal baggage.

Our military government authorities rejected these conditions. They pointed out that we had been assured free access to Berlin at the time our troops withdrew from Saxony and Thuringia into their own zones. The Russians claimed that no such agreement had been made. They declared that they had the full right to control all traffic in their zone. They began to stop our trains at the zonal border and turn them back when the train commanders under orders, refused to submit to inspection. Between April 1 and July 1 Russian orders sealed off all highway, rail, and river traffic into and out of Berlin.

*Technical difficulties* was given as the reason by the Russians.

The nature of these "difficulties" soon became apparent. On June 18 the British, French, and Americans announced that the three western zones would immediately set up a new type of currency. The Russians had plates of the currency in use at the beginning of the occupation and had been able to flood the western zone with money printed in the east zone, thus deliberately adding to the inflation which threatened to block Germany's effort at recovery. In due course we changed the plates, but Russia continued to manipulate the east mark. Our currency reform was designed to give Germany a sound mark to use in the west. And of course the good western currency was preferred by all Germans. The Russians opposed our currency reform because it exposed the basic unsoundness of their own currency. And it became one of the major points of contention during the discussions on the Berlin blockade. The importance the Russians attached to our move was soon obvious: They offered to reopen the approaches to the city of Berlin if the Western powers would call off the currency change-over.

What the Russians were trying to do was to get us out of Berlin. At first they took the position that we never had a legal right to be in Berlin. Later they said we had had the right but that we had forfeited it.

The entire setup of the four powers in Berlin, involving our withdrawal from areas intended for Russian occupation, had been negotiated as a military matter by the generals in the field. General Lucius Clay later blamed himself for not having insisted on a confirmation of the agreement in writing. It is my opinion that it would have made very little difference to the Russians whether or not there was an agreement in writing. What was at stake in Berlin was not a contest over legal rights, although our position was entirely sound in international law, but a struggle over Germany and, in a larger sense, over Europe. In the face of our launching of the Marshall Plan, the Kremlin tried to mislead the people of Europe into believing that our interest and support would not extend beyond economic matters and that we would back away from any military risks.

I brought up the situation at the Cabinet meeting of June 25. Secretary of the Army Kenneth Royall maintained constant touch with General Clay in Germany and reported that a serious situation was developing. I asked Royall to inquire from General Clay whether the situation was serious enough to consider the removal of the families of our personnel in Berlin. Clay thought it unwise to do so for the psychological effect the move might have. Clay was forced to make emergency arrangements to have essential supplies flown into the city, since Berlin, by now, was effectively blockaded by the Russians both by land and by water.

On June 26, the day after I discussed the Berlin crisis with the Cabinet, I directed that this improvised "airlift" be put on a full-scale organized basis and that every plane available to our European Command be impressed into service. In this way we hoped that we might be able to feed Berlin until the diplomatic deadlock could be broken.

Negotiations had been transferred to Moscow, where on July 6 the representatives of the three Western powers, with our Ambassador, W. Bedell Smith, acting as spokesman, put their case before the Russians. The Soviet reply, given on July 14, dropped all pretenses of "technical difficulties" and made it abundantly clear that the blockading of Berlin by the Russians was a major political and propaganda move. The Soviets refused, at this time, to talk about Berlin except as part of discussions covering the entire subject of Germany. They rejected our condition that the blockade be lifted before any talks could start.

I issued instructions to have General Clay and his State Department adviser, Robert Murphy, called to Washington to make a report.

The Russians were obviously determined to force us out of Berlin. They had suffered setbacks recently in Italy, in France, and in Finland. Their strongest satellite, Yugoslavia, had suddenly developed a taste for independent action, and the European Recovery Program was beginning to succeed. The blockade of Berlin was international Communism's counterattack. The Kremlin had chosen perhaps the most sensitive ob-
objective in Europe—Berlin, the old capital of Germany, which was and is a symbol to the Germans. If we failed to maintain our position there, Communism would gain great strength among the Germans. Our position in Berlin was precarious. If we wished to remain there, we would have to make a show of strength. But there was always the risk that Russian reaction might lead to war. We had to face the possibility that Russia might deliberately choose to make Berlin the pretext for war, but a more immediate danger was the risk that a trigger-happy Russian pilot or hotheaded Communist tank commander might create an incident that could ignite the powder keg.

General Clay came to the White House on July 22, 1948, to attend the meeting that day of the National Security Council, and I asked him to report on the situation in Germany.

Here, in substance, is what he said: The abandonment of Berlin would have a disastrous effect upon our plans for Western Germany. It would also slow down European recovery, the success of which depended upon more production, particularly from Western Germany. The Germans in general were more concerned than the Allies about the possibility of our leaving Berlin. We should be prepared to go to any lengths to find a peaceful solution to the situation, but we had to remain in Berlin.

The attitude of the German people, Clay added, was in some respects unbelievable. The party leaders in Berlin who made up the City Magistrat, with headquarters in the Soviet zone, had absolutely refused to accept Soviet control. The people of Berlin were determined to stand firm even if it required undergoing additional hardships.

He reported that the airlift had been averaging about 2400 to 2500 tons per day, which was more than enough to handle food requirements but was inadequate to include the necessary amounts of coal. The minimum required to sustain Berlin without extreme hardship was estimated to be 4500 tons per day. For the summer 3500 tons per day might suffice, but additional tonnage would be required during the winter.

At the moment, the airlift operation involved fifty-two C-54's and eighty C-47's. Two round trips were made each day, involving more than 250 landings. Seventy-five additional C-47 planes would enable us to bring in 3500 tons daily.

I asked the Air Force Chief of Staff what problems would be involved in making these additional planes available and was told by General Vandenberg that if we put more planes on the Berlin airlift the Military Air Transport Service would become disrupted. We would also find that we would need at least one more major airfield inside Berlin to handle the traffic and at least one major maintenance depot at the other end.

In answer to a question by Secretary Marshall, General Vandenberg said that the maximum airlift would involve using planes which are intended for emergency use, many of which might be destroyed in case of hostilities. This would adversely affect our capabilities to wage strategic warfare. If the majority of our planes were caught and destroyed, this would delay our ability to supply our forces and hold outlying bases. General Vandenberg also pointed out that the air lanes to Berlin belonged to the Russians as well as us and that if we increased our traffic to the point where they could claim that they were forced out, international incidents might result.

I then asked General Clay what risks would be involved if we tried to supply Berlin by means of armed convoys. The general said he thought the initial reaction of the Russians would be to set up road blocks. Our engineers would be able to clear such obstacles, provided there was no Russian interference, but the next step the Russians would take, General Clay thought, would be to meet the convoys with armed force.

Robert Lovett, who was in attendance with Secretary Marshall, asked Clay if he thought the Russians might try to block our airplanes with fighter patrols or by other methods. General Clay said he felt that the Russians would not attack our planes unless they had made the decision to go to war.

I asked General Clay if there were any indications known to him that the Russians would go to war. He said he did not think so. What they seemed to be aiming at was to score a major victory by forcing us out of Berlin, either now or after fall and winter weather forced us to curtail the airlift, without, however, extending the conflict.

We discussed the kind of assistance that we might expect from our allies if the conflict became more intense. I stated it as my judgment that if we moved out of Berlin we would be losing everything we were fighting for. The main question was: How could we remain in Berlin without risking all-out war?

General Vandenberg said again that he felt the concentration of aircraft necessary to provide Berlin with all its supplies by air would mean reducing our air strength elsewhere, both in planes and in personnel. An emergency would find us more exposed than we might be able to afford.

I did not agree with the Air Force Chief of Staff. I asked him if he would prefer to have us attempt to supply Berlin by ground convoy. Then, if the Russians resisted that effort and plunged the world into war, would not the Air Force have to contribute its share to the defense of the nation? I answered my own question: The airlift involved less...
risks than armed road convoys. Therefore, I directed the Air Force to furnish the fullest support possible to the problem of supplying Berlin.

General Vandenberg interjected that that would not be possible unless additional airfield facilities were constructed in Berlin. General Clay pointed out that he had already selected a site for an additional field and that construction, using German manpower, could begin at once. General Vandenberg then assured me that the Air Force would devote its entire energy to the carrying out of my order.

I was compelled to leave the meeting at this point, but the Council continued to discuss various phases of the problem, such as the number of planes that could be put on the airlift at once and the number of dependents to be retained in Berlin.

We had to be prepared to expand the airlift to a maximum while continuing talks with the Russians to see if the blockade could not be removed by agreement. On July 30 Ambassador Smith and his French and British colleagues handed the Russian Foreign Ministry the Allied reply to the Russian note of July 14. We declared that the Russian reply had offered no constructive suggestion. The situation was full of dangers to world peace, and for that reason the three ambassadors requested a conference with Stalin and Molotov.

This interview with Stalin and Molotov took place on August 2 at nine o’clock in the evening. Stalin, as was so often the case, appeared more open to argument than his subordinates had been, and the meeting resulted in a more relaxed atmosphere. Stalin indicated that he was willing to have the transport restrictions lifted, provided arrangements were made to have both the eastern and western types of German currency circulate in all of Berlin. He no longer insisted that there had to be a conference on all-German problems before the blockade was lifted, but he wished it recorded that it was the “insistent wish” of the Soviet government that the Allies postpone the next steps planned in the integration of the western zones.

However, when Ambassador Smith and his colleagues sat down with Molotov to put this understanding into a formal statement, the Russian position once again turned uncompromising and hard. Four lengthy meetings produced no agreement. Our representatives objected to the inclusion in the Russian draft of a sentence that, in substance, would have had us admit that we were being readmitted to Berlin by sufferance only. Molotov rejected the Western draft because it asserted that we were in Berlin as a matter of established right. The Russian version said that transportation restrictions imposed after the date of the currency reform would be lifted, but since the currency reform did not come into effect until late in June, such an undertaking would not have included a great many of the prior restrictions. What was more important, if we signed this statement, we would have agreed to the Russian contention that the blockade was a “defense” against our currency measure. In addition, the Russian draft would have vested the control of both currencies in use in Berlin in one bank, completely controlled by them, and would have given a Russian-controlled agency supervision over all of Berlin’s external trade.

These drafting sessions with Molotov proved so futile that we instructed Smith to ask for another personal conference with Premier Stalin. This meeting took place on August 23, and again Stalin appeared much more interested in reaching a basis for understanding than Molotov had been. On the matter of how far back the lifting of restrictions should extend, Molotov again insisted that the statement should promise only the lifting of those restrictions that had been imposed after June 18. Stalin, however, thought it would be better to have the statement read “the restrictions lately imposed” and to have it understood that if any restrictions had been imposed prior to June 18 they would also be lifted. Stalin also agreed that the Soviet bank that was to control the two Berlin currencies would, in turn, be under four-power control.

But Molotov again proved difficult when the diplomats sat down to draw up a communiqué and a set of instructions for the four military governors in Berlin who, it had been agreed, should work out the details. In the end, in fact, it was impossible to issue even an interim communiqué to inform the public that technical questions had been referred to Berlin, because Molotov refused to agree to any text except in his terms.

The discussions among the four military governors never got out of the stage of frustration. Marshal Sokolovsky, the Russian representative, at once took a position diametrically opposed to the explicit assurances which Stalin had given the ambassadors, declaring that he would not even consider the removal of any of the restrictions imposed before June 18. Indeed, he tried to put new restrictions in, this time on air traffic. He also stated categorically that control by the four powers of the bank issuing the currency certificates was out of the question. The week of technical discussions in Berlin proved even more futile than the month of negotiations in Moscow.

The airlift, meanwhile, steadily expanded. On August 20 Secretary of the Army Royall reported to the National Security Council that the combined British-American lift had averaged 3,300 tons daily and that the maximum for any day’s lift had now reached 4,575 tons. Of this tonnage, the British, using everything they had available by way of transport planes, had flown in about one third. The stockpiles in Berlin
were slowly growing; there was now a 25-day reserve of coal and a 30-day reserve of food in that city. On September 9 Secretary of the Air Force Symington informed the National Security Council that since early August the daily average lift had been increased to 4,000 tons and that it was likely that 5,000 tons a day could be reached if additional cargo planes were allocated.

At this September 9 meeting of the NSC we discussed at length the implications of the apparent failure of the negotiations with the Russians. Marshall and Lovett reviewed the diplomatic events of the past month and concluded that apparently we would have no alternative but to put the case before the United Nations. Under Secretary Lovett called attention to the fact that the Soviets had announced that they would hold air maneuvers in a general area that included the air lanes used by our airlift. We informed the Russians that we would not halt our air operations.

Secretary Marshall pointed out that time was on the side of the Soviets. We could continue and even step up the airlift, but even though it had been more successful than had been expected, the Russians could try our patience by ever-new methods. Just recently, for instance, there had been Communist-led riots in the western zones of Berlin, and the situation was so dangerous that the slightest element added might be the fuse to spark a general conflagration.

Some voices were raised in America calling for a break with the Russians. These people did not understand that our choice was only between negotiations and war. There was no third way. As long as the Russians were willing to continue talks—however futile—there would be no shooting.

Ambassador Smith was directed to hand Molotov an aide-mémoire which listed the specific causes of the failure of the Berlin talks and stated our position in the plainest language possible. Molotov's reply was the same old story. All the blame was on our side, and nothing much could be done until we accepted the Soviet position in its entirety.

The Foreign Ministers of France, Britain, and the United States, who were at that moment conferring in Paris, issued a statement on September 26, 1948, calling the Soviet reply “unsatisfactory” and announcing that the case would now be placed before the United Nations. I was at that time crossing the country on one of my crucial political campaign trips, but I kept in close and constant touch with all developments. Messages and documents were all forwarded to me for approval. Robert Lovett, as Acting Secretary of State, was as meticulous as General Marshall in making sure that the President was constantly advised of developments and his approval obtained before any major step was taken or important statements issued.

The American complaint against Russia was formally submitted to the United Nations in a note which Ambassador Warren Austin handed to Trygve Lie, the Secretary General of the U.N., on September 29. The note drew attention to the “serious situation which has arisen as a result of the unilateral imposition by the Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics of restrictions on transport and communications between the western zones of occupation in Germany and Berlin,” and charged that the action was a threat to the peace under Chapter VII of the Charter. The note also made it clear that the United States regarded the Soviet action as a pressure device to secure political objectives.

The Soviet government took the position that there would have been no blockade if the Western powers had acceded to the Russian position. Furthermore, so Mr. Vishinsky argued in the Security Council of the United Nations, there was no blockade in the sense of traditional international law and, therefore, there could be no real threat to peace. The Soviet Union, Vishinsky said, would not take part in any discussion of the blockade before the Security Council.

Our spokesman before the Security Council throughout this dispute was Professor Philip Jessup of Columbia University. Jessup was one of the leading authorities on international law, and he gained the respect of the world for the statesmanlike manner in which he represented the case for the Western powers before the U.N.

The battle of diplomacy was overshadowed, however, by the drama of the aerial convoys that day after day winged their way into Berlin. By mid-October General Clay could state as a proven conclusion that the airlift was no longer an experiment. Even adverse weather could not keep our supply planes from making their runs from the western zones into the blockaded former capital of Germany.

General Clay made this report at another meeting of the National Security Council on October 22, 1948, when he placed before us an account not only of the technical achievement of the airlift but also of the effect our action in Berlin had had on the German people. They had closed ranks and applied themselves to the tasks of reconstruction with new vigor. It had turned them sharply against Communism. Germany, which had been waiting passively to see where it should cast its lot for the future, was veering toward the cause of the Western nations.

The Soviet leaders made further attempts toward the end of the year to induce the Berliners to weaken in their determination to stick with the West. On November 30, Soviet intrigues led to the splitting up of the Berlin city council, and the city was thus, for all practical purposes, split in two. The Russians also introduced a new identification system that made contacts between the eastern and western portions of the city
almost impossible, and they changed the system of distribution for electric power, virtually disrupting the transport setup.

Meanwhile, the Security Council of the United Nations had a technical committee working on recommendations for a solution of the currency deadlock. Our reaction to these proposals was that our experience with the Russians impelled us to reject any plan that provided for a four-power operation. We had learned that the Russians would usually agree in principle but would rarely perform in practice. We wanted a settlement, but we could not accept a settlement that would put the people of Berlin at the mercy of the Soviets and their German Communist hirings.

This is where things stood as 1948 ended and 1949 began. We had fought off the Russian attempt to force us out of Berlin. The longer the blockade continued, the more the technical efficiency of the airlift improved, and the more the people of Germany looked toward the West to strengthen them in their determination to remain free. Berlin had become a symbol of America's—and the West's—dedication to the cause of freedom.

The Kremlin began to see that its effort to force us out was doomed. Russia's toughness and truculence in the Berlin matter had led many Europeans to realize the need for closer military assistance ties among the Western nations, and this led to discussions which eventually resulted in the establishment of NATO. Berlin had been a lesson to all.

Late in January 1949 the Kremlin released a series of answers given by Premier Stalin to questions submitted by an American correspondent. Stalin had used this device—and correspondents—on other occasions to indicate changes in attitude or policy. At this time he answered a question with regard to the Berlin blockade, saying that there would be no obstacle to the lifting of the traffic restrictions if restrictions imposed by the three Western powers and by the Russians were lifted at the same time.

Dean Acheson, whom I had appointed Secretary of State after my election in 1948, made his regular call at the White House after this Stalin interview was published. We went over the answers of the Russian Premier with great care. We noticed that for the first time since June 1948 the Berlin blockade was not tied to the currency matter in the Russian statement. Acheson suggested, and I approved, that we instruct Jessup to find out from the Russian delegation at the U.N. if this had been intentional.

On February 15, 1949, Dr. Jessup found an informal opportunity to pass a few words with Mr. Malik, the Soviet representative at the U.N., while the delegates were in their lounge. Jessup observed to Malik that Stalin's answer made no reference to the currency problem in the Berlin matter. Was this omission of any significance? Mr. Malik said he did not know but that he would ask. Exactly one month later he had an answer: The omission was "not accidental." This is an example of how difficult it was to do business with the Russians on a straightforward basis.

The Russians were still insistent that we call off our actions to create a West German government. But they were no longer insistent that this had to be done first before they would call off the blockade. They were now willing to agree that all restrictions on traffic in and out of Berlin imposed by either side after March 1, 1948, would be lifted, and that then the Council of Foreign Ministers should be convened to discuss "matters arising out of the situation in Berlin, and matters affecting Germany as a whole." Thus the Russians were ready to retreat. On May 4 a communiqué announced that the four governments concerned—the United States, Great Britain, France, and the U.S.S.R.—had agreed: The blockade of Berlin would end on May 12.

More than fourteen months had passed since the first restrictions had been imposed by the Russians. A little over a year had elapsed during which Berlin had been supplied by means of the airlift.

This achievement by the Air Force deserves much praise. Technically, it was an extremely difficult job—so difficult that even the Air Force chiefs themselves at first had serious doubts that it could be done. It proved a beacon light of hope for the peoples of Europe.

When we refused to be forced out of the city of Berlin, we demonstrated to the people of Europe that with their co-operation we would act, and act resolutely, when their freedom was threatened. Politically it brought the peoples of western Europe more closely to us.

The Berlin blockade was a move to test our capacity and will to resist. This action and the previous attempts to take over Greece and Turkey were part of a Russian plan to probe for soft spots in the Western Allies' positions all around their own perimeter.