In late 1956 the CIA assembled some spy photographs on a large briefing board to give President Eisenhower an overhead view of the Suez Canal. Gamal Abdel Nasser had sunk large ships to close the Suez Canal in retaliation for the Anglo-French attack, and now that the war was over Eisenhower had asked to see the damage sustained by the canal. Eisenhower, who kept a neat desk, did not want the board on his desk or even on an easel beside it. Instead the president asked the startled CIA analyst who had brought the photographs to place them on the floor of the Oval Office. Eisenhower then knelt and on his hands and knees began examining the images. What he saw stirred the famous Eisenhower temper. “Stupid, stupid, stupid!” he muttered as he paused to look at each of the wrecked ships. More than fifty of them were clogging what he knew to be the most important commercial seaway in the world. The president was convinced that Nasser would never have closed the Suez Canal were it not for Anglo-French invasion. For one thing, Cairo badly needed the revenue from the tolls. Indeed, the Egyptians were already working very hard, and very efficiently, to clean up this mess. Despite their efforts, the canal remained closed until April 1957.

The blocked Suez Canal symbolized for Eisenhower the self-inflicted wound that the West had suffered in the Middle East in 1956. Even though the United States had played a decisive role in ending the Suez crisis and as a result had earned the gratitude of many developing nations, Eisenhower was convinced that Khrushchev had emerged the bigger winner. By openly trying to overthrow Nasser, the French and the British had lost a lot of their remaining influence in the Arab world, creating a power vacuum that the Kremlin was well positioned to fill.

Eisenhower had shown that he understood Egyptian sensitivities about control of the Suez Canal, but he still could not grasp Gamal Abdel Nasser. By 1957 the White House had ample evidence to conclude that Nasser was no more an agent of Communist influence than he was a stooge of the West. He was a political animal who was prepared to bargain with any side in the Cold War to achieve whatever end he thought Egypt needed. Indeed, a careful review of Nasser’s actions since 1954 would have shown that in spite of his cooperation with the Kremlin, the Egyptian leader consistently preferred dealing with the United States. In 1955 Nasser had delayed purchasing weapons from the Soviet Union to see if the United States could come close to Moscow’s sweetheart deal. In early 1956 his representatives had spent months negotiating millions of U.S. dollars in secured loans to construct the Aswan High Dam before the United States summarily ended these talks. Later, on the eve of the Anglo-French attack, he had sent Washington a secret plea for diplomatic assistance so that he would not have to turn to Khrushchev yet again. And most recently, just after the cease-fire had taken hold in Egypt, Nasser reiterated his commitment to good relations with the United States.

Yet Cold War concerns so distorted the lens through which the Eisenhower administration viewed the Middle East that the U.S. government convinced itself that communism, with Nasser’s assistance, was the main political force shaping the region in 1957. If the United States did nothing, the administration assumed the Soviet Union would rapidly fill the political vacuum created by the collapse of French and British influence. Eisenhower also became convinced that the Soviets wanted to control the oil reserves of the Middle East.

The president’s anxiety over the future of the region was reinforced by his secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, who was always quicker than his boss to perceive a Soviet challenge and was even less attuned to the mass phenomenon of Arab nationalism.

On January 5, 1957, Eisenhower announced a new political offensive to meet this perceived threat to the Middle East. In a special message to Congress, he formally extended U.S. protection over the entire region. Immediately dubbed the Eisenhower Doctrine, the statement established a U.S. commitment to provide economic and military aid (though not direct military intervention) to “any nation or group of nations in the general area of the Middle East” in light of “the increased danger from International Communism.” As Eisenhower later explained, his objective was to demonstrate his administration’s “resolve to block the Soviet Union’s march to the Mediterranean, to the Suez Canal and the pipelines, and to the underground lakes of oil which fuel the homes and factories of Western Europe.” Had the statement been combined with a new initiative to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict, then it might have been greeted in the Arab world with more approval.
But in so forcefully pursuing the bogeyman of Soviet influence, the United States sent the message that it was departing from its traditional role as honest broker in the region. In the mid-1950s nationalists like Nasser had turned to Washington as a counterweight to Great Britain's imperial pretensions. Now Washington was speaking as if it intended to become Britain's successor in the area. Eisenhower's misunderstanding of the political dynamics in the Middle East soon complicated U.S. policy in the region and handed Khrushchev new opportunities to expand Soviet influence.7

Eisenhower and the U.S. government had made a serious misjudgment about both Moscow's intentions and capabilities. The Kremlin was in no mood for a foreign policy offensive in the Middle East or anywhere else in January 1957. The twin crises of the autumn in Hungary and Egypt had taken a heavy toll on Soviet self-confidence and on Khrushchev's leadership. Despite the Soviet Army's success in crushing the Hungarian revolt and Khrushchev's apparent feat in using the new tactic of nuclear bluff to pull victory from the jaws of defeat in Egypt, his preeminence in the Presidium was now under intense scrutiny. Fortunately for him, his colleagues did not agree on what had gone wrong in late 1956. The old guard eclipsed by Khrushchev in 1955 blamed him for even attempting a political solution with Imre Nagy. Former Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov had been complaining for two years that Khrushchev was naive in his handling of foreign Communists, like Tito of Yugoslavia, who wanted to be independent of Moscow. When Nagy tried to take Hungary out of the Warsaw Pact and endorsed a call by Hungarian students for a reexamination of relations with Moscow, Molotov felt vindicated. Lazar Kaganovich, a member of the Kremlin leadership since the 1920s, and Georgi Malenkov shared Molotov's concerns.

Khrushchev and his protégés in the Kremlin interpreted the Hungarian incident differently, finding its causes in the failures of socialism in Eastern Europe. None of these men, Khrushchev included, was psychologically prepared to blame the lack of personal freedom under socialism for the frailty of the governments in Eastern Europe. Nor did they hold Western intrigue responsible for the political upheaval in the region, an excuse that would have permitted them to sidestep tough questions about what had happened in October 1956. Instead this group, which constituted a majority in the Presidium, had reached the disquieting conclusion that the Polish and Hungarian governments had brought workers as well as students into the streets by failing to provide their citizens with adequate standards of living.

What made the analysis telling for the Kremlin was that it led to the unspoken but shared assumption that the Soviet Union was not itself immune from political disorder for similar reasons. Barely two weeks after the Soviet troops had put down the rebellion in Budapest, Khrushchev called for an immediate reexamination of the budget for 1957, the second year of a five-year plan announced in 1956. He suggested an emergency investment in Soviet residential housing construction and more funds targeted at raising the material well-being of Soviet workers.8 The Presidium rallied around the proposal, despite the fact that this infusion of capital would put additional stress on the Soviet budget. Any fiscal qualms were outweighed by the conviction that Soviet standards of living, especially for the industrial working class, had to be improved to forestall political trouble.

The Hungarian effect could also be seen in a hardening of the Kremlin's attitude toward political dissent at home. Khrushchev encountered no opposition when he suggested that the Communist Party begin cracking down on "anti-Soviet and hostile elements" in the USSR.9 He wanted a subcommittee of the Presidium to reexamine sentencing for political crimes. Since Stalin's death in 1953 the Soviet Union had rapidly dismantled much of the widespread gulag system of concentration camps. Thanks to Khrushchev's policy of destalinization the vast majority of the 2.5 million prisoners of the gulag had already been released.10 The Hungarian rebellion did not compel Khrushchev to reconstitute the system, but it played on existing concerns that perhaps his act of clemency had gone too far. "We were scared, really scared," Khrushchev recalled later. "We were afraid the thaw might unleash a flood, which we wouldn't be able to control and which could drown us."11 In December 1956 Khrushchev wondered aloud if some dangerous political opponents who should remain isolated from the general population had been released. "About those we have released from prison and exile," he confessed to the Presidium on December 6, "some don't deserve it."12 Having seen how the workers had taken up the banner of the Hungarian students, he was eager to prevent disgruntled Soviet workers from finding similar anti-Kremlin leadership at home.

Khrushchev and his old guard critics were of one mind on domestic dissent in 1957. When Khrushchev recommended that the KGB and the Ministry of the Interior be instructed to work harder to root out dissenters, Malenkov and Molotov agreed. Molotov added the grumble that Soviet propaganda had become too weak. He believed it was dangerous to admit that Soviet standards of living were not high. Even Mikoyan spoke up on the importance of strengthening the "party outlook" of the people.13 Shortly thereafter Soviet sol-
Curiously, in light of Washington’s assessment of the Kremlin’s renewed self-confidence in the Middle East after the collapse of the Anglo-French intervention, the one criticism of Khrushchev that most of the Presidium seemed to share in early 1957 was that he had mishandled the Suez crisis. Both the old Stalinists and some of the younger leaders saw the crisis as a by-product of Khrushchev’s eagerness to expand Soviet commitments to Nasser and other Arab states. Even Mikoyan, Khrushchev’s friend and political ally, sided with those who believed that Suez had been an unnecessary crisis for the Soviet Union.

Eisenhower’s public commitment to fighting communism in the Middle East had the momentary, and no doubt unintended, effect of rallying new support for Egypt in the Kremlin even among those leaders who regarded Nasser as an untrustworthy ally who had dragged Moscow into an unwanted crisis. The Egyptians had recently turned to the Soviets for military assistance at cut-rate prices to rebuild after their losses in the Suez crisis. The cost alone gave Moscow pause. There was also the long-standing Kremlin concern about what Nasser would do with these weapons. Before the nationalization of the Suez Canal, Khrushchev had warned Nasser not to build up his arsenal to the extent that it provoked the more powerful Western powers. However, with Eisenhower’s having thrown down the gauntlet, even those who had been wary about providing military assistance to Nasser now supported an arms deal. On January 31, less than a month after the U.S. president announced his new doctrine, Moscow approved a multimillion-dollar package for Cairo.

This was but a blip, however; little more than posturing to show the United States that the Soviet Union was not afraid of the new doctrine. Most of the Presidium opposed any more Middle Eastern adventures. Khrushchev, who wanted to do much more for the Arabs than send them weapons, soon learned that there were limits to how far his colleagues would go to meet the U.S. challenge to the region. Skeptics of Khrushchev’s policy were prepared to help the Arabs help themselves, but the consensus in the Kremlin in the wake of the Suez crisis was that it should do nothing to increase the odds that Soviet forces would ever have to fight in the Middle East.

These limits were visible in how the Kremlin responded to the trouble brewing in Syria. Since Soviet-Syrian relations had warmed in 1956, Damascus had worried about Western retaliation. Following the declaration of the Eisenhower Doctrine, the Syrians became convinced that the U.S. government would soon invade their country. When the Syrians approached the Soviets in March 1957 for a commitment to send volunteer pilots to Egypt or Syria, the Kremlin responded that though it would continue to supply arms to Syria, sending volunteer pilots “might involve negative consequences for both the Arab states and the Soviet Union.” Malenkov and Molotov, long skeptical of the relationship with Egypt, led the opposition to expanding Soviet assistance to Syria.

Although disappointed at his colleagues for not strengthening his initiatives in the Middle East, Khrushchev shared the sense that this was not the right time to do anything that might goad the Americans. “This is a dangerous moment,” he explained in a secret session in the Kremlin. He made this statement in April 1957 during a Kremlin discussion that he and Mikoyan led on the current international balance of power. Both men believed that because both superpowers were suspicious and still licking their wounds after the events of 1956, the odds of a nuclear war’s happening were increasing. Moscow had had its brush with defeat in Hungary. The West had lost in Egypt. Khrushchev and Mikoyan saw the uneasy peace that had held between Moscow and Washington since the end of World War II as more fragile than ever. Under these conditions, Khrushchev believed that the Soviet Union had to redouble its efforts to achieve some form of disarmament.

Khrushchev’s subsequent effort to revise the Soviet Union’s position at the negotiations of the United Nations subcommittee on disarmament, where the world’s largest powers had been discussing the issue since 1955, ran into as much opposition as had his earlier effort to do more to help Syria. The United States had just announced a unilateral cut in the size of its military, which Khrushchev viewed as a hopeful sign. “If the enemy is ready to make real concessions,” he argued, “we should not be diehard.” But the disarmament issue caused deep rifts within the Soviet leadership. Naturally Khrushchev found himself at odds with Molotov. But increasingly Malenkov, Khrushchev’s former ally in the struggle for a policy of peaceful coexistence, was wary of creative approaches to reaching agreement with the West.

Most striking, however, was the form that the disarmament debate took between Khrushchev and the Soviet armed forces. Under the leadership of Marshal Zhukov, the Soviet military staked out a very pro-disarmament position. The reason for this commitment, which differed rather dramatically from the position taken by its counterparts in the Pentagon, who had been wary of Eisenhower’s Open Skies proposal, was a judgment about strategic intelligence. Zhukov’s military intelligence chiefs could not produce enough information on Western capabilities at NATO’s bases in Europe. The Soviets
had not been able to develop their own version of the U-2, and spy satellites were still a figment of the imagination. What technology could not provide the Soviet Army, diplomacy might. With strong backing from their military, Soviet delegates at the disarmament talks in London in November 1956 had offered a plan for partial aerial surveillance that covered sixteen hundred kilometers between Paris and the Soviet-Polish border. In this next round of talks the Soviet military hoped to go further, perhaps as far as to allow parts of the Soviet Union to be inspected so as to open parts of the United States to Soviet airplanes.

Unlike in the disagreement over Syria, Khrushchev appeared to emerge victorious from the April 1957 disarmament discussions in the Kremlin. The outcome was a personal defeat for Molotov and Malenkov and a one-sided compromise between Khrushchev and the Soviet military that benefited Khrushchev. The new policy was to accept mutual cuts in the size of NATO and Warsaw Pact armies and to halt all nuclear testing for two years. Khrushchev conceded to Zhukov that for the first time the Soviet Union would offer to open some of its territory to overflights, but he managed to dress it up in a formula that he knew the West would never accept. The portion to be opened was Siberia, which had no missile sites and few strategic airfields. Meanwhile Khrushchev would expect the United States to allow inspections of its western states, where he knew the Americans were planning to station their intercontinental ballistic missiles and which already had many strategic air bases. His concession was in fact no concession at all.

Khrushchev had little chance to savor his victory in changing Soviet disarmament policy. He had won that battle, but a major shift occurring in Kremlin politics suggested that similar victories would be increasingly more difficult. Over the winter and early spring of 1957 the apparent consensus on how to meet Soviet domestic challenges in the wake of the Hungarian crisis frayed. Characteristically responding with a flood of new initiatives to raise the Soviet standard of living, Khrushchev soon found he was testing the patience of even his closest allies in the Soviet leadership. In March 1957 he had to coax the Kremlin into launching a sweeping reform of the way the Soviet Union managed the industrial sector of its economy. Unhappy with the endemic inefficiencies of Soviet industry, Khrushchev decided it was time to decentralize supervision over the factories in the republics. In practice this meant shifting power from Malenkov's and Molotov's allies in the ministries in Moscow to his allies among the regional party elites in the Soviet republics.

Naturally, Molotov and Malenkov opposed this reform. But again, thanks to key votes from younger Presidium members and his staunch ally Mikoyan, Khrushchev carried the day. Had his drive stopped there, he might have negotiated the political shoals of this issue as well as he did the disarmament question, but Khrushchev was too impatient not to push for more changes.

The rural economy was the one bright spot in the Soviet economy in 1957. In the three years since Khrushchev had called for the development of the so-called virgin lands of Kazakhstan and western Siberia, Soviet agricultural production had increased dramatically. Between 1954 and 1956, 137,000 square miles of fallow land—roughly the combined area of Pennsylvania, New York, and Ohio—had come under cultivation. And the yields were excellent. The harvest of 1956 produced a bumper crop both in the established black soil region in southern Russia and the newly developed virgin lands. The returns were 20 percent higher than in 1955 and nearly 55 percent greater than the average in the last years of Stalin's life, 1949-1953. Most satisfying to Khrushchev was the statistic that half of all of the Soviet Union's grain production now came from his virgin lands. The news from the livestock farms was similarly encouraging. Since Stalin's death, meat output was up by 162 percent, and milk by 105 percent. This country of nearly two hundred million people was still not self-sufficient in food, but the gap was narrowing.

After a good story to tell the Soviet people in this period of political uncertainty, in the winter and spring of 1957 Khrushchev embarked on a series of well-publicized victory tours of the winter wheat and cotton areas of southern Russia, the northern Caucasus, Uzbekistan, and Kirghizia. The enthusiasm of the farmers he met when mixed with his own sense of accomplishment formed a bewitching brew. At stops along the way Khrushchev competed with himself to provide ever more colorful and ambitious statements. In the wheat and livestock center of Krasnodar in southwestern Russia, he announced on March 8 that the principal economic goal of the Soviet Union was to "overtake and surpass . . . the most highly developed capitalist countries." A few days later, a little farther north in Rostov-on-Don, he slammed Western imperialists who had so wrongly predicted an agricultural crisis in the Soviet Union. But his most dramatic statement came two months later, on May 22, when in repeating the goal he had laid out for the country in Krasnodar, Khrushchev issued a prediction: "We shall be able by 1960 to catch up with the United States in per capita meat output." Khrushchev was promising almost a tripling of Soviet meat production.

When reported back to Moscow, the catch and surpass pledge pushed his most serious opponents over the edge. Molotov and Kaganovich did not hide
their anger at the first leadership meeting after Khrushchev returned from Krasnodar. They bitterly reminded him that there was no basis for believing that the Soviet Union could surpass the United States in meat production anytime soon, let alone within three years.3° “You talk too much!” Khrushchev later recollected their yelling at him.31

Khrushchev’s big political mistake was to engage the prestige of the entire country without warning the rest of the Kremlin. His actions had annoyed more than the Stalinists. Even his protégés believed that before setting a Soviet goal, Khrushchev should confer first with the Presidium and then with the economic planners at the Central Committee. Like the industry reforms, the May 22 speech was yet one more reminder of Khrushchev’s willfulness and tendency to go it alone, and dangerously so, if left to his own devices.

Oblivious of the fact that his actions were causing serious disquiet in the Presidium beyond his stalwart opponents, Khrushchev incautiously mixed self-promotion with his crusade to lift the morale of the average Soviet citizen. He decided to have himself awarded a Lenin Prize for the virgin lands program. It had only been two years since the last time that Khrushchev had received a Lenin Prize, the highest award that the Soviet state bestowed on one of its citizens. The Stalinist trio of Molotov, Kaganovich, and Malenkov did not formally oppose the award, but each suggested when the issue was discussed at a Presidium meeting in April 1957 that probably the timing was not right. “We do not have the cult of personality,” said Kaganovich, “and [we] should not give a cause [for thinking so].”32

Serious preparation to remove Khrushchev began after this inept attempt at self-congratulation. Predictably, Molotov led the cabal against him. Molotov had never got over the fact that this upstart had outplayed him in 1955 and 1956, costing him his preeminent role in designing Soviet foreign policy. Malenkov’s and Kaganovich’s opposition also stemmed from old slights, especially the Khrushchev power grab of 1955.

What made the situation dangerous for Khrushchev, however, was that these three bitter men were soon joined in opposition by other full members of the Presidium who had actually benefited from the events of 1955 and 1956 but were reacting to the Khrushchev of 1957. These men—Nikolai Bulganin, Maksim Saburov, and Mikhail Pervukhin—had come to mistrust Khrushchev, whom they regarded as an erratic, willful man who was allergic to consensus building. Khrushchev had strong ideas on things about which he knew something—party work and agriculture, for instance—and strong ideas on subjects like foreign and military policy that he was just learning about. Left unchecked, Khrushchev’s energy tended toward recklessness. The nuclear era was just not the right time to have a man with a short fuse atop a superpower.

By June a rough head count showed that a majority of the Presidium agreed that Khrushchev had overstepped his bounds and needed to be demoted from the position of first secretary. Only six votes of the eleven full members were required to overturn the leader, and the conspiracy had eight.33

Khrushchev, it appears, was caught off guard by the plot. Although one of the complaints of the anti-Khrushchev group was that his loyal henchman, the current KGB chief, Ivan Serov, had established surveillance over the membership of the Presidium, Khrushchev’s first clue that something was up came in the form of an invitation from Bulganin to an unscheduled meeting of the Council of Ministers on June 18.34 Three days earlier Khrushchev had observed some open criticism of his position during a Presidium discussion of Soviet purchases of machine tools from the socialist bloc.35 But that was not much of a warning, and he left the meeting unconcerned. In fact the open criticism was a sign of the confidence of the plotters. At one point Voroshilov suggested putting off any decision on the matter “until the next meeting of the Presidium of the Central Committee,” which all the conspirators knew as code for the post-Khrushchev era.

At first Khrushchev tried to beg off going to Bulganin’s meeting, saying that he was tired and had a meeting in Leningrad later in the day. But Bulganin insisted.

Once Khrushchev reached the Kremlin he found that a formal session of the Presidium had been called without his knowledge. The only topic on the agenda was his future as party leader. Stunned, Khrushchev listened as the conspirators informed him that he would have to cede his prerogative as chair of the Presidium to Bulganin for this extraordinary meeting. Mikoyan, who had not been brought into the conspiracy by the plotters, joined Khrushchev in objecting, but they were voted down.

No Soviet leader had ever survived politically the loss of a no-confidence motion in the Presidium. In January 1955 Georgi Malenkov, the first to suffer this fate, had accepted the outcome and relinquished his positions. Khrushchev, however, refused to resign when the vote went against him on June 18, 1957. He gambled that there was a huge Soviet party apparatus outside the walls of the Kremlin that was beholden to him and that these regional and local officials could keep him in power. Khrushchev had single-handedly rebuilt the party’s confidence after the shattering years of Stalinist repression. He had promoted officials from every region, thus cultivating protégés and instilling loyalty even in the men whom he had not brought to
Moscow with him. Thanks to the recent agricultural successes, which had created a better political climate in the countryside, these regional leaders believed that their loyalty had been rewarded. Meanwhile Khrushchev had created good relations with the military by working with Marshal Zhukov to wash away the stain of the Stalin years, during which most of the Soviet general staff had been purged. He had assiduously supported the posthumous rehabilitation of revered civil war veterans like Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky, who had been murdered in the 1930s.

Khrushchev called in all these chits at once. The Soviet Air Force put special planes at the disposal of regional party secretaries so that they could fly to Moscow for a special session of the Central Committee. By the end of June 20, 107 of the 130 full members of the committee were in Moscow, and 57 had signed a petition demanding the convening of a plenary session to discuss Khrushchev’s future. The signatories supported his position that the Presidium alone could not remove a first secretary of the party.

He knew he had the votes if he could move the decision outside the Presidium. What remained of Malenkov’s political base was in Moscow, Molotov was a man of the past, and most of the other members of the conspiracy were political ghosts. There was one painful exception. His protégé the stylish Soviet foreign minister and candidate Presidium member Dmitri Shepilov had impetuously added his name to the conspiracy at the last minute. This was quite a blow to Khrushchev, who had worked closely with Shepilov when the latter was the editor of Pravda. As Shepilov become more immersed in foreign affairs, Khrushchev had welcomed his role in bringing Nasser closer to Moscow. If Khrushchev survived this coup, Shepilov would have to go, and his deputy, Andrei Gromyko, would then become Soviet foreign minister.

Khrushchev did not have to wait long to see his analysis proved correct. By June 22 it was all over. The vote in the Central Committee went against the Presidium. But they were neither shot nor arrested. Their principal allies, all of whom eventually recanted their opposition to Khrushchev, suffered less dramatic declines. Bulganin was permitted to stay on the Presidium, but he had been purged. He had assiduously supported the posthumous rehabilitation of revered civil war veterans like Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky, who had been murdered in the 1930s.

In the aftermath of their miscalculation, two of the old Stalinists, Molotov and Kaganovich, pathetically begged for their lives. Perhaps because they had once planned to kill Khrushchev, both men assumed that he would execute them for their sins. “Comrade Kaganovich,” Khrushchev is said to have told one of them over the telephone, “your words confirm once again what methods you wanted to use to achieve your vile aims . . . You wanted to kill people. You measure others by your own yardstick, but you are mistaken. We adhere to Leninist principles and will continue to do so . . . You will be able to work and live peacefully if you work honestly like all Soviet people.” And Khrushchev kept his promise.

For the West whatever meaning the failed coup against Khrushchev might have for assessments of political stability in the Soviet Union was swept away less than four months later. The Soviet Union’s unexpected achievement of launching the first satellite into space seemed to change the balance of power in the superpower competition. Instantly a country that could not produce enough meat, butter, and coal to satisfy the needs of its own people had a claim to being technologically superior to the United States.

Sputnik Zemlya (“companion of Earth”), or Sputnik for short, started the space age and with it the superpower space race. In the mid-1950s the United States and the Soviet Union each undertook to put a satellite in space sometime during the International Geophysical Year (IGY) of 1957, which coincided with heightened solar activity between July 1, 1957, and December 31, 1958. In early 1957 the chief Soviet designer, Sergei P. Korolev, suggested accelerating the Soviet military program to build an intercontinental ballistic missile, the R-7, and to use it to propel a satellite into space in the fall of that year. It took five failed launches before an R-7 with a dummy warhead blasted off successfully from the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Soviet Central Asia in August 1957. This was itself a great triumph for Khrushchev, who had placed his faith in the future nuclear-tipped missile, although military deployment of the R-7 was still some years away. Korolev, who was more interested in the peaceful exploration of space than in the destruction of any targets on earth, pushed to use the R-7 to place the first man-made satellite into orbit.

Weighing just over 184 pounds, cylindrical with splayed antennas that looked like the popular tail fins on cars of the day, Sputnik had no purpose other than to orbit and make a sound. It carried a battery that would allow it to emit a deep beep, beep, beep to radio operators in the countries that it flew over. Despite later fears in the West that these beeps were encrypted messages to
Soviet agents, they actually carried no information. Their power would be purely symbolic.

The R-7 carrying Sputnik was originally supposed to go up on October 6. There was nothing magical or ideologically significant about that day. The Presidium certainly knew about the forthcoming launch, but because the chance of failure was high, no propaganda campaign was prepared in advance. The Soviet people were not to be told anything about Sputnik unless the launch succeeded. At the last moment, Korolev decided to move up the launch two days. A conference on the IGY had just opened in Washington, D.C., and a paper given on September 30 by an American scientist had worried Korolev that the Eisenhower administration might be only days away from sending up its own satellite. On launch day, Khrushchev was scheduled to be coming through Kiev on his way home from his southern retreat at Pitsunda and made no plans to make the long detour eastward to attend the launch at Baikonur.

Korolev had been mistaken to believe that the Eisenhower administration was on the verge of beating them into space. Eisenhower had a very detailed space policy, and it did not include the necessity of being first into space. The U.S. president’s ideas about space travel were interwoven with his concerns about intelligence gathering over the Soviet Union. The failure of his efforts to gain Soviet approval of his Open Skies proposal had led to a risky U-2 spy aircraft program that made him uneasy. He could never get over the sense that each U-2 mission constituted an act of war, even if these high-altitude flights were only pinpricks into the sovereignty of Soviet airspace. He longed for the day when spy satellites, seemingly beyond Soviet sovereign airspace, could carry the burden of this surveillance.

Eisenhower’s sensitivity to the question of a country’s sovereign airspace also affected how he managed the U.S. effort to build satellites. In the mid-1950s the international legal status of space was still undetermined. Theoretically, a country’s claim on sovereignty might conceivably be extended into the cosmos, a farfetched notion a decade later, but when Eisenhower approved the first spy satellite program, it was still possible that the nations of the world might carve up space as they had Earth’s atmosphere. Eisenhower wanted to prevent that from happening and hoped instead to establish the principle that a nation’s satellite could orbit over another country without its permission.

The president believed that it would be easier to sell this idea if space vehicles could freely orbit Earth if the first U.S. satellite project was both open to public scrutiny and presented as having peaceful purposes. He assigned this public satellite initiative to the U.S. Navy, which called it Vanguard and kept it at arm’s length from the army and air force’s secret efforts to build an intercontinental ballistic missile. It is now believed that had Eisenhower let the army’s rocket specialists, who included the notorious Werner von Braun, who had built V-2 rockets for Hitler, manage the program, a U.S. satellite could have been propelled into space in 1956. The decision to make Vanguard public also had the unintended consequence that millions of Americans quickly came to believe that the United States would be the first to put a satellite into space. By early 1956 National Geographic magazine had already crowned Vanguard “history’s first artificial earth-circling satellite.” If there was any talk of a space race with Moscow, it usually involved the conviction that the Soviets would take second place.

On Friday, October 4, 1957, the popular cultural milestone was supposed to be the premiere episode of a new situation comedy, Leave It to Beaver. The White House was not expecting any major international development. The president had left for his farm in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, intent on playing his fifth game of golf in a week. Then came the beeps. The R-7 carrying the Soviet satellite took off from Baikonur just after 2:00 P.M., eastern standard time. Every ninety-six minutes and seventeen seconds Sputnik orbited Earth, and by evening in the U.S. Northeast, ham radio operators were hearing its sound. Just after 8:00 P.M. those without ham radios got to hear the sound for the first time as the National Broadcasting Company aired a Sputnik tape on its radio network.

While American scientists immediately hailed Sputnik as an achievement for humanity, the media and many citizens saw it as the opening shot in a new and frightening phase in the Cold War. What the New York Daily News called “Khrushchev’s Comet” not only called into question the supremacy of American science but also suggested that Sputnik would be the first in a series of Soviet military achievements. Senator Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson, who was at his Texas ranch on October 4 and had walked outside in the hope of seeing the shiny tin ball, called for immediate hearings on the threat posed to U.S. security. “Soon they will be dropping bombs on us from space,” said Johnson, “like kids dropping rocks onto cars from freeway overpasses.”

The White House tried unsuccessfully to allay these concerns. Being first in space had never been a litmus test for Eisenhower, who remained confident that the military’s scientific team would provide him with ICBMs and a reliable spy satellite soon. At a press conference he told the American public
that there was no reason to fear because the Soviets had “put one small ball in the air.” His chief of staff added that Sputnik was no more than “one-shot in an outer-space basketball game.” But what was later recalled as “a wave of unreasoning hysteria” would not go away. Within a year Eisenhower had signed bills strengthening the teaching of science and foreign languages in schools and universities and he had authorized Wernher von Braun’s team to enter the space race. On January 31, 1958, Explorer 1 was placed into orbit by an army Jupiter missile.

The public reaction in the United States and throughout the world, where Sputnik was hailed in all languages, was intoxicating for Khrushchev. The Soviets were now touted as being ahead in rocket science, something they had only dreamed of before. If that were not enough to please Khrushchev, because of Sputnik, the Americans were second-guessing themselves, complaining about their own weaknesses. The initial reporting on Sputnik in Pravda had been restrained. But after watching the excitement abroad, the Kremlin decided to give the achievement banner treatment in the October 6 edition. Khrushchev also invited Korolev to a meeting of the Presidium on October 10. After hearing the rocket designer’s report on Sputnik, the Presidium voted to award him the Order of Lenin. There was no grumbling about this Order of Lenin’s being undeserved.

The celebration over Sputnik hid from public view a messy settling of scores in the Kremlin. A matter of hours before Sputnik was launched, Marshal Zhukov, the Soviet defense minister, had left Moscow on a previously scheduled three-week tour of Albania and Yugoslavia. His departure was the cue for Khrushchev to set in motion the removal of this popular World War II hero from the Presidium. For three years the two men had been political allies against the hard-line Stalinists. In 1955 Khrushchev had enlisted Zhukov in his struggle to undermine Molotov’s opposition to a policy of peaceful coexistence with the West. Most recently Zhukov had helped Khrushchev keep his job by instructing Soviet military transports to ferry Central Committee members to Moscow so that they could vote to overturn the Molotov, Kaganovich, Malenkov, and Shepilov coup attempt. But by October 1957 Khrushchev wanted him out on charges of trying to usurp the role of the Communist Party in Soviet national security.

Although the immediate catalyst for this crisis remains muddy, the origins are clear. Despite their agreement on the threat posed by Molotov and an acquaintance that stretched back to the Ukraine, where Zhukov had been military commander when Khrushchev was regional party chief, these two Kremlin stars had irreconcilable views on the role of the party in the Soviet military. Since becoming a candidate member of the Presidium following the Twentieth Party Congress in early 1956, Zhukov had worked to diminish the position of the political officers, the old political commissars, in the military. Responsible for ensuring the ideological reliability of the officer corps, the commissars represented party control of the military, and the marshal’s lack of respect for them as an institution was troubling to men like Khrushchev who put the CPSU first. Zhukov also raised suspicions by allowing to pass into disuse defense councils at the republic level, which were staffed and dominated by the local party elite. There were rumors that among the troops he liked to deprecate the party’s representatives, likening them to old cats “that have lost their flair.” Moreover, in his public speeches the defense minister seemed to be intentionally vague about the subordination of the military to the party.

Zhukov had seemed especially cocky after his apparent rescue of Khrushchev’s political career in June. In August the marshal had tried to reopen the disarmament debate that he had lost in the spring. At that time the Kremlin had decided to offer the West an aerial inspection plan that it knew the Americans could not accept, and Zhukov remained convinced that Moscow should pay the price of limited aerial inspection to open U.S. military facilities to Soviet cameras. He pressed Khrushchev to reconsider his opposition to the idea. Zhukov was also increasingly vocal about his differences with Khrushchev over how to reform the military in a period of budgetary difficulty. In late 1955 the two had disagreed over how to spend money on the Soviet Navy. Whereas Khrushchev wanted to concentrate on improving the submarine fleet, Zhukov wanted to save the aircraft carrier program. After the coup attempt Zhukov expressed uneasiness about Khrushchev’s intention to reduce the size of Soviet forces in Germany without reaching some kind of political arrangement with the West, and he opposed any budget cuts that threatened his goal of increasing the standard of living of Soviet soldiers.

Khrushchev was not the only member of the Kremlin leadership to have noticed that Zhukov seemed to be over-asserting himself. Besides his policy initiatives, the marshal raised concerns because he seemed to be going out of his way to cultivate public support for himself. He had recently thrown the support of the Soviet Army behind the making of a movie about the Battle of Stalingrad that highlighted his historical role. He had even commissioned one of the nation’s preeminent portrait painters to produce a canvas of him as the savior of Mother Russia, astride a white horse against a background of the burning Reichstag.
Khrushchev and his allies placed a sinister construction on reports that Zhukov was now creating his own personal guard. Without Kremlin approval Zhukov’s intelligence branch had organized a special school to train guerrillas and saboteurs. Memories of the corps of bodyguards loyal to Stalin’s former intelligence chief Lavrenti Beria were fresh in the party leadership, and they had no wish to see Zhukov establish a similar private army.

Politically stronger after the failed coup attempt against him, Khrushchev did not believe he had to tolerate Zhukov. Once the Soviet defense minister had left the capital, Khrushchev invited Zhukov’s principal rival in the military, the head of the Main Political Directorate of the army, General A. S. Zheltov, to slander Zhukov in front of the Presidium.\(^5\) Zheltov, the army’s chief political commissar, alleged that Zhukov mistrusted the party’s representatives in the military. “If you were to hang red beards on the political workers and give them daggers,” Zhukov had reportedly said to Zheltov in an apparent allusion to the Mongol hordes that had swept through Russia in the Middle Ages, “they would slaughter all the commanders.” Zheltov complained that Zhukov had placed so many restrictions on him that he could not take inspection tours of the troops without the marshal’s approval.

Two days later special meetings were convened for junior officers in Leningrad and Moscow to discuss the accusations against Zhukov. A special conclave of all of the living marshals of the Soviet armed forces was also assembled to prepare the way for Zhukov’s removal. Presidium members attended these events.\(^6\)

On October 25, the eve of Zhukov’s return to Moscow, the Kremlin officially decided to remove him once he returned.\(^7\) The very next day, just after he arrived in the Soviet capital, Zhukov was called to the Kremlin to be formally told of the charges against him.\(^8\) At this dramatic meeting the war hero denied the accusations, calling Zheltov’s central criticism “wild.” He did admit to “some blunders” on his part in how he managed his public image, but it was too late. “I consider him dangerous in the leadership of the ministry,” said Bulganin. “A regime of terror has been created,” added Mikoyan with a dramatic flourish. Brezhnev captured the fears of the Presidium, which seemed less concerned about Zhukov’s personal ambitions than the long-term consequences of letting him reduce the role of the CPSU in the Soviet military: “The policy is aimed at a rift [between the army and the party],” Khrushchev brought the vilification to an end: “The drama with Zhukov is difficult for me now. . . . Why cut the threads connecting the party with the army?” Khrushchev’s resolution that Zhukov be removed immediately was passed unanimously. The decision was to be publicized on the radio that day to prevent any effort at resistance by Zhukov’s allies in the military. In Zhukov’s stead the group chose Marshal Rodion Malinovsky, who had been reluctant to join Zheltov in criticizing Zhukov.\(^9\) Although Malinovsky had also been a formidable military commander in World War II, Khrushchev had worked with him and believed he could be controlled.

Khrushchev moved quickly to alter those foreign policies that reflected Zhukov’s influence. First, he called for a vote to pull the Soviet Union from the London disarmament talks, which had remained in session throughout the first ten months of 1957. Khrushchev had shared Zhukov’s commitment to the talks and still worried about the possibility of nuclear war, but he did not share Zhukov’s view that the Soviet position needed to change. Instead he wanted to force a change in the Western conditions for disarmament by dramatically walking out. The most recent Western proposals, given to Moscow’s representatives on August 29, had not closed the gap remaining between the two sides.

The Kremlin and the White House had reached an understanding on a very modest cut in the size of their respective armed forces from 2.8 million soldiers, sailors, and airmen to 2.5 million and even that all nuclear testing should be halted for between ten months and two years. But each side continued to impose preconditions that made it impossible to proceed from these shared goals to signed agreements.\(^10\)

On the Soviet side, Khrushchev refused to accept a cut to 2.5 million unless it was agreed ahead of time that it would be followed by a second cut to 1.3 million. As for a nuclear test ban, it was the Americans who imposed the unacceptable precondition. At the urging of his advisers Eisenhower, who wanted a test ban, insisted that the United States would not support a test ban without a simultaneous ban on the production of fissionable materials. In other words, superpower nuclear stocks would have to be frozen at their current levels.

Khrushchev had a greater objective than simply forcing some tactical changes. He intended to kill Eisenhower’s Open Skies proposal once and for all.\(^11\) With Zhukov gone, he could rescind the Soviet offers made in November 1956 and April 1957 to open part of Eastern Europe and the USSR to U.S. airplanes.\(^12\) These had been domestic concessions to Zhukov and were no longer necessary.

Khrushchev’s tougher disarmament policy made the Foreign Ministry and Anastas Mikoyan uneasy. Deputy Foreign Minister Valerian Zorin, who had been the Soviet delegate at the London talks and was representing the ministry while Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko, Shepilov’s replacement, was at the United Nations, called the recommendation premature, but lacking a vote
in the Presidium could do nothing to stop Khrushchev's allies from ratifying this suggestion.\textsuperscript{64} Also on the losing end was Mikoyan, who ultimately decided not to fight Khrushchev on this matter. The Soviet Union could return to the disarmament issue later.

With his victory over the old Stalinists and Zhukov, Khrushchev had hopes that he could finally control the Soviet Union’s Middle Eastern policy. The Syrian government had just signed a trade agreement with Moscow, and there were indications in the fall of 1957 that the United States was encouraging Turkey to invade Syria in response. On October 10, while Zhukov, who might have objected, was on his final foreign trip to the Balkans as Soviet defense minister, Khrushchev had pushed for a commitment to help Syria.\textsuperscript{65} He proposed that Soviet forces be mobilized in the southern republics to deter Turkey from invading Syria. The Presidium approved the request, and when Turkey did not invade, Khrushchev believed he had scored a little personal triumph.

But a month later Khrushchev was to learn a crucial lesson when he tried to exploit his success to push the Soviet Union too far too fast. For all his success in escaping political death in June and in removing Zhukov in October, he was still not alone at the top. Although the era of the nasty debates with Molotov and Kaganovich were over, the Presidium still contained men with independent minds. Moreover, even with the removal of Zhukov the basic conservatism of the Soviet armed forces, which was resistant to expanding defense commitments into the third world, remained.

This hard little lesson came when Khrushchev suggested a Soviet-led military alliance in the Mediterranean modeled after the Baghdad Pact. In mid-November he outlined a plan for the Presidium that would involve giving security guarantees to Egypt, Syria, Yugoslavia, and Greece. But he didn’t get it. Mikoyan refused to support the idea, as did the senior military officers whom Khrushchev had brought to the meeting especially to hear the idea. Despite having been handpicked by Khrushchev to succeed Zhukov because he was reliable, the new defense minister, Rodion Malinovsky, also thought it a bad idea to proceed with this arrangement now. The chief of the general staff, Marshal V. D. Sokolovsky, then effectively threw cold water on the plan by suggesting that Nasser, Moscow’s key ally in the region, would probably not support it. The Presidium did not formally kill the proposal; it was simply sent to the bureaucrats in the Defense and Foreign ministries and was never heard from again.\textsuperscript{66}

These Presidium debates over Soviet policy in the Middle East had taken place in a newly appointed room in the Kremlin. To dramatize his authority after the failed coup, Khrushchev had moved the Presidium meetings from the room where they had long been held to a room adjacent to his suite of offices in a building near the imposing Spassky Gate, which opened onto Red Square. A large oval table that could accommodate forty to forty-five people dominated the new meeting space, and the fact that Khrushchev’s own office was next door was a reminder of who had the most powerful voice around that table.\textsuperscript{67}

The year 1957 had witnessed the end of the old guard in the Kremlin. What was to follow remained unclear. At best, from Khrushchev’s perspective, the Soviet Union was an incomplete dictatorship. There was no question that all future policy initiatives would come from him. This had largely been true since 1955, but now there was less negotiating that had to be done. Nevertheless, if his proposals were too dramatic, as was his call for a Soviet Baghdad Pact, he could count on some opposition.

While the rest of the world had caught glimpses of the major political events of the year in Moscow, all the policy debates had remained hidden from view. The United States had no way of knowing what new Soviet policies Khrushchev’s political victories would bring to the fore. Since October 1957 there had been changes in Soviet foreign policy, the most noticeable being the withdrawal from the London disarmament talks, but they had hardly been dramatic. What remained to be seen was what kind of statesman this more powerful Khrushchev wished to become.