HRUSHCHEV SAW NO inherent contradiction in actively cultivating new allies in the third world as he worked to relax military tensions with the West. In February 1960, just days after single-handedly reshaping Soviet disarmament proposals and three months before the Paris summit, Khrushchev had approved plans for a new Friendship University in Moscow to bring young adults from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East to study Marxism-Leninism and the practical arts of agriculture and engineering. Scheduled to open in October 1960, the school was designed to accommodate five hundred foreign students in the expectation they would come from ninety different countries. This was a substantial undertaking. “The university cost us a hefty sum,” Khrushchev later recalled, “but it was worth it.”

It had been a long time since Moscow had sponsored a special school for foreign Communists. In 1921 the Bolsheviks in Tashkent had established the Communist University of Toilers of the East to promote revolution in India and Central Asia. A few years later the Soviets added the Sun Yat-sen University to train cadres for the revolution in China. Stalin had closed these schools as he turned the energies of the regime inward and moved the USSR away from supporting the international Communist movement. Khrushchev, however, was eager to restore that focus of Soviet foreign activity.

Recent developments had encouraged Khrushchev to pay even more attention to developing ideological allies in the third world. Since 1955 he had championed signing arms deals, providing grants, and sending industrial and agricultural delegations to cultivate the first generation of third world leaders without regard to their political affiliation. Although the peoples of such newly independent countries after World War II as India and Indonesia spoke dozens of different languages, prayed to different gods, and were shaped by different histories, Khrushchev saw them as a cohesive group that could be converted to Marxism-Leninism. Five years into this campaign the results were not as Moscow had hoped. The leaders were turning out to be more nationalistic than progressive and far less pro-Soviet than they should have been in light of the money that the Kremlin was spending on them.

Egyptian President Nasser no longer acted like a dependable Soviet ally. When Iraq refused Egypt’s offer to join the United Arab Republic after the Iraqi Revolution in 1958, Khrushchev found himself in the midst of a feud between the Iraqi leader, Brigadier General Qasim, and Nasser that appeared to have wrecked his relationship with the Egyptian leader. Nasser blamed Iraqi Communists, who formed part of the governing coalition, for Qasim’s lukewarm embrace of Arab nationalism and assumed Moscow was directing the local Communists. By 1959 Nasser was putting more of his own Communists in jail and both publicly and privately attacking Khrushchev for not having done enough for Egypt in the 1956 Suez Crisis. Complaining about these attacks on Communists, Khrushchev told Egyptian Ambassador Mohammed Awad el-Kouni, “we consider the struggle against imperialism under the banner of Arab nationalism to be a progressive phenomenon in so far as it consolidates the power of colonial and dependent people.” El-Kouni replied: “But President Nasser is not an anticomunist, he is only against Arab communists.”

Meanwhile Moscow’s alliance with Iraq had also gone sour. In August 1958 Qasim had told the Soviets that he did not fear the position of the Communist Party in Iraqi society. Indeed, some prominent members of Qasim’s inner circle were party members. His first cousin Mahdavi, the chief justice of the country’s revolutionary tribunal, was a Communist. So too were Qasim’s personal aide, Colonel Basfi, and the chief of the Iraqi Air Force, General Avkati. By early 1960, however, relations between Qasim and the Communist Party had become sharply antagonistic. He held the party responsible for a series of bloody clashes between Kurdish Communists and government soldiers in northern Iraq in the spring of 1959 that jeopardized his control of the country. Qasim had subsequently outlawed all political parties. In February 1960, just as Khrushchev was announcing in Moscow the formation of Friendship University, the Communists closest to Qasim approached the Soviet ambassador at a housewarming party for General Avkati to share their concerns about the direction in which the country was going. Mahdavi told of a recent meeting with Qasim in which he had warned his cousin that his autocratic ways were strengthening the reactionary forces in the country at the expense of his progressive allies. Qasim’s response to Mahdavi had been flippant: “Does this mean you are tired of your job at the tribunal?”
In the winter of 1960 Moscow took this gloomy report from its chief allies in Baghdad so seriously that it turned to its traditional fixer, Anastas Mikoyan, and asked the Iraqis to permit special high-level talks. The Presidium instructed Mikoyan to report back on “Qasim’s attitude toward the Communist Party and the willingness of the communists to cooperate with him.” Expecting that this conversation would be disappointing, the Kremlin also instructed Mikoyan to tell Qasim that the Soviet Union, his principal supplier of weapons, was “unhappy” with his treatment of the Iraqi Communist Party. As a reminder of the value of keeping in Moscow’s good graces, Mikoyan was to bring with him some KGB information on Western plots to overthrow the Iraqi leader. The Qasim regime, however, was so cool to a visit from Mikoyan that it was delayed until April.

Despite these reverses in the Middle East, Khrushchev remained optimistic. His commitment to the Friendship University in early 1960 did not stem from pessimism about Soviet opportunities in the third world. Balancing out the bad news from Cairo and Baghdad were hopeful new developments in parts of the world where the Soviet Union had never before had interests. In late 1958 and 1959, while Khrushchev’s foreign policy concerns were primarily Berlin and disarmament, a second wave of national liberation reshaped the map of Africa and brought postcolonial regimes to power in the Caribbean and Asia. The first move to sovereignty occurred in West Africa, where Ghana, the former British colony of the Gold Coast, declared its independence in 1956. The former French West African colony of Guinea followed in 1958. Sekou Touré, the new president of Guinea, turned to the Soviet Union soon after independence. “When I look into the face of the Soviet Union,” he had told a visiting Soviet diplomat, “I see a reliable friend.”

This new generation of leaders brought Moscow its two brightest hopes for expanding Soviet influence in the developing world. Over the course of 1960 the world came to pay enormous attention to Khrushchev’s relationships with Fidel Castro and Patrice Lumumba. The charismatic young Cuban revolutionary and the dynamic Congolese nationalist personified the kind of leader that Khrushchev hoped to see in the third world. Although neither Castro nor Lumumba was a formal member of a Communist Party, both seemed reassuringly comfortable with Marxism-Leninism and, most important, looked to Moscow for guidance.

In the months to come, Khrushchev took risks to help Castro and Lumumba as local events transformed the two nations into hotly contested squares on the Cold War chessboard. The strong ideological affinity between Moscow and these two young leaders added a new dimension of fear for Washington, making these entanglements seem more threatening than any the Soviet leader had made in the Middle East. With dark passions provoked, the administration would soon be actively trying to kill Castro and Lumumba. But before recounting how the Cold War struggle turned so deadly in the third world in 1960, we should examine the origins of Moscow’s relationship with these young leaders. In neither case did Khrushchev make the first move.

The Cuban Revolution began in 1956, when Fidel Castro led a band of guerrillas calling themselves the July 26 Movement into the mountains of Cuba, where they mounted sporadic attacks against the regime of Fulgencio Batista. Following the lead of the Cuban Communist Party, the Partido Socialista Popular (PSP), Moscow at first took little notice of this struggle. The local Communists, who believed that revolution should come through a political uprising of the urban working class, seriously underestimated Castro and doubted the revolutionary potential of Cuba’s vast population of agricultural workers. When it became clear, however, that Castro’s movement was capturing the Cuban public’s imagination and wearing down the Batista regime, the Cuban Communists rallied to his side, and Moscow followed. In December 1958 the Kremlin organized a small covert operation to ship surplus World War II-terror rifles to the revolutionaries, using a company in Costa Rica.

Soviet assistance, however, played no role in the outcome of the Cuban Revolution. Castro’s forces reached Havana before the weapons did. On New Year’s Eve 1958 Batista fled the country, and the next morning a new Cuban government led by the July 26 Movement was declared.

Over the course of 1959 Fidel Castro gradually introduced himself to the Soviets. Moscow already knew something about his younger brother, Raúl. In his early twenties Raúl had attended a youth congress in Bucharest, Romania, and joined the youth wing of the PSP upon his return. According to Raúl’s wife, Vilma Espín, Raúl discussed this decision with his older brother, who was attending the law school at the University of Havana at the time. Fidel advised Raúl to “go ahead” and join the party in 1953. Fidel was already a Marxist, but he told Raúl that he could not follow him into the PSP. According to Espín, Fidel believed his fledgling political career would be doomed if he were a party member. The Soviets, on the other hand, were never sure how much Fidel knew of his brother’s work with the PSP and doubted that Fidel was a Marxist-Leninist. Instead, Fidel appeared to be a
revolutionary who intended to put his own stamp on a social revolution in his own country. In a word, Latin America’s first Fidelista. He needed neither party nor ideological guidance from abroad. In part, the Soviets got this view from the Cuban Communists. The PSP’s leaders told Moscow that Raúl was much closer to the PSP than Fidel. Indeed, the Cuban Communist leaders reported that Raúl and Ernesto “Che” Guevara, an Argentine-born Communist in the inner circle of the revolution, had kept their Communist membership a secret from Fidel, despite their intense loyalty to the man.

Moscow’s first inklings that a special relationship with Fidel Castro and his regime was possible came in April 1959, when Raúl Castro sent a representative on a mission to Moscow to request Soviet assistance in creating a Marxist-Leninist cadre within the Cuban Army. The Kremlin obliged the Cubans by sending seventeen Spanish republican military officers who had taken refuge in Moscow at the end of the Spanish civil war in 1938. The next step came a few months later, when the Cubans approached the Poles for military hardware. The Kremlin reviewed all weapons sales by its satellites to nonbloc countries, and in late September 1959 it approved the Polish request to send some Soviet bloc tanks to Havana. The first Soviet representative to visit Cuba after the revolution, the KGB’s Aleksandr Alekseyev, reached the island a few weeks later. When the Cubans approached the Czechs in January 1960 to request weapons from them, the Kremlin agreed. The next month Presidium member Mikoyan visited Cuba in a major public display of friendship to open a Soviet exhibition in Havana. Mikoyan was passionate about what he found there. “I felt as though I had returned to my childhood!” he reported to the Kremlin. “[Fidel] is a genuine revolutionary—completely like us.”

Fidel Castro initially imposed limits on Cuba’s relationship with Moscow. At his first meeting with the KGB’s Alekseyev in October 1959, he had explained how his fear of U.S. retaliation shaped his approach to the Kremlin. “For Nasser it made sense,” Castro told Alekseyev in explaining why Cuba would not be requesting weapons directly from Moscow. “First of all, American imperialism was far from him, and you are next door to Egypt. But us? We are so far... No weapons. We do not ask for any.” Castro also believed that the real threat to his regime was economic, not military. “All U.S. attempts to intervene are condemned to failure,” he said confidently to Alekseyev at a later meeting, in February 1960. “The only danger for Cuban Revolution is Cuba’s economic weakness and its economic dependence on the U.S. which could use sanctions against Cuba. In one or two years, [the] U.S. could destroy the Cuban economy. But never, even under mortal danger, will we make a deal with American imperialism. And under these circumstances, the USSR could play a decisive role in the strengthening of our revolution by helping us economically.” Castro also wanted to limit what the Cuban people knew of his dealings with Moscow. Anticommunism was deeply ingrained in Cuban society, where the Roman Catholic Church remained a strong institution, and Castro did not want to restore open relations with the Soviet Union until he was more confident of the domestic reaction.

Despite Castro’s caveats, Khrushchev had reason to be optimistic about the potential for sturdy ties between the Kremlin and Cuba. The thirty-two-year-old Castro seemed to be a true revolutionary and reliably anti-American.

On April 18, 1959, three months after Castro’s triumphant arrival in Havana, a tall Congolese activist named Patrice Lumumba entered the Soviet Embassy in the Guinean capital of Conakry. At the time the Congo was still a Belgian colony, and Moscow knew nothing about Lumumba and very little about his homeland. The night before, a Guinean official had introduced the Soviet ambassador to Lumumba, and the two set an appointment for the next day. “The struggle for the independence of the Congo,” Lumumba explained to Ambassador P. I. Gerasimov, “is progressing.” He was the founding leader of the Mouvement National Congolais (MNC), a grassroots organization that demanded Congo’s independence from Belgium. Born in 1925, Lumumba had only a primary school education because the Belgian colonial administration did not offer public secondary education to blacks. In his early twenties Lumumba had gone to work in the post office in Stanleyville, and eventually he started writing pamphlets for the local branch of the Liberal Party of Belgium. While in prison in 1956 for allegedly embezzling funds on the job, he wrote a political tract, Le Congo, terre d’avenir: est-il menacé? [The Congo, Land of the Future, Is It Threatened?]. After he was released later that year, Lumumba’s political activism became more intense and more radical. In October 1958 he played a major role in establishing the MNC, which advocated independence.

Lumumba hinted strongly to Moscow’s representative in April 1959 that he was pro-Soviet, if not a Communist. He asked for permission to make a secret visit to the Soviet Union, explaining that once he returned from Moscow he would be in a better position to “expose the anti-Soviet propaganda that the colonial powers are now increasingly disseminating in Africa.” To keep the trip a secret from the Belgians, the Guineans had already promised to allow Lumumba to leave from Conakry if the Soviets agreed.
Lumumba also asked for Soviet financial assistance. He lacked the funds to distribute his own propaganda throughout the vast territory of the Belgian Congo. If his message could get out, he assured the Soviet ambassador, it would undermine the "anti-Soviet fabrications" of the Belgians.

The meeting with the Soviet ambassador was not Lumumba's only effort to seek Communist assistance in 1959. Two weeks later he left for Brussels to meet with the leaders of the Belgian Communist Party, whom he saw as natural allies. His conversations with Albert de Coninck, the secretary of the Central Committee of the Belgian party, created great optimism among the Belgian Communists, which they communicated to Moscow. "The Congo," de Coninck explained to the Soviet officials at the embassy after his meeting with Lumumba, "presents the most favorable conditions for the spread of Marxism of any country in Africa." As evidence, he pointed to the colony's large—by African standards—urban population. Compared with 10 percent in French West Africa, 26 percent of the Congolese population lived in towns or cities. De Coninck also celebrated the fact that the party Lumumba led was the strongest in the Congo and "practically stands at the forefront of the national-liberation movement." Although not formally a Communist, Lumumba "supports progressive positions." This was a codeword among Communists for someone who was politically reliable.

The Belgian Congo was a potentially rich prize. A vast empire in Central Africa that stretched from the mouth of the Congo River on the western coast of the continent for twelve hundred miles into the interior, it had more mineral wealth than any other country in Africa. The colony produced 9 percent of the world's copper, 49 percent of the world's cobalt, 65 percent of the world's industrial diamonds, and 6.5 percent of its tin. During the Second World War the Congo had been the source of almost all of the financing of the Belgian government-in-exile, and since 1945 its mining output had almost doubled. Moscow had no particular interest in acquiring these resources, but this mineral wealth meant that once it was independent, the Congo had a good chance of prospering and might thereby become a useful Soviet ally.

In January 1960 Congolese negotiators reached an agreement with the Belgian government that independence would be declared on June 30. This would be preceded by the country's first parliamentary election in May.

Lumumba was unquestionably the Soviet favorite in the political struggle for the Congo. In late December 1959 the Kremlin had turned down a blanket request for assistance from representatives of another coalition comprising distinguished Congolese nationalists who were not allied with Lumumba. Moscow suspected the ideological commitment of these nationalists, and Khrushchev preferred to take his chances with Lumumba.

Well into the Winter of 1960 the U.S. government knew surprisingly little about the extent of the Kremlin's relationship with Castro and cared little about Lumumba. Neither the CIA nor the National Security Agency, which intercepted and decrypted foreign communications, had detected the covert supply of Soviet bloc weapons to Havana that the Presidium had approved in September 1959 and January 1960. Lumumba's contacts with Soviet representatives had been noticed but were largely ignored.

Washington was working hard to understand Fidel Castro. With Cuba only ninety miles off the coast of Florida, the Eisenhower administration had followed the Cuban Revolution very closely. For a time after the July 26 Movement took control of the island, the administration was unsure how to handle Castro. The State Department initially recommended engagement. An undercover CIA officer was assigned to spend time with Castro during a tour of the United States that the young leader took in April 1959. Castro made some very reassuring statements to this officer. In fact the visit, which was partially choreographed by an American public relations firm, created widespread support for the rebels without revealing Castro's future revolutionary aims. Castro repeated the mantra "We are not communists," throughout his stay. He was so convincing that even Vice President Nixon, who had a private meeting with Castro in Washington, D.C., described him as an anti-Communist who cavorted with the PSP out of sheer naivete.

Despite this initial positive evaluation, by the end of 1959 the U.S. government had turned against Castro. Fidel Castro's October 1959 nomination of his brother, Raúl, to lead the newly created Ministry of the Revolutionary Armed Forces provoked a series of high-profile military defections in Cuba that created deep concern in Washington. The defectors revealed that Raúl was employing veterans of the Spanish civil war to train a Marxist cadre within the Cuban armed forces. The White House knew that Raul was a hard-core Communist, as was Che Guevara, but had not been sure of their influence and that of the PSP over Fidel. These changes in the Cuban military seemed to presage a Communist takeover. In early November President Eisenhower decided that the United States had no choice but to remove the Castro regime. "There is no reasonable basis," explained the
State Department in a memorandum clarifying the issue for the president, “to found our policy on a hope that Castro will voluntarily adopt policies and attitudes consistent with minimum United States security requirements and policy interests.” Consequently, argued the State Department, “the prolonged continuation of the Castro regime in Cuba in its present form would have serious adverse effects on the United States position in Latin America and corresponding advantages for international communism.” President Eisenhower agreed.

Within a month of this change in U.S. policy, Allen Dulles and the CIA prepared proposals for bringing an end to the Castro regime. The agency even called for “thorough consideration [to be given to the elimination of Fidel Castro].” In formally recommending assassination as an option, the agency stated: “None of those close to Fidel such as his brother Raul or his companion, Che Guevara, have the same mesmeric appeal to the masses. Many informed people believe that the disappearance of Fidel would greatly accelerate the fall of the present government.”

Eisenhower, however, did not believe it was time to force the issue. Despite his suspicions of Castro, the president set the CIA’s plans to one side. As of early 1960, the White House was watching to see what direction events took on the island.

The Eisenhower administration also adopted a wait and see approach to the Congo, though this was less because of high-level uncertainty than because of a general lack of concern about the Belgian colony. Washington had only a vague opinion of Patrice Lumumba, and the president and his top foreign policy advisers were not at all engaged in thinking about the Congo’s political future. By early 1960 Washington had received reports that Lumumba was receiving money from the Soviets, but those following the issue were not sure whether this was proof of ideological commitment or rank opportunism.

Lumumba actively sowed some of this confusion. In late February 1960 he met the U.S. ambassador in Brussels after consultations with the Belgian government. “[A] highly articulate, sophisticated, subtle and unprincipled intelligence,” wrote Ambassador William Burden in describing Lumumba for the State Department. Lumumba, who arrived half an hour late and kept the meter running in a taxi left standing outside the embassy, struck Burden as thoroughly opportunistic and extravagant. “[He] would probably not meet the famous definition which was given a century ago of the honest politician as one who, when bought, stayed bought.”

The Congolese was indeed playing a game. He tried to convince the Americans that the Soviets had approached him first, not the other way around. Complaining to Burden about the Kremlin’s pressure on him, Lumumba wove a fanciful story of a stream of invitations to visit Moscow, all of which he “had turned ... down because he believed that these influences from the East were very bad from the point of view of the Congo.” Lacking any contradictory information, the U.S. ambassador did not reject Lumumba’s denial out of hand. “It seems clear that if Lumumba is receiving any specific support from the East, he is perfectly prepared to betray these supporters to the fullest extent that suits his purposes.” When Lumumba asked for an invitation to visit the United States, Burden endorsed the idea in a cable later sent to Washington.

Lumumba’s meeting with Burden did not spark any action by Washington, and there was no subsequent invitation to visit the United States. The administration had not yet decided that the Congo was a contested spot in the Cold War.
the USSR with supplies of goods and weapons in the case of a blockade or [U.S.] intervention?" He asked Alekseyev to send an immediate cable to Khrushchev inviting the Soviet Navy to send submarines to assist Cuba. "We have here very many caves and all are unoccupied," he added as a suggestion for a secret port. Despite this request, the explosion did not eliminate all of Castro's inhibitions in dealing with Moscow. There was still no Soviet Embassy in Havana, the reason why Alekseyev was the key link between the regimes. Castro told Alekseyev that he considered it premature to reestablish formal diplomatic relations. He wanted his government's alliance with the Kremlin kept confidential until he was certain that the Cuban people would not overreact.

Khrushchev acted quickly when he received a report on Alekseyev's meeting with Castro. To that time he had not been in direct communication with Castro, but on March 12 he sent a personal letter to the Cuban leader, offering both advice and weapons. Reflecting his general optimism about a coming détente with the United States (the ill-fated Paris summit was still two months, away and Francis Gary Powers had not yet set off in a U-2 over Russia), Khrushchev cautioned Castro not to assume the worst about the Eisenhower administration. "In spite of the difficulty and growing tension of the situation, the USA is today content to restrict itself to measures designed to further the favorable development of international relations, and will under no circumstances cross the line to undertake an open intervention against Cuba." Khrushchev's opinion reflected the assessment of the KGB, which had collected information indicating that the Eisenhower administration would attack Cuba only if provoked. What would provoke it? The KGB suggested either an attack on the U.S. naval base at Guantánamo, on the eastern tip of Cuba, or the establishment of a Soviet missile base anywhere on the island. Although Khrushchev did not share Castro's new fears about an imminent U.S. attack, he was prepared to sell the Cubans whatever weapons they believed they needed. The letter invited Castro to request arms shipments from Czech or Soviet manufacturers and said nothing about price. The Cubans had paid for the Soviet bloc weapons they received previously. This time they would not be expected to. The letter closed with an invitation for the Cuban leader to make his first visit to Moscow.

"Could you write down the Spanish translation for me?" asked Castro excitedly when Alekseyev read a hasty translation of the letter a few days later in Havana. Castro could not have been happier and told the Soviet representative that this letter would be placed in a box of keepsakes that he had stashed away in the mountains. With the letter came an odd Soviet offer to pay Castro for the "rights" to his speeches. Initially the honoraria were a few hundred U.S. dollars, but by 1961 Castro would be receiving eight thousand U.S. dollars for a set of his speeches. This was just a little bonus for Castro to use as he wished.

Castro's public reaction to the explosion also removed any remaining doubts in Washington. Although the administration had been discussing the removal of Castro since November, there had been little urgency to implement this policy. Castro's campaign to associate the administration with the Coubre incident accelerated U.S. activity against Castro. "The Country Team is of the unanimous opinion there is no hope that US will ever be able to establish a satisfactory relationship with the Cuban government as long as it is dominated by Fidel Castro, Raul Castro, Che Guevara and like-minded associates," wrote the U.S. Embassy in Havana on March 8 after canvassing the opinion of the local CIA representative as well as those of the resident diplomats.

The White House's high-level advisory group, including the president's national security adviser, Gordon Gray, met to discuss Cuba the same day the report from the embassy arrived in Washington. An NSC meeting, chaired by the president, was scheduled for the next day. The advisory group accepted that the United States could not live with Castro but suggested four reasons why a U.S. military invasion was inadvisable: the lack of any alternative to Castro, the concern that an attack would solidify Castro's government, the need to coordinate with Latin American countries, and the effect on world opinion. As an alternative to invasion, the group suggested economic and diplomatic measures against Castro's regime.

The discussion at the NSC on March 10 was more bellicose. The U.S. military believed that Washington had to consider an invasion. The navy, in particular, feared that Castro would try soon to close the U.S. base at Guantánamo. In a paper prepared for the meeting, the chief of naval operations, Admiral Arleigh Burke, argued that should covert action "fail to bring a solution in time ... the United States [should] be prepared to take military measures." Despite the rising concerns, expressed alarmingly by his military advisers, Eisenhower refused to rush to solve his Castro problem. He dismissed any immediate threat to Guantánamo and assured his team that if any of the ten thousand U.S. citizens in Cuba were "in danger," he would order an intervention. Instead he wanted his advisers to think about an alternative to Castro. He did not want to topple the regime in Havana without having a favorable replacement in the wings. Otherwise, he warned, "we might have another Black Hole of Calcutta in Cuba."
The effect of these discussions was a renewal of administration interest in covert solutions. On March 16 the 5412 Committee of the NSC, which oversaw the planning of covert action, discussed specific plans for “the replacement of the Castro regime with one more devoted to the true interests of the Cuban people and more acceptable to the US in such a manner as to avoid any appearance of US intervention.” Responding to Eisenhower’s concerns at the NSC meeting, the group stressed that the first objective was to create “a responsible, appealing and unified Cuban opposition to the Castro regime.”

Assassination plans were frozen. At the moment the administration was merely entertaining schemes to embarrass Castro. The CIA plotted to spray with LSD a cigar that an agent could hand him minutes before he was to give a major public speech. It also worked on a depilatory powder that would make his beard fall out; captured perhaps by the legend of Samson, the CIA believed that Castro’s personal charisma would disappear with his whiskers. The agency took this ludicrous notion seriously enough that it looked around for appropriate agents so that the next time Castro went abroad, a hotel attendant could be recruited to dust the Cuban leader’s shoes with the powder when they were left outside his suite to be shined overnight.

In the weeks after La Coubre Castro took a series of steps to radicalize the Cuban Revolution and bring his relationship with Khrushchev into the open. In May, Cuba established formal diplomatic relations with Moscow, allowing the Soviets to open an embassy in Havana. That month Castro also informed U.S. oil companies operating in Cuba that they would have to refine the three hundred thousand tons of crude oil the Soviet Union had promised to sell Cuba. He expected the U.S. companies to say no, and on June 10 the Cuban government nationalized the refineries. When Cuba’s foreign-owned electric utilities refused to operate using Soviet oil, Castro nationalized them too.

Castro was not yet free of his fear of the United States. Although he had no precise knowledge of the CIA’s plotting, it did not take him long to develop cold feet about the extent to which he was publicly identifying his regime with Moscow. In late spring 1960 Castro began to notice an increase in opposition to his regime. Some counterrevolutionaries had taken up guns and were going into the mountains as his July 26 Movement had done in the mid-1950s. Statements by U.S. officials had also become sharper of late.

In this climate Khrushchev’s invitation to visit Moscow was unhelpful. At first Fidel thought he might just send his brother, who was expected to leave in the spring of 1960 on a tour of major Eastern European capitals and Beijing. But by late June Fidel thought that even a visit from Raúl would be too dangerous for his regime. “At this time, when an intervention is being prepared,” Castro told Alekseyev on June 24, “Raúl’s visit would be seen by our enemies as evidence of a new orientation of Cuba under the military assistance of the USSR.”

The postponement of Raúl Castro’s visit came at an awkward time for Khrushchev. The great wave of decolonization had increased Sino-Soviet tensions. The Chinese disapproved of Moscow’s cautious approach to the social movements in Africa and the Caribbean. Mao and his colleagues believed that the Kremlin’s aversion to using violence as a political tool was causing it to miss opportunities to spread the gospel of socialism. This disagreement spilled out into the open just at the moment that Castro postponed his brother’s visit. In early June 1960, at a meeting of international trade unionists in Beijing, the Chinese and their allies—the Burmese, North Vietnamese, Sudanese, Somalis, Argentines, Ceylonese, Japanese, and Zanzibaris—had raised doubts about Khrushchev’s leadership of the international Communist movement. They berated Moscow for not being revolutionary enough, for promoting a doctrine of peaceful coexistence that appealed to bourgeois nationalists more than to Communists and weakened the possibility for revolutionary activity. Khrushchev answered his critics in Bucharest two weeks later. It was not enough to read Marx, he declared. “One must also correctly understand what one had read and apply it to specific conditions of the time in which we live, taking into consideration the situation and the real balance of forces.”

Khrushchev saw significant value in a public visit by Raúl Castro in July, and the postponement worried him. The Soviet leader, who doubted that a U.S. military invasion of Cuba was either imminent or likely that summer, regarded Castro’s explanation as a poor excuse. Moreover, the latest Soviet information was that Raúl intended to go ahead with the other stops on his planned foreign tour, including Prague. Khrushchev wondered if the postponement might actually be linked to the events in Beijing or Bucharest. Reports had come to the Kremlin that Raúl and some of the other Cuban revolutionaries were somewhat attracted to Beijing’s more radical line. Khrushchev decided not to waste time in removing any doubts, his own or those of the Chinese, that Cuba viewed Moscow as its principal socialist ally.

The KGB predicted more U.S. covert action but assured the Kremlin that the Eisenhower administration was no more likely to launch a military attack on Cuba now than it had been months earlier. Assuming that the risks were low and the potential benefits high, Khrushchev chose a public forum to reassure the Cubans that their security was a vital Soviet interest. Before a group
of Soviet teachers on July 9, he announced that the Soviet Union would defend Cuba with nuclear weapons, if need be. He said: "It should be borne in mind that the United States is now not at such an unattainable distance from the Soviet Union as formerly. Figuratively speaking, if need be, Soviet artillerymen can support the Cuban people with their rocket fire should the aggressive forces in the Pentagon dare to start intervention against Cuba. And the Pentagon could be well advised not to forget that, as shown at the latest tests, we have rockets which can land precisely in a preset square target 13,000 kilometers away. This, if you want, is a warning to those who would like to solve international problems by force and not by reason."58

This extraordinary statement—the first time the Soviet Union had rattled its nuclear missiles in defense of a third world nation since the Suez crisis in 1956—achieved the goal Khrushchev set out for it. Fidel Castro was so appreciative that he decided to let his brother go to the Soviet Union.

Raúl Castro arrived in Moscow on July 17 for what turned out to be a warm and productive visit. The young revolutionary was eager to express his brother's and his own gratitude for the Soviet diplomatic support. They were convinced that Khrushchev's July 9 statement had altered U.S. calculation and forestalled an attack.

Khrushchev had some advice for the Cubans. Despite his disappointment at the recent collapse of the four-power summit in Paris, he still doubted that Eisenhower would invade Cuba unless provoked. His greater worry was that the Cubans might somehow trigger a U.S. counterstrike. "We don't want war," Khrushchev cautioned Raúl, "and you don't need war."59

When Raúl asked, "Do you think the U.S. can arrange intervention under the banner of Organization of American States, as it was in Korea under the banner of United Nations?" Khrushchev responded, "It is not a real possibility now; it is an absolutely different situation [today]." Khrushchev, however, did not want the Cubans to believe that he was intending to limit Soviet military assistance to Cuba. "If it [is] useful for you," he said, "we can give you more."60

The meeting had its light moments. To demonstrate how committed the Cubans were to building a socialist society, Raúl spoke of himself toiling day and night. In response Khrushchev threw out a half-mocking taunt: "Don't work all night. You will make stupid mistakes if you do."61

Khrushchev thought the visit had achieved all that he had hoped it would. Cuba had become a very strong ally. A clerical change at the KGB signaled this new confidence. In August 1960 the code name for the Castro regime file was changed from YOUNGSTYE (Youngsters) to AVANPOST (Bridgehead).62

Khrushchev's meeting with Raúl Castro coincided with major developments in the Congo, which soon placed the Soviet relationship with Lumumba at the center of an international storm. Khrushchev did not attend the independence ceremony on June 30, but the events that followed had important consequences for the Soviet Union. In May, Lumumba's party won the largest number of seats in the country's first election. Congo became a parliamentary democracy with a prime minister, the head of government, and a president as the head of state. Lumumba became the country's first prime minister, and Joseph Kasavubu, a fellow nationalist but not a member of Lumumba's party, became president.

The deal struck between Belgium and the Congolese nationalists left a thousand white Belgian officers in charge of Congo's twenty-five-thousand-man army, called the Force Publique, on the day of independence.63 Belgian nationals were also kept in posts in the new government's civil service. This deal quickly unraveled. Within days of independence the Congolese Army collapsed. Black noncommissioned officers mutinied, declaring they were unwilling to serve under white officers. With the army paralyzed, disorder spread throughout the huge territory. Many of the hundred thousand Europeans living in the Congo at the time of independence fled out of fear. They included the civil servants, who had not had time to train Congolese replacements. The Belgian government reacted by sending troops on July 10 to protect the remaining foreign community.64 The independence accord stipulated that Belgium could not redeploy troops to Congo without the permission of the new sovereign government, yet Brussels sent troops anyway.

The next day the situation in the Congo became even more confused. With the support and encouragement of the Belgians, a Congolese soldier named Moïse Tshombe declared the independence of the copper-producing province of Katanga. The province, the source of one-half of Congo's exports, was by far the country's richest region. A day earlier Tshombe had invited the Belgian government to send paratroopers to the provincial capital of Elisabethville. Eager to defend the Union Minière du Haut Katanga, a Belgian company that enjoyed a monopoly over copper production, Brussels also sent forces to Katanga.

With the Force Publique in disarray, Lumumba and Kasavubu jointly requested intervention by the United Nations on July 12. It was an unprecedented request by a sovereign state. The UN had never before been asked to
send troops into a civil war. The two leaders explained that international intervention was required to prevent "acts of aggression" by Belgian troops against Congolese citizens. They asked that membership in the UN contingent be restricted to soldiers from neutral countries. Stressing the urgency of the situation, Lumumba and Kasavubu threatened to appeal to the countries associated with the nonaligned movement founded at the Bandung Conference in 1955, including India and China, if the UN did not act "without delay."65

Kasavubu did not share Lumumba's interest in close ties with Moscow. However, the next day he agreed to send a joint message to Moscow asking Khrushchev "to watch hourly over the development of the situation." They added: "We may have to ask for the Soviet Union's intervention should the Western camp not stop its aggression against the sovereignty of the Republic of the Congo." Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko distributed copies of the telegram to all members and candidate members of the Presidium.66

As of early July, Khrushchev had no desire to involve the Soviet military in an intervention in Africa. The Congo presented a major logistical challenge to any intervention because it lacked a major port near its principal cities, meaning that all military assistance would have to be airlifted. Khrushchev preferred a political solution anyway. It served Soviet interests to let the UN restore order. Moscow's favorite was already Congo's prime minister, and the international community was coming to his rescue. On July 13 the Soviet delegate at the UN was instructed to support a Security Council resolution calling for the formation of a UN force for the Congo and the immediate withdrawal of Belgian forces from the country. The resolution passed that night, 8–0, with Washington and Moscow on the same side of the discussion. Both superpowers were asked to contribute weapons and food to the UN force.67 On July 15 Khrushchev sent word to Kasavubu and Lumumba that he regarded the UN intervention as a "useful thing."68 In this telegram, which the Kremlin made public, Khrushchev also warned the Belgians and their allies: "If aggression were to continue in spite of this [UN] decision, the Soviet Government declares that the necessity would arise for more effective measures."69

Advance elements of the UN force began arriving in Congo the same day as Khrushchev's telegram. As soon as the Security Council passed the enabling resolution, UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld moved quickly to organize a military force that initially numbered four to five thousand men, largely recruited from African countries.

Kasavubu's and Lumumba's appreciation was short-lived. They soon were disappointed to learn that this force would not deploy to the secessionist region of Katanga. Determined to avoid involving the UN in any civil wars, the Secretariat refused to be drawn into the conflict between the Congolese government and Tshombe's forces in Katanga.

The Eisenhower administration knew that its interests in the Congo were different from those of the Soviet Union. On the day the Congo became independent, the CIA described its new government as having a "leftist tinge" and warned that it was vulnerable to Communist influence.70 The agency, which may have been receiving information from the Belgians, asserted that five of the ten members of the cabinet were "inclined toward communism." It added: "Lumumba himself appears to be neutralist in attitude, with a Leftist and opportunistic bent."71

As chaos spread throughout the country, the administration sensed it might be witnessing the creation of a second Cuba. The U.S. Embassy in Leopoldville boldly drew the parallel between Lumumba and Castro: "The most serious effort is centered in Leopoldville where they [the Soviets] are well on their way to completely capturing Lumumba and followers like they took Castro in Cuba. Believe pattern very similar but this one is easier in some ways; Congolese are totally disorganized, they are political children and only pitiful few have faintest idea where Lumumba is taking them."72

Washington had an opportunity to get a better sense of whether Lumumba was another Castro when, on July 23, he flew to the United States at the invitation of the administration. The Congolese prime minister decided to leave his country in a desperate attempt to get the UN to help him fight Katangan separatism and to encourage the Americans to increase the pressure on their Belgian allies to leave the Congo. He planned to spend a few days at the UN before visiting Washington.

Lumumba made his case to the UN in New York. He visited with Secretary-General Hammarskjöld and various ambassadors. He also made time to see Soviet Deputy Foreign Minister Vassily Kuznetsov.73 President Eisenhower did not make time to see Lumumba, but the Congolese leader was given half an hour on July 29 with Secretary of State Herter. Lumumba left a bad impression on the Americans. Herter's deputy, C. Douglas Dillon, who attended the meeting, later recalled that Lumumba struck him as "a person who is gripped by this fervor that I can only describe as messianic . . . he was just not a rational being."74 Lumumba's request for
U.S. assistance, which included a plane that he and Kasavubu could use to get around the Congo, fell on deaf ears. The administration wanted all support for the Congolese government to go through the UN lest it establish a precedent that the Soviets could use to outbid Washington.75

Lumumba next went to Ottawa, and the Canadian government was as unhelpful as the U.S. government. Frustrated by the lack of success, Lumumba went to see the Soviet ambassador in Canada, A. A. Aroutunian. A few days later, when he reached New York for more lobbying at the UN, Lumumba followed up the talk with Aroutunian with a second conversation with Kuznetsov.76 Afterward Lumumba flew to Western Europe to continue his search for allies in the fight against Brussels and Elisabethville.

The threat of Soviet intervention propelled the UN to take one of the steps that Lumumba had requested. On August 1 Moscow issued a public statement that "[i]f the event of the aggression against the Congo continuing . . . the Soviet government will not hesitate to take resolute measures to rebuff the aggressors who . . . are in fact acting with the encouragement of all the colonialist powers of NATO" and appointed a Soviet ambassador to the Congo. The next day Hammarskjöld declared that the UN force would enter Katanga Province on August 6. For some time the secretary-general had been telling the U.S. government that the UN had to go into Katanga to deny Moscow a pretext for military intervention.77 The Kremlin's statement made the argument for him.

As Moscow was preparing its response to Nkrumah, Hammarskjöld reported to the UN Security Council that on the advice of Ralph Bunche, his personal representative in the Congo, he had decided to postpone the entry of UN troops into the secessionist province because of the likelihood the Katangans would attack them. He still wanted to send them in, but he wanted the consent of the secessionists and Belgium, which was increasingly acting as Katanga's ally and protector.80 In response to the secretary-general's initiative, the Soviets proposed a new Security Council resolution that drew a clear distinction between his and the Kremlin's approach to the crisis. Whereas Hammarskjöld continued to look for a diplomatic way to restore order in Katanga without in any way tipping the balance toward either Tshombe or Lumumba, the Soviets wanted UN troops to enter the rebellious province and "put an end to acts directed against the territorial integrity of the Republic of Congo."81 Moscow knew that it did not have the votes for this resolution. On August 9 it withdrew this resolution in favor of a compromise proposed by Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and Tunisia, which demanded the "immediate" withdrawal of Belgian forces from Katanga and the deployment of UN forces to the province, while reaffirming that UN troops could not participate in the civil war between the Congolese government and Tshombe.82

With the United Nations unwilling to defend the unity of the Congo, the Kremlin stepped up its support for the central government in Léopoldville and its allies. On August 11 the Presidium approved a letter from Khrushchev assuring Ghana that it could count on receiving Soviet weapons if they were needed in the Congo conflict. More important, Ghana received a promise "to give the African people not only symbolic assistance but real help in this struggle."83 The same day a Soviet Il-I4 transport plane arrived in the Congo as a personal gift to Patrice Lumumba.84
Lumumba had meanwhile returned to Léopoldville from his extended trip to the United States and Europe. Although the UN’s August 9 resolution was disappointing, he was emboldened by Khrushchev’s letter to apply even more pressure on the UN to defend the principle of a united Congo. On August 14, a day after appealing for unity in a speech to the Congolese people, Lumumba issued a series of demands in a letter to Hammarskjöld, who was back in the Congo. The central government wanted Congolese troops, not the UN, to guard Congo’s airports, it wanted African and Congolese troops to be sent to Katanga and all non-African UN troops to be removed, and it wanted all weapons captured by the UN in Katanga to be turned over to the government. Over the next twenty-four hours, although Lumumba and Hammarskjöld both were in Léopoldville, they communicated by letter. Five letters passed between them, and Lumumba’s became increasingly angry. At one point he charged that Hammarskjöld, a Swede, was not impartial because of the dynastic ties between the Swedish and Belgian royal families. The secretary-general’s response was to return to New York, and relations between the men were ruptured.85

At this point Lumumba formally requested Soviet military assistance. Although Lumumba claimed that Kasavubu had agreed to make this request to Moscow, the Congolese president later denied it and soon used the government’s turn to the East against his prime minister. Khrushchev had been expecting a request, and on August 20 the Kremlin agreed to send cargo planes to the Congo. Five days later the Soviets requested permission from the Greek government to overfly its territory and refuel in Athens. The Greeks, who told United States about the Soviet request, agreed so long as they could inspect the cargoes.86 On August 28 ten Il-14s took off from Moscow for Léopoldville, via Athens, with foodstuffs for the Congolese people.87 Soviet military assistance took a different route. Four days later five AN-12 cargo planes left Moscow for Conakry, Guinea, filled with weapons and ammunition for the Congolese.88

With Khrushchev’s direct involvement in the Congo conflict, fears that it had become a second Cuba bubbled over in Washington. Throughout July the U.S. government had continued to hope that the UN could stabilize the situation and prevent the Kremlin from increasing its influence. There had also been a debate over Lumumba’s politics. “Despite charges by the Belgians and his Congolese opponents that Lumumba is a communist,” concluded the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research in late July, “we have nothing to substantiate this allegation.”89 The news in August that Soviet cargo planes were flying to Congo settled the debate about Lumumba.

The news also had an impact on a much broader discussion in the administration. Coming on the heels of the apparent Soviet gains in Cuba, the summer’s events in the Congo suggested that the third world was nearing a tipping point that required more energetic U.S. action if the entire region was not to be lost to communism. Eisenhower had told his foreign policy team on August 1 that the world was in “a kind of ferment” greater than he could remember “in recent times.” “The Communists,” he added, are trying to take control of this and have succeeded to the extent that students in many cases are now saying that the Communists are thinking of the common man while the United States is dedicated to supporting outmoded regimes.”90

On August 18, 1960, the administration began seriously preparing for the removal of the prime ministers of both the Congo and Cuba.91 At a morning meeting of the NSC the president said that Western troops might have to intervene in the Congo under the UN flag. “We should do so even if such action was used by the Soviets as the basis for starting a fight.”92 Eisenhower was convinced that Lumumba was on the Soviet payroll, and the council discussed rumors that Belgian Communists or Soviet advisers were writing his cables and plotting strategy. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs requested that the White House consider overt and covert measures to keep a Congolese airfield and one port out of Soviet control, predicting that “the covert activities of just a few Communist infiltrating such essential facilities” could “threaten the Free World’s essential South Atlantic sea routes.”93 The Joint Chiefs presented no evidence for this, nor had they ever previously described the sub-Saharan region as a U.S. vital interest. But such was the emotional pitch that August in Washington. Formal planning for covert action to unseat Lumumba began after this meeting.

That afternoon the CIA updated the president on the progress of the anti-Castro planning. For months the administration had been watching developments in Cuba with dismay, reacting to them with more and more active planning but no action. Most recently, on July 21, the CIA had sent a message to the head of its station in Havana: “Possible removal top three leaders [Fidel, Raúl, and Che] is receiving serious consideration at HQS.”94 The next day the same officer was told, “Do not pursue. . . . Would like to drop matter.”95

The change in Washington’s mood in August inspired renewed planning by the CIA, which now offered a three-point initiative, involving the creation of an opposition, black propaganda (covertly distributed false rumors and assertions concerning the regime), and paramilitary training of a shock force
of Cuban émigrés. Most of the discussion concerned the third point. As outlined by Richard Bissell, the agency’s King Midas, who had turned the U-2 program around in the 1950s, this involved the training of five hundred exiles in Guatemala for infiltration into the Cuban mountains. They would be introduced into the country in groups of seventy-five, dropped and supplied by air. over several months these units would make contact with the thousand or so rebels estimated to be actively fighting the regime on the island. Because Bissell was not completely confident that the paramilitary infiltration and the development of a resistance following infiltration would be enough to topple the regime, the agency had begun thinking of a backup émigré invasion of the Isle of Pines to establish a base from which a government-in-exile recognized by the United States could operate.

It was in this climate that the administration instructed the CIA to begin looking at how to kill both Patrice Lumumba and Fidel Castro. The U.S. government had considered political assassination as a tool of foreign policy once before. Between 1952 and 1954 the CIA had investigated ways of murdering key Guatemalan officials, including President Jacobo Arbenz. According to an internal CIA study, “some assassins were selected, training began, and tentative ‘hit lists’ were drawn up.”96 The State Department under Presidents Truman and Eisenhower was aware of this planning. The Eisenhower administration found a different way to remove Arbenz, however, before the CIA ever received a formal order to use this particular tool.97

It is one of the conundrums of the Cold War that it was the democratic West and not the Soviet Union that considered the use of political assassination as a means of increasing its influence in the third world. There is no evidence that the Presidium in the Khrushchev era ever contemplated killing Tshombe or Kasavubu or the leaders of the Cuban exile community, let alone the leaders of pro-Western developing countries like Tunisia and Thailand. This difference may reflect Khrushchev’s innate optimism about Soviet prospects in the region, as compared with the deep pessimism of Dwight Eisenhower and even that of his successor, John F. Kennedy, about U.S. prospects in the third world.

In August 1960 the CIA opened contacts with members of the Mafia to plan a hit on Castro.98 The Mafia had its own reasons for wanting to eliminate the Cuban leader: He had closed its casinos in Havana. The planning against Lumumba, however, was more urgent, and the CIA received much clearer instructions from the White House. On August 25 the subcommittee of the NSC responsible for planning covert action recommended that “planning for the Congo would not necessarily rule out ‘consideration’ of any par-

icular kind of activity which might contribute to getting rid of Lumumba.”99 Eisenhower had already sent word to this group through his national security adviser that he wanted “very straightforward action in this situation.” On August 26 Allen Dulles reported to the CIA chief in Congo that “we conclude that [Lumumba’s] removal must be an urgent and prime objective and that under existing conditions this should be a high priority of our covert action.”100 The CIA station in Léopoldville was authorized to spend up to a hundred thousand dollars to “carry out any crash programs.”

HAVING VOLUNTEERED to risk a minor intervention in Africa, Khrushchev decided to go himself to the United Nations to rally the support of the Afro-Asian countries for Lumumba’s cause and the Soviet Union. The new General Assembly session was scheduled to begin September 20. The Soviet leader decided to go by ship. The creaky Tu-114 that had brought him across the Atlantic in 1959 was undergoing repairs, and no other aircraft in the Soviet fleet could take him nonstop from Moscow to New York City. The trip on the steamer Baltika would take ten days, so he intended to bring along several East bloc leaders to allow for some conferences on the way over.

As Khrushchev was preparing to leave the Soviet Union in early September, the situation worsened in Congo. Secretary-General Hammarskjöld had lost his patience with Lumumba and told the Americans that he must be “broken.”101 The UN leader, who now shared the dire opinion of the Eisenhower administration, had become convinced that the situation in the Congo could not be stabilized until Lumumba was out of the way. Hammarskjöld “is clearly looking forward to forcing issue with Lumumba,” the US ambassador to the United Nations Henry Cabot Lodge had reported, “but wants latter to create the situation.”102

Equally worried was President Kasavubu, who insisted that he had not been consulted on Lumumba’s request to Khrushchev for Soviet military assistance. On September 5 Kasavubu dismissed Lumumba on the grounds that his handling of relations with the Soviets suggested he was trying to turn the Congo into a dictatorship.

Kasavubu’s action caused both a constitutional crisis in Congo and an international crisis between the Soviet Union, which supported Lumumba, and those countries that did not.103 The Congolese president had the right under the constitution to fire the prime minister. However, the elected Congolese Parliament voted on September 9 to annul Kasavubu’s decree against Lumumba and on September 14 called for a cabinet shuffle, retaining
Lumumba as prime minister but dropping some of his allies." Meanwhile, afraid that the Soviets might try to intervene to restore Lumumba, the UN's local commander ordered the closure of the country's airports and shut down Léopoldville's only radio station after allowing Kasavubu to make a public announcement of Lumumba's dismissal.

Khrushchev was furious when these events in the Congo were reported to him, and he lost any remaining trust in the leadership of the UN. After having argued for two months that it could not intervene in the domestic affairs of the Congo, the UN was now siding with Kasavubu against Khrushchev's ally. The Soviets refused to recognize Lumumba's firing and continued with plans to assist the Congolese Army in attacking Katanga. On September 5, 6, and 7 Soviet transport planes, piloted by Soviet citizens, flew an estimated 450 Congolese soldiers south from Lumumba's headquarters in Stanleyville in the northern Congo in likely preparation for an attack on Tshombe's forces. Moscow permitted Soviet pilots, at some risk to their planes, to take off and land from the grasslands near the airports that had been closed by the UN.

Khrushchev sailed for the United States on September 9 and had to monitor the developments in Central Africa from the ship. "All the way across the Atlantic on our way to New York," Khrushchev later remembered, "we had kept in close touch with our Foreign Ministry about the situation in the Congo, sending and receiving coded messages between our ship and Moscow." Meanwhile, although Khrushchev refused to abandon Lumumba, the Soviet government did place a temporary halt to the use of Soviet planes by the Lumumbists.

On September 14 Lumumba suffered an even more dramatic blow orchestrated in part by the U.S. government. Lumumba's former personal secretary, Joseph Désiré Mobutu, whom he had promoted to a leadership position in the Congolese National Army, staged a coup against him. Mobutu seized power, pledging that the country's elected leaders would be replaced by nonpartisan, nonsectarian professionals until the end of the year, by which time the constitutional crisis could be resolved. "This is not a revolution," said Mobutu; "it is a truce." In early September, after Kasavubu had proved unable to remove Lumumba, the U.S. Embassy in Léopoldville began intensive discussions with Mobutu, who had been trained in the United States, to encourage him to take action against the Lumumbists and the Soviet bloc. On September 16 Mobutu's forces chased the elected representatives out of the parliament building in Léopoldville, and the next day he ordered the Soviets and the Czechs to close their embassies. Although Mobutu was criticized by Kasavubu for being "insolent," he was allowed to remain president.

Mobutu's coup and the subsequent expulsion of Soviet diplomats sharpened Khrushchev's anger at Hammarskjöld and the UN. "I spit on the UN," Khrushchev said in reaction to the unceasingly bad news from the Congo. "It's not our organization.... That good-for-nothing Ham is sticking his nose in important affairs which are none of his business.... We'll really make it hot for him." The Soviet delegate at the UN, Valerian Zorin, received instructions to charge Hammarskjöld with colluding with the Americans to remove Lumumba from power. But Khrushchev was determined to do more. He wanted Hammarskjöld's resignation and thought it time to eliminate the secretary-general position altogether. "On the ship's deck the thought came to me," Khrushchev explained a month later to his colleagues in the Kremlin, "about the structure of the United Nations." Believing the future of the UN was at stake, he concluded that a troika of representatives from the three worlds—capitalist, socialist, and neutral—should jointly run the organization. While deciding to raise the pressure on the UN, Khrushchev nevertheless decided to reduce the immediate risks for the Soviets in the Congo conflict. Moscow ordered the Soviet pilots and planes, whose missions in support of the Lumumbists had already been suspended pending developments, to return with its diplomats.

Events at the UN in the days before Khrushchev arrived in the New York showed that he faced a tough campaign to rally majority support for reforming the UN's leadership structure and reversing its policy in the Congo. In response to Zorin's charge, Hammarskjöld had appealed for a show of confidence from the delegates. He got it in a resolution proposed by the Ghanaian delegation. Accra supported Lumumba but had no interest in allowing the Congo to become a battlefield in the Cold War. Passed by a unanimous 70–0 vote on September 18, the resolution affirmed that Hammarskjöld should take "vigorous action" to implement Security Council resolutions and declared that no state should send arms or military personnel into the Congo except as part of the UN mission. Only the Soviet bloc, France, and South Africa abstained. Not one of Khrushchev's new allies in Africa or Asia had opposed the resolution.

Washington was no more confident of the outcome in the Congo than was Khrushchev. The administration did not believe that Mobutu alone could effectively contain the threat from Lumumba. On September 16 Lumumba delivered himself into the protective custody of the United Nations. He was given UN guards and allowed to walk around Léopoldville.
On September 24 Allen Dulles reaffirmed Washington's desire to "eliminate Lumumba from any possibility of resuming government position." Two days later the CIA sent its science adviser, Dr. Sidney Gottlieb, to the Congo with a collection of poisons to use against Lumumba. It was believed possible to gain access to his home and put the poison in his toothpaste. Lawrence Devlin, the CIA station chief in Léopoldville, was told that the order to kill Lumumba had come from Eisenhower. When Devlin asked if Gottlieb had actually heard the president say these words, Gottlieb said no but explained that Bissell, the CIA's influential deputy director for plans, had assured him that the president had issued the order.

THE STEAMER Baltika with Khrushchev and his delegation on board arrived in New York Harbor on September 19. Khrushchev had not told the Americans how long he planned to spend in New York. There were rumors that he would ring in the New Year in the city famous for its street party in Times Square. Unlike in 1959, the administration did not throw out any red carpet for him. Khrushchev had mentioned his interest in meeting President Eisenhower to the international press, but the president did not respond with an invitation.

In his speech to the General Assembly four days later, Khrushchev blasted the Western powers for their machinations in the Congo. He denied Lumumba was a Communist and warned the West not to celebrate its victory over him too soon. Then he attacked the leadership of the United Nations. Calling it "one-sided," he outlined his troika proposal.

Hammarskjöld refused to resign. In a calm but firm speech on September 26, he defended the office of the secretary-general. "This is a question not of a man," he said, "but of an institution."

Between sessions, Khrushchev met with world leaders to solicit support for restructuring the UN. He spent a lot of time with President Nasser of the United Arab Republic and the Ghanaian leader, Kwame Nkrumah. Both men received Soviet military assistance and were pro-Lumumba, yet both disappointed Khrushchev. Ultimately, with one important exception, none of the Soviet Union's third world allies—India, Ghana, Guinea, the United Arab Republic—supported Khrushchev's call to replace Hammarskjöld with a troika. Guinea's Sékou Touré was the most publicly critical of Hammarskjöld, but like Nkrumah, he only endorsed a compromise plan to ensure that Hammarskjöld's three deputies represented each of the three world groupings.

Nkrumah presented Khrushchev with the most interesting paradox. On
August 6 the African leader had asked for secret Soviet military assistance, now at their meeting in New York he privately told Khrushchev that “there is no other path for Africa except socialism,” but in the General Assembly he refused to support the attack on Hammarskjöld. 122

Fidel Castro was the lone exception among Khrushchev’s third world allies. The two met for the first time at the Soviet consulate and quickly established a personal rapport. The Cubans then demonstrated their friendship by following the Soviets in voting against Hammarskjöld’s Congo policy and in calling for UN restructuring.

Although Khrushchev could not gain enough votes for his UN proposals, his energetic diplomacy did affect Hammarskjöld’s handling of the Congo operation. The UN informed its team in the Congo that Lumumba would have to be a part of any political settlement. When the United States asked the UN to allow Mobutu’s forces to arrest Lumumba, the secretary-general refused. Instead he wanted Lumumba kept in “cold storage” under UN protection until a political settlement involving all of the parties could be reached. 123 When Mobutu’s troops appeared with an arrest warrant at the house where the UN was protecting Lumumba on October 10, the Ghanaian soldiers guarding Lumumba as part of the UN force told them to leave. 124

Disappointed by the secretary-general’s sudden reluctance to pursue Lumumba, the United States accelerated its own efforts to eliminate the deposed prime minister. The CIA considered both using Congolese agents in an assassination attempt and deploying “a commando-type group” to remove Lumumba from UN custody. Devlin, the CIA’s station chief in Léopoldville, did not want to use the poison sent to him from headquarters and threw it into the Congo River. 125 Instead he cabled Washington on October 17 to recommend that headquarters send “soonest high powered foreign make rifle with telescopic scope and silencer. Hunting good here when light’s right.” 126

Khrushchev was the center of attention throughout his three weeks in New York. The day before he left, he ensured that this became an indelible impression. While listening to a Filipino diplomat chastise the Soviet Union for its colonial behavior in Eastern Europe, Khrushchev began pounding the desk with both fists. Figuring he was not making enough noise, he then slipped off one of his loafers and began pounding with it. An embarrassed Gromyko, who looked as if he were “about to plunge into a pool of icy water,”
removed his shoe and gingerly accompanied his boss as if shoe drumming
were a traditionally acceptable form of protest at the United Nations.127

A buoyant Khrushchev flew back to Moscow on October 13 on a Soviet
plane. Although none of his African or Asian allies had endorsed his propos­
als for reforming the UN, he told the Presidium two days later that he had
made the case effectively. He had no doubts about his campaign against
Hammarskjöld. Indeed, he informed his colleagues that henceforth "[w]e will
not agree to any disarmament if the structure of the UN does not get
changed."128 He also brooked no questioning about Soviet policy toward
Cuban emigres, in neighboring Latin American countries to remove the Castro regime. That same day the
Cubans deployed thousands of militiamen along the southern coast of the
island, where an invasion force from Guatemala might land. On October 27,
1960, Cuban forces were placed on the highest military alert.131

Khrushchev responded by restating his July threat to use nuclear weapons
to defend the Castro regime. This time, however, he believed that the threat to
Castro was real. The TASS news service released on October 29 a transcript of
an interview Khrushchev gave to a Cuban journalist in which he warned the
United States not to force him to make good on his "symbolic" threat to use
nuclear weapons.132

The tension over the Caribbean lasted another ten days. When John F.
Kennedy won a razor-thin victory over Richard Nixon on November 8, the
Soviets and Cubans relaxed. The feared preelection attack had not happened.

Whereas Khrushchev could believe he had protected Castro, he was not
able to save Lumumba. In November the Soviets lost a crucial diplomatic bat­
tle at the UN when the United States successfully lobbied to seat a Congolese
delegation led by Kasavubu. The vote went 53–24 (19 abstentions) against the
Soviets and their friends, with the margin of victory coming from the former
French colonies in West Africa.

When Lumumba learned of Kasavubu’s victory in New York, he looked for
an opportunity to rally his own forces. Taking advantage of a thunderstorm,
Lumumba escaped from his UN guards on the night of November 27. His
flight worried Mobutu and his Western allies. Were Lumumba to reach
Stanleyville, where the bulk of his supporters were forming a resistance to
Soviet military assistance. While Mobutu’s forces launched a manhunt, the
CIA sent a contract killer, a European with a criminal record, to Stanleyville
with orders to murder Lumumba. Meanwhile UN headquarters ordered the
UN force to step aside and allow events to take their course.

Although Lumumba’s name was well known throughout the Congo, his
image was not. As he and his men traveled the seven hundred miles to
Stanleyville in a convoy, they were repeatedly stopped by tribesmen who did
not believe that this figure in sports shirt was the “savior” Lumumba. “You
are a liar. We know Lumumba well. He always wears suits and glasses. But
you?” one village headman reportedly said to Lumumba.134 These delays did
not worry Lumumba, who took time to give long speeches in the villages
along the way. A spectator at one of these speeches tipped off Mobutu’s force,
and the hunt narrowed. On December 2 Lumumba was captured in view of a
contingent of UN troops from Ghana. When the troops requested permission to rescue Lumumba, New York stuck to its position of neutrality. Lumumba disappeared into Mobutu’s custody.

The first eleven months of 1960 had taught Khrushchev some hard lessons about the perils of establishing new allies in the third world. He assumed the United States had connived with Hammarskjöld to neutralize Lumumba and had a lot of evidence that Washington was trying to overthrow Castro. There could be no doubt that the administration was at least determined to deny Moscow any and all of these new allies. If Moscow wanted to continue winning new allies, Khrushchev understood that political and economic competition might not be enough. He had to be prepared to take some military risks. Southeast Asia, an area that previously he had left to the Chinese and the North Vietnamese, would be the proving ground for this new form of the strategy of peaceful coexistence.

The coup of August 9, 1960, was a surprise to all but the Second Battalion of the Royal Lao Army and its commander, Kong Le. Kong had duped the United States, the main foreign supporter of the Lao Army, into helping him. A week earlier, at Kong’s request, U.S. military advisers had given the battalion training in a nighttime takeover of the capital. The explanation given by Kong-Le and his men was that they needed to know this in case it was ever attempted by the Communist Pathet Lao.

Only twenty-six years old, this young commander—professed no wish to be the generalissimo of Laos. Once the coup succeeded, he threw his allegiance behind a former Lao prime minister, Souvanna Phouma, and called for a return to a foreign policy of genuine neutrality. Kong-Le was no Communist, but he considered himself an anti-American nationalist. Whereas in Egypt Nasser had initially been able to reconcile a desire for better relations with the United States with strong nationalism, this was more difficult for nationalists in Southeast Asia, where since 1954 the United States had been seen as the principal imperialist power. Kong-Le clearly blamed the United States for having brought the Cold War into Lao politics. The major task facing the Laotian people, he said in the months after the coup, was to “drive away the Americans.”21

The coup in Laos, a country that had never before attracted his attention, fitted a predictable and welcome pattern for Nikita Khrushchev. Once more an anti-imperialist leader had emerged to lead a nationalist movement in the third world. Yet in August 1960 Khrushchev was much too preoccupied with the nationalists in the Congo and Cuba to take much notice of this development in Laos.

At a conference in Geneva in 1954 the Soviet Union, along with China, Great Britain, and the United States, had formally dismantled the French