"Last week, as John Kennedy closed out the first 100 days of his administration, the U.S. suffered a month-long series of setbacks rare in the history of the Republic." Asked how he liked being president, Kennedy replied that he liked it better before the Bay of Pigs. He also described himself as "always on the edge of irritability."

"Sons of bitches," Kennedy said after reading Time's critical assessment of his first hundred days. "If they want this job they can have it tomorrow."

Yet however frustrated he was by events and his own stumbles, Kennedy was determined to use the problems of his first months as object lessons in how to be more effective. His resolve stood him in good stead: He managed coming crises with greater skill and a growing conviction that he might be an above average and maybe even a memorable president after all.

CHAPTER 11

A World of Troubles

We face a relentless struggle in every corner of the globe.

— John F. Kennedy, April 20, 1961

In the fifteen years since the onset of the Cold War, Americans had struggled with their fears. The long tradition of "free security," weak neighbors, and vast oceans, which had insulated the country from foreign dangers, had done little to prepare it for a drawn-out contest with a hostile superpower convinced that its ideology and that of the United States could not coexist. The tensions over the East-West divide and America's apparently unprecedented vulnerability to attack tested the country's self-confidence.

In the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy mirrored this national anxiety. In a speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors on April 20, he spoke apocalyptically about the Cold War. "If the self-discipline of the free cannot match the iron discipline of the mailed fist — in economic, political, and scientific .. struggles as well as the military — then the peril to freedom will continue to rise," he predicted. Cuba was a case in point. "The evidence is clear — and the hour is late," he said. "We and our Latin friends will have to face the fact that we cannot postpone any longer the real issue of survival of freedom in this hemisphere itself." It was "clearer than ever that we face a relentless struggle in every corner of the globe that goes beyond the clash of armies or even nuclear weapons. . . . We dare not fail to see the insidious nature of this new and deeper struggle . . . [which] is taking place every day, without fanfare, in thousands of villages and markets — day and night — and in classrooms all over the globe." The message underlying this clash was that "the complacent, the self-indulgent, the soft societies
are about to be swept away with the debris of history. Only the strong, only the industrious, only the determined, only the courageous, only the visionary who determine the real nature of our struggle can survive.” It sounded like Theodore Roosevelt and what Kennedy himself had said in the forties in response to earlier foreign threats.

In the spring of 1961, Labor Secretary Arthur Goldberg reported that Soviet steel production had equaled that of the United States in the fourth quarter of 1960. As more thoughtful observers understood then and as we know now, Soviet competitiveness, except in armaments, was illusory. Back in 1958, Willard Mathias in the Office of National Estimates had predicted that communism’s inability to produce sufficient consumer goods and resistance to sharing power with a growing middle class of Soviet professionals and technocrats would ultimately destroy the party’s power. (Six years later, Mathias would describe this “evolution” as “probably irreversible.”) In June 1961, Walter Heller told JFK that “the Soviets have no reasonable hope of outproducing us in the next 10–25 years unless the U.S. economy slows down miserably. . . . On a per capita basis, the Soviet GNP in 1959 was only 39% of ours.” The Soviets could not equal U.S. output until 1990, Heller said — and that was in the unlikely event they maintained a 6 percent annual growth rate; it would probably not be until 2010 that the Soviets caught up to the United States, if even then. But such assessments of Soviet weakness were frowned upon in the fifties and sixties. An American army general told Mathias that he was “suspected of being a communist agent because [he had] not been tough enough on the Russians.” And for the moment, Kennedy was as much in the grip of conventional Cold War thinking as most other Americans. The keen analytic powers and wise judgments displayed in his pre-presidential views on colonialism temporarily deserted him.

Convinced that the Bay of Pigs failure could be attributed partly to press stories that had alerted Castro to an invasion, Kennedy used an April address to the American Newspaper Publishers Association to urge the country to sacrifice some of its traditional freedoms. Kennedy twitted the largely Republican audience by suggesting that his talk might better be called “The President Versus the Press” rather than “The President and the Press.” He denied an intention to impose any form of censorship or to establish an “official secrets act,” as Allen Dulles suggested, or to control the flow of information through an office of war information, but he urged the publishers to ask themselves if what they printed was not only news but “in the interest of national security.” Seeing Kennedy’s remarks as an implicit threat, several editors and publishers requested a meeting at the White House. Kennedy agreed, and at the meeting they pressed him to cite examples of irresponsible reporting. Kennedy singled out the New York Times and revelations about the Cuban invasion. At the close of the meeting, however, in an aside to Times editor Turner Catledge, Kennedy acknowledged the essential role of a critical free press: “Maybe if you had printed more about the operation,” he said, “you would have saved us from a colossal mistake.”

Kennedy’s tensions with the press extended to worries about invasions of his privacy. In his address to the publishers, he denied that his remarks were “intended to examine the proper degree of privacy which the press should allow to any President and his family.” He wryly observed that the attendance of reporters and photographers at weekly church services had “surely done them no harm.” He was unapologetic about breaking with Eisenhower’s practice of letting journalists attend his golf games. But then, Kennedy noted with charming self-deprecation, Ike’s golfing accomplishments did not include the beaming of a Secret Service agent.

But Kennedy’s concern was not with the usual press aggressiveness in covering a president’s family and recreational activities. Rather, he was increasingly worried about disclosures detailing his much-rumored womanizing. Almost everyone in the press corps knew about or at least suspected his philandering, columnist Bob Novak later said. From the start of his presidency, some ultra-right-wing papers and what one historian called the “underground market” were swamped with exposes about JFK’s hidden, illicit romances. But the mainstream press resisted such scandal mongering. Lyndon Johnson’s hideaway office on Capitol Hill, for example, where he indulged in recreational sex, was an open secret during his vice presidency; reporters privately joked about LBJ’s “nooky room.” Yet nobody in the mainstream press thought it was worth writing about.

The fact that such gossip was confined to a fringe media, which earned a living from unsubstantiated rumors, made Kennedy himself largely indifferent to these articles at the start of his presidency. The fact that the gossip, much of which was true, might trouble Jackie was not enough to rein him in. Indeed, such talk, which
added to a romantic, macho image that contrasted sharply with that of his stodgy predecessor, may even have appealed to JFK. Nevertheless, despite the press restraint, people around the president worried about his vulnerability to enemies who might try to break tradition and embarrass him with published accounts of his affairs. Ten days after Kennedy became president, J. Edgar Hoover passed along a report from a field agent about a woman who claimed to be JFK’s lover. “Once every two or three months, similar missives would arrive in Bobby’s office from the director, not-so-subtle signals that Hoover was keeping, and regularly updating, a file on the president. Blackmail,” Bobby Kennedy biographer Evan Thomas concluded, “was an efficient means towards Hoover’s true end, the preservation of his own power.” It was also Hoover’s way of ingratiating himself with Bobby, his immediate boss, and the president. His reports were meant to say, I am your protector, keeping you up-to-date on allegations and dangers you might want to preempt.

There is no evidence that rumors about Kennedy’s sex life or, for that matter, the escapades themselves distracted him from important business in the first months of his term. Between November and February he had exchanged conciliatory messages with Khrushchev, and on February 22, he expressed the hope that they might be able to meet soon “for an informal exchange of views,” which could contribute to “a more harmonious relationship between our two countries.” But the Bay of Pigs invasion undermined whatever goodwill the initial Kennedy-Khrushchev exchanges had generated. Seeing Kennedy as thrown on the defensive by his embarrassing failure, Khrushchev went on the attack. “It is a secret to no one,” he wrote Kennedy, “that the armed bands invading Cuba were trained, equipped and armed in the United States of America.” He promised to give Cuba “all necessary help to repel armed attack” and warned that “conflagration in one region could endanger settlements elsewhere.”

Kennedy manfully responded that the invasion was a demonstration of brave patriots determined to restore freedom to Cuba. He emphasized that the United States intended no military intervention on the island but was obliged “to protect this hemisphere against external aggression.” Kennedy also warned against using Cuba as a pretext for inflaming other areas of the world, which would endanger the general peace. He asked Khrushchev to “recognize that free people in all parts of the world do not accept the claim of historical inevitability for Communist revolution. What your government believes is its own business; what it does in the world is the world’s business. The great revolution in the history of man, past, present, and future, is the revolution of those determined to be free.”

Kennedy’s greatest fear was that Moscow might use Cuba as an excuse to close off West Berlin, to which many educated East Germans and other East Europeans were fleeing from communism. When Nixon had urged JFK to find an excuse for invading Cuba, Kennedy had replied that an invasion would risk a war with Russia over Berlin and his priority had to be world peace. If there was to be a next world war, Berlin, Kennedy believed, would be where it began.

Khrushchev answered Kennedy with a fifteen-page letter reiterating his accusations about U.S. interference in Cuba and restating his warnings that this was no way to ease Soviet-American tensions. Kennedy wisely left Khrushchev’s letter unanswered. Still, because Khrushchev was as intent as Kennedy on avoiding a nuclear conflict, the Soviet leader seized upon the president’s February proposal for a meeting in Vienna on June 3 to 4. Although Khrushchev did not say so, it was clear to Kennedy that Berlin, which Khrushchev described as “a dangerous source of tension in the very heart of Europe,” was also his greatest concern.

Kennedy’s first three months in office had confirmed his belief that overseas perils should take priority over economic and social reforms, but because he believed that an effective foreign policy partly depended on a strong economy and social cohesion at home, he felt compelled to strike a balance between external and internal initiatives. His dilemma, as he saw it, was that domestic proposals could do more to divide than unite the country.

On April 18, in the midst of the Bay of Pigs crisis, he asked Congress to create a new cabinet department of urban affairs and housing as a way to halt “the appalling deterioration of many of our country’s urban areas,” rehabilitate the nation’s cities, where 70 percent of Americans lived, and ensure “adequate housing for all segments of our population.” It seemed like an apple pie and motherhood proposal, but it quickly ran into opposition from southern senators and congressmen representing rural areas and small cities. A greater emphasis in a revised bill on small communities promised to neutralize the latter, but southern opposition to an act that could
May, Kennedy proposed legislation that would primarily serve inner-city blacks and make Housing and Home Finance Agency administrator Robert Weaver the first African American cabinet secretary was unyielding. The bill was also held hostage to budget constraints imposed by the improving but still sluggish economy and increasing defense expenditures. Kennedy's reluctance to fight for something he saw as a secondary priority was as much a drag on aggressive action as the economy and southern opposition.

Consequently, in May, Kennedy proposed legislation that would stimulate the economy with limited tax reductions tied to revenue gains. He described his proposal as "a first though urgent step along the road to constructive reform." He said he planned to send a more comprehensive tax reform program to the Congress in 1962 that would stimulate "a higher rate of economic growth, [and create] a more equitable tax structure, and a simpler tax law." In the meantime, he proposed a tax incentive to businesses in the form of a credit for modernization and expansion of plant and equipment. To make up for lost income here, he proposed the end of tax exemptions for Americans earning incomes abroad in economically advanced countries and for estate taxes on overseas properties, withholding taxes on interest and dividend payments, the continuation of corporate and excise taxes scheduled to be reduced or ended in July, and a tax on civil aviation providers to help pay for the operation and improvement of the federal airways system.

Business leaders, who preferred liberalized depreciation allowances to tax credits for new plant and equipment costs, successfully blocked Kennedy's bill, demonstrating both their power as a lobby and White House inattentiveness or carelessness. Fearful of sharing the spotlight and thus diminishing JFK's standing as a domestic leader, the White House had barred Lyndon Johnson, the most skilled legislator in the administration, from a meaningful role in dealing with Congress. Instead, Kennedy, who had never shown an affinity for the sort of cooperative endeavor needed to enact major bills, relied on inexperienced aids to advance his legislative agenda. Complaining that his contacts on the Hill were not being used, Johnson said, "You know, they never once asked me about that!" The result, predictably, was a stumbling Kennedy legislative effort.

Despite his defeats on creating a housing department and tax reform, Kennedy could point to some gains in domestic affairs. The Congress agreed to an Area Redevelopment Act that fulfilled his campaign promise to help ease chronic unemployment in West Virginia and nine other states. In addition, the Congress gave Kennedy significant additions to several existing programs: expanded unemployment benefits, a higher minimum wage that included 3.6 million uncovered workers, increases in Social Security, aid to cities to improve housing and transportation, a water pollution control act to protect the country's rivers and streams, funds to continue the building of a national highway system begun under Eisenhower, and an agriculture act to raise farmers' incomes and perpetuate "a most outstanding accomplishment of our civilization...to produce more food with less people than any country on earth."

Despite these advances, the administration could not take much satisfaction from its initial domestic record. Aside from area redevelopment, the White House had no major legislative achievements. Kennedy's "highest-priority items," tax reform, federal aid to elementary and secondary education, college scholarships, and health insurance for the aged, never got out of congressional committees. Historian Irving Bernstein, who closely studied the struggles over the education and health bills, described them as political snake pits. Federal involvement in education was anathema to conservatives, who wished to preserve local control. Emotional arguments about public funding for parochial schools opened an unbridgeable gap between Catholics and Protestants. Determined to keep his campaign pledges on separation of church and state, Kennedy provoked unyielding opposition from Catholics for refusing to support direct aid to parochial schools. While some critics of his stand on education protested his adherence to traditional thinking, his advocacy of health insurance for the elderly under Social Security provoked the opposite response — warnings against administration plans to imitate communist countries by socializing medicine. Nor could a health insurance bill win approval from the House Ways and Means Committee, whose chairman, Wilbur Mills of Arkansas, would endorse only bills with clear majorities.

Supporters of the education and health bills blamed Kennedy for not providing stronger leadership. He had in fact spoken forcefully for both measures during the presidential campaign, describing them as legislative priorities. But Richard Neustadt's recent book *Presidential Power* had deepened Kennedy's understanding of a president's limited personal influence and the folly of fighting for lost causes in a Congress dominated by conservative southern Democrats allied with Republicans. The almost certain defeat of these bills in the first session of the 87th Congress made him reluctant to spend much political capital on them.
Because Kennedy had been so cautious in backing the school and health bills, pollster Lou Harris urged him to understand the need for a more substantial domestic record. "Phase Two" of Kennedy's administration "is now beginning and it is time for a new up-beat," Harris wrote him in June. "The President needs some major and specific score-throughs. While the foreign policy crisis has dominated . . . [your] time and energies, the quickest, most easily understood, and most dramatic gains are likely to be on domestic issues." Harris counseled him to make a September back-to-school fight for an education bill. It should become "a new number one domestic priority." After an education bill passed, Harris urged him to announce "Medical Care for the Aged by '62." He suggested a three-pronged attack: "A frontal assault on the AMA as an obstructive lobby holding back progress," a "grass roots" movement by "older people... who could make the Kennedy bill their rallying point," and a direct appeal to a national audience "through three separate television shows." Given the makeup of Congress in 1961, Harris's advice was less a demonstration of smart politics than an expression of frustration, shared by Kennedy, at the president's inability to make headway on two of the country's most compelling social needs and on issues that could give the Democrats a significant advantage in the 1962 congressional campaigns. Although unwilling to bring either bill up again in the fall, Kennedy vowed another effort the next year.

NOWHERE, HOWEVER, was Kennedy's frustration more evident than on civil rights. Throughout the 1960 campaign and most of his presidency he felt underappreciated by civil rights activists. After watching Kennedy's performance in the opening months of his term, Martin Luther King predicted that the new administration would do no more than reach "aggressively" for "the limited goal of token integration." He told Harris Wofford, "In the election, when I gave my testimony for Kennedy, my impression then was that he had the intelligence and the skill and the moral fervor to give the leadership we've been waiting for and do what no President has ever done. Now," after watching him in office, "I'm convinced that he has the understanding and the political skill but so far I'm afraid that the moral passion is missing." James Forman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was less convinced of the president's good intentions, describing Kennedy on civil rights as nothing more than "quick-talking [and] double-dealing." Bayard Rustin, a founder of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), believed Kennedy was "the smartest politician we have had in a long time." At one minute, according to Rustin, he called black leaders together and promised to help them get money for voter registration. The next he cozied up to "the Dixiecrats and gives them Southern racist judges who make certain that the money the Negro gets will not achieve its purpose." Rustin added: "This is the way all presidents behave. They give you as little as they can. And one of the reasons for that is they're president of all the people and they have to accommodate all segments. . . . So they are constantly weighing where is the weight of the problem for me if I don't act?" Rustin believed that "anything we got out of Kennedy came out of the objective situation and the political necessity, and not out of the spirit of John Kennedy. He was a reactor."

Much of the resentment during the first six months of Kennedy's term concerned the fact that he would neither sign a promised Executive Order desegregating federally financed housing nor ask Congress for a civil rights law. He saw either action as certain to anger southerners and lose any chance of support for other reforms. Having criticized Eisenhower's refusal to act on housing by emphasizing that it required only a stroke of the pen, Kennedy began receiving pens in the mail as a reminder of his words during the campaign. In response, Kennedy "kept muttering and kidding about how in the world he had ever come to promise that one stroke of the pen."

In May, the African American deputy DNC director, Louis Martin, wrote Ted Sorensen to say that the president's silence on the issue showed the administration as "timid and reluctant to put its full weight behind Civil Rights legislation. . . . His enemies are now being given an opportunity to charge him with inaction in a very vital area." The criticism angered the president and Bobby. They believed that they were doing as much as possible for civil rights under current constraints. True, when a Gallup poll in January asked people in the South whether the day would ever come when blacks and whites would share the same public accommodations, 76 percent said yes. But all the other polling data suggested that neither the North nor the South had a majority ready to see this happen soon. If there were federal aid to education, should money go to all public schools, including those practicing racial segregation? Gallup asked. Almost seven years after the Supreme Court declared "separate but
equal" schools unconstitutional and two thirds of the country said it supported desegregation in public schools and all forms of public transportation, 68 percent of Americans answered yes. In May and June, when asked if integration should be brought about by every means in the near future, only 23 percent agreed; 61 percent preferred gradual change. The Kennedys shared majority sentiment that peaceful demonstrations challenging southern segregation laws would do more to hurt than help bring about integration.

But it was not simply public opinion that restrained them. The Kennedy lawyers in the Justice Department believed that there were distinct limits to what the White House could do about racial injustices. Burke Marshall, the head of the department’s Civil Rights Division, told Martin Luther King that constitutional federalism placed severe restrictions on the government’s power to intervene in school desegregation or police brutality cases. The only substantial latitude the Justice Department had was to protect voting rights, and even there they had to struggle against the resistance of local southern officials to enfranchising blacks.

In March and April, a controversy erupted over hotel accommodations in Charleston, South Carolina, for a black member of the National Civil War Commission planning to attend the commemoration of the battle of Fort Sumter. When Kennedy wrote a letter to General Ulysses S. Grant III, the head of the commission, urging equal treatment for all commission members, southern delegates to the ceremony decried Kennedy’s unauthorized intrusion into the actions of a privately owned hotel. Grant’s response that the commission had no business interfering in “racial matters,” Kennedy’s inability to persuade any Charleston hotel to satisfy his request, and a decision to move the commemoration dinner to a nearby U.S. naval base that segregated its personnel embarrassed Kennedy and reinforced his determination to shun “racial politics.”

Kennedy’s relationship with Martin Luther King in 1961 reflected the administration’s eagerness to avoid too much entanglement in civil rights struggles. King was not invited to the Inauguration nor to a meeting of civil rights leaders on March 6 in Bobby’s office. As King biographer Taylor Branch said, “King’s name was too sensitive at the time, too associated with ongoing demonstrations that were vexing politicians in the South.” In late March, after King asked for a private appointment with Kennedy, O’Donnell told King that the “present international situation” — Laos, Africa, Cuba, and Soviet difficult — made it impossible for the president to find time for a meeting. Only at the end of April did the White House agree to a secret, off-the-record discussion in a private dining room at Washington’s Mayflower Hotel between King, Bobby, Louis Martin, and several Justice Department officials. King was so self-effacing and agreeable during the meeting that he got a few minutes with Kennedy at the White House afterward, and Bobby gave him the private phone numbers of Justice Department officials John Seigenthaler and Burke Marshall with instructions to call them any time voter registration workers in trouble could not get through to the FBI.

The gestures were of a piece with other administration actions the Kennedys believed gave them a claim on the appreciation of civil rights leaders. A White House “Summary of Civil Rights Progress for the Nine Months — January 20 Through October 1961” stated the Kennedy case. It described the president’s Executive Order establishing a “Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity with far greater power of enforcement than held by any predecessor agencies” and its record of having persuaded “about half of the fifty largest government contractors to undertake specific plans for progress involving recruitment, training, hiring and upgrading of Negro employees.” The committee hoped to enlist all fifty contractors in this program of “affirmative action” by the end of the year. More than “fifty outstanding Negroes” had already been appointed to high-level policy-making jobs in the administration, and government agencies were actively recruiting “qualified Negroes for federal service in the U.S. and overseas.” The Justice Department had filed twelve voting rights suits and intended to support in every appropriate way efforts of Negroes to . . . register and vote.” The administration had taken legal action and given moral and political backing to implement school desegregation across the South. And the president had set up a subcabinet group on civil rights to coordinate all federal civil rights actions. Finally, the administration stated its intention to end segregation and other forms of discrimination in interstate bus, train, and plane travel everywhere in the country within a year.

The claim about desegregating interstate transportation was a good example of why the Kennedys had limited credibility with civil rights leaders. The administration had been reluctantly drawn into the controversy. In early May, thirteen black and white members of CORE boarded Greyhound and Trailway buses in Washington, D.C.,
to travel to New Orleans through Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, and Alabama. The goal was to reach New Orleans by May 17, the seventh anniversary of the Supreme Court's school desegregation ruling. Although CORE had notified the Justice Department of its actions and a reporter had told Bobby, the White House itself had no advance warning of the trip. On May 15, newspaper stories about violence in Alabama against the Freedom Riders caught the Kennedys by surprise. Kennedy, who was scheduled to go to Canada in two days, saw the headlines as another blow to America's international prestige. "Can't you get your goddamned friends off those buses?" he asked Harris Wofford. "Tell them to call it off! Stop them!" When the Freedom Riders, several of whom had been badly beaten, abandoned the bus trip to fly from Birmingham to New Orleans and found themselves trapped in the Birmingham airport by bomb threats, Bobby asked Seigenthaler to go help them. "What sort of help do they need?" Seigenthaler asked. Bobby, who a week before at the University of Georgia had made a forceful statement of the administration's determination to enforce civil rights laws as a way to assist the fight against international communism, replied, "I think they primarily need somebody along just to hold their hand and let them know that we care."

The Kennedys believed that Bobby's Georgia speech, which had won praise from blacks and whites, and Seigenthaler's presence in Birmingham, where he helped get the Freedom Riders to New Orleans, were ample demonstrations of their commitment to civil rights and entitled them to cooperation and support from activists. A Gallup poll showing that only 24 percent of the country approved of what the Freedom Riders were doing and that 64 percent disapproved added to the Kennedys' conviction that their actions showed political courage.

Rights leaders, however, believed that the administration was doing as little as it could and much less than needed to be done. Consequently, a group of Nashville students, despite warnings that they might be killed and counterpressure from Seigenthaler, decided to go to Birmingham and then complete the bus trip to New Orleans. On their arrival, they were arrested and imprisoned by local police for violating segregation laws. The activists, held illegally in "protective custody," demanded immediate release to resume their trip. To keep the president clear of "racial politics," Bobby told the press that only he and his deputies were discussing how to proceed. But Kennedy met with this team in his bedroom, where he sat in pajamas before an uneaten breakfast. All agreed that they needed a plan for direct intervention. They ruled out federalizing the Alabama National Guard, which would add to the sense of crisis and engage the president beyond what they wanted. Instead, the president called Alabama governor John Patterson, his most reliable southern ally during the 1960 campaign. Patterson, who had no intention of falling on his sword for the Kennedys, replied through a State House operator that he was fishing in the Gulf of Mexico and was unreachable. When another call to Patterson from Kennedy brought a more direct refusal to talk, Bobby told the governor's aides that the president would be compelled to send in federal forces unless Patterson agreed to protect the Freedom Riders. Grudging agreement from Patterson to act and pressure from Bobby on Greyhound to find a driver who would risk driving an integrated bus finally got the protesters on their way to Montgomery.

In order to get Greyhound on board, Bobby had been forced to threaten a company supervisor in Birmingham. "Do you know how to drive a bus?" Bobby had asked with controlled rage. When the man said no, Bobby exploded: "Well, surely somebody in the damn bus company can drive a bus, can't they? . . . I think you . . . had better be getting in touch with Mr. Greyhound or whoever Greyhound is, and somebody better give us an answer to this question. I am — the Government is — going to be very much upset if this group does not get to continue their trip." Eavesdroppers on Bobby's telephone conversation leaked it to the press, which ran front-page stories across the South charging that Bobby was backing and abetting the Freedom Riders. In addition to the bad publicity in the South, the reports gave the Kennedys little credit with civil rights backers, who saw Bobby as reacting rather than leading on an important issue. And they undermined the administration's political influence with southern congressmen and senators, who now seemed certain to make life more difficult than ever for Kennedy on the Hill. "I never recovered from it," Bobby later said of the newspaper allegations.

The ordeal of the activists and the administration's struggle to protect them resumed in Montgomery, where a white mob carrying ax handles, baseball bats, chains, and lead pipes assaulted the Freedom Riders at the bus terminal. In the absence of city policemen, who shared local antagonism to the riders, the unrestrained mob beat the activists, reporters, photographers, and Seigenthaler, who tried to protect two women being pummeled. John Doar, a Justice Department attorney on assignment in Montgomery, was watching
from a federal building window. He described the melee to Burke Marshall on the telephone in Washington. "Oh, there are fists, punching!" he shouted into the phone. "There are no cops. It's terrible! It's terrible! There's not a cop in sight. People are yelling, 'There those niggers are! Get 'em, get 'em!' It's awful." Rioters with pipes clubbed Seigenthaler to the ground, where he lay unconscious for half an hour before being taken to a hospital.

Patterson refused to discuss the latest riot with Bobby, and after a conversation with Jack, who was away for the weekend in Middlesburg, Virginia, Bobby decided to send federal marshals to Montgomery to protect the "interstate travelers." News that King was also heading for Montgomery, to preach to the Freedom Riders at black minister Ralph Abernathy's First Baptist Church, upset Bobby, who unsuccessfully tried to dissuade King from putting himself in harm's way and adding to the local tensions. To guarantee King's safety, fifty U.S. marshals met him at the airport and escorted him to Abernathy's home. After Byron White, Kennedy's old friend and a deputy U.S. attorney general, met with Governor Patterson, who demanded withdrawal of the U.S. marshals, White called the president to recommend just that. But Kennedy, who had issued a statement after the riot at the Montgomery bus terminal saying that the U.S. government would meet its responsibility to maintain public calm, rejected White's suggestion.

Except for his statement issued from the White House press office, Kennedy remained out of sight, though Bobby consulted with him constantly during the weekend. On Sunday, May 21, a new violent confrontation erupted between the marshals and a white mob surrounding Abernathy's church, where fifteen hundred supporters of the Freedom Riders had gathered to hear King speak. To continue insulating the president from the crisis, Bobby took the lead in deploying the marshals and negotiating with local law enforcement to keep the peace. During repeated mob assaults on the church, which the marshals repelled with tear gas, King and Bobby clashed on the telephone. While King and his audience waited for more marshals to arrive, he told Bobby, "If they don't get here immediately, we're going to have a bloody confrontation." After Alabama National Guardsmen replaced the marshals and intimidated people inside the church by refusing to let them leave, King upbraided Bobby for having abandoned the congregation to the control of Patterson's hostile guardsmen. "Now, Reverend," Bobby replied impatiently, "you know just as well as I do that if it hadn't been for the U.S. marshals you'd be dead as Kelsey's nuts right now." Bobby's reference did not amuse King, who had never heard the Irish expression describing impotence. "Who's Kelsey?" he asked some aides. "That ended the conversation," Wofford says, "but there were harder words to come."

Although the people in the church were allowed to depart before dawn and the administration had a sense of triumph at having preserved law and order, the gulf between the Kennedys and civil rights advocates deepened. When Patterson had complained that the presence of U.S. marshals in Alabama was "destroying us politically," Bobby replied, "John, it's more important that these people in the church survive physically than for us to survive politically." But on Monday, after the all-night crisis at the church, Bobby wanted the Freedom Riders to call off their campaign. "They had made their point," he told Wofford. Publicly, Bobby called for a "cooling-off" period. James Farmer of CORE responded sharply. "Negroes have been cooling off for a hundred years," he said, and would be "in a deep freeze if they cooled any further." For his part, King told Time magazine, "Wait, means 'Never.' " When a reporter asked Ralph Abernathy if he was concerned about embarrassing the president, Abernathy answered, "Man, we've been embarrassed all our lives." King told some of his associates after rejecting Bobby's request, "You know, they don't understand the social revolution going on in the world, and therefore they don't understand what we're doing."

After he had issued his public statement on the disorders in Alabama, Kennedy met with a group of liberals, including the actor Harry Belafonte and Eugene Rostow, the dean of the Yale School and W. W. Rostow's brother. Belafonte respectfully asked if the president knew, they don't understand the social revolution going on in the world, and therefore they don't understand what we're doing."

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"That ended the conversation," Wofford says, "but there were harder words to come."

Although the people in the church were allowed to depart before dawn and the administration had a sense of triumph at having preserved law and order, the gulf between the Kennedys and civil rights advocates deepened. When Patterson had complained that the presence of U.S. marshals in Alabama was "destroying us politically," Bobby replied, "John, it's more important that these people in the church survive physically than for us to survive politically." But on Monday, after the all-night crisis at the church, Bobby wanted the Freedom Riders to call off their campaign. "They had made their point," he told Wofford. Publicly, Bobby called for a "cooling-off" period. James Farmer of CORE responded sharply. "Negroes have been cooling off for a hundred years," he said, and would be "in a deep freeze if they cooled any further." For his part, King told Time magazine, "Wait, means 'Never.' " When a reporter asked Ralph Abernathy if he was concerned about embarrassing the president, Abernathy answered, "Man, we've been embarrassed all our lives." King told some of his associates after rejecting Bobby's request, "You know, they don't understand the social revolution going on in the world, and therefore they don't understand what we're doing."

After he had issued his public statement on the disorders in Alabama, Kennedy met with a group of liberals, including the actor Harry Belafonte and Eugene Rostow, the dean of the Yale School and W. W. Rostow's brother. Belafonte respectfully asked if the president could say something a little more about the Freedom Riders. "No less respectfully, but more forcefully, Rostow urged "the need for moral leadership on the substantive issue of equal access to public facilities." After they left, Kennedy asked Wofford, "What in the world does [Rostow] think I should do? Doesn't he know I've done more for civil rights than any President in American history? How could any man have done more than I've done?" There was something to be said for Kennedy's point, but not as much as he thought. He had gone beyond other presidents, but it was not enough to keep up with the determined efforts of African Americans to end two centuries of oppression.
When the Freedom Riders returned to Washington after serving time in a Jackson, Mississippi, jail, Kennedy refused to see them at the White House. Nor would he follow Wofford's suggestion that he issue a statement, which "Eisenhower never did ... to give clear moral expression to the issues involved. The only effective time for such moral leadership is during an occasion of moral crisis," Wofford asserted. "This is the time when your words would mean most." Black leaders and newspaper editorials were complaining that "despite your criticism of Eisenhower on this score, you have not chosen yet to say anything about the right of Americans to travel without discrimination." Because making the moral case for a statement seemed unlikely to persuade Kennedy, Wofford also emphasized its impact on foreign affairs. "Some such vigorous statement and public appeal, on top of the effective actions of the Attorney General, past and planned, should have a good effect abroad. I note from reading the foreign press that some strong Presidential statement is awaited."

Kennedy's refusal to follow Wofford's suggestion rested on his conviction that he had done as much as he could. He understood the sense of injustice that blacks felt toward a system of apartheid in a country priding itself on traditions of freedom and equal opportunity. Southern abuse of blacks, including physical intimidation of courageous men and women practicing nonviolent protest, was not lost on him. He knew this was not simply a five-or-ten-cent increase in the minimum wage but an issue that contradicted the country's credo. Nonetheless, he gave it a lower priority than the danger of a nuclear war in which tens of millions of people could be killed and the planet suffer damages that would jeopardize human survival. He seemed to operate on the false assumption that openly and aggressively committing himself to equal rights for black Americans would somehow undermine his pursuit of world peace. Many civil rights activists justifiably concluded that Kennedy simply did not have the moral commitment to their cause, that his background as a rich man insulated from contacts with African Americans and their plight made him more an interested observer than a visceral proponent, like Hubert Humphrey, of using federal power to cure the country's greatest social ill.

FROM MAY 16 to 18, in the midst of the strife in Alabama, Kennedy made his first trip as president abroad, to Canada. Although he knew that the timing of his visit might anger civil rights activists, he saw conversations in Ottawa as too important to be deferred. Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, who wished to separate Canada from U.S. Cold War policies, opposed Washington's pressure for Canadian membership in the Organization of American States and requests to deploy nuclear weapons on Canadian soil. Because Kennedy had no hope of changing Diefenbaker's mind through private conversations, he used a speech before Parliament to plead the case for U.S. policies. He described America's historic friendship with Canada as the "unity of equal and independent nations," and urged Canadians to join the OAS as one way to make "this entire area more secure against aggression of all kinds." He emphasized how heartened the OAS would be by Canada's participation. As important, he urged the deployment of nuclear weapons for the defense of all NATO areas, meaning Canada as well as Europe, and warned, "Our opponents are watching to see if we in the West are divided. They take courage when we are."

Diefenbaker resented Kennedy's attempt to force him into unwanted actions, and after Kennedy returned to the United States, the prime minister threatened him with the publication of a memo in which Kennedy allegedly described Diefenbaker as an S.O.B. Ted Sorensen claimed that the handwritten note included an illegible reference to the OAS and nothing about Diefenbaker. After the memo incident, Bobby recalled that his brother "hated ... Diefenbaker — had contempt for him." In a private, candid response to the flap over the memo, Kennedy said, "I didn't think Diefenbaker was a son of a bitch, I thought he was a prick." ("I couldn't have called him an S.O.B.," Kennedy joked. "I didn't know he was one — at that time.") Personal animus aside, the visit to Canada added to Kennedy's foreign policy worries. Like Churchill during World War II, he could complain that the only thing worse than having allies was not having them.

The trip to Canada and a special message to Congress on May 25, a week after his return from Ottawa, reflected Kennedy's ongoing concern to restore confidence in his foreign policy leadership after the Bay of Pigs failure. Normally, he explained, a president spoke only annually on the state of the union, but these were "extraordinary times" confronting Americans with an "extraordinary challenge." Delivering his speech from the well of the House before a joint session, Kennedy solemnly reminded the Congress that the U.S. had become the world's "leader in freedom's cause. ... The great battleground for the defense and expansion of freedom today,"
he said, "is the whole southern half of the globe — Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East — the lands of the rising peoples." The adversaries of freedom were working to capture this revolution and turn it to their advantage. And although they possessed "a powerful intercontinental striking force, [and] large forces for conventional war," their "aggression is more often concealed than open."

Since America’s advantage in numbers of nuclear weapons and capacity to deliver them was secondary in this "battle for minds and souls," Kennedy omitted mention of it. Nor did he feel compelled to include the civil rights movement across the South as part of the struggle of oppressed peoples against "injustice, tyranny, and exploitation." It would be no selling point to southern congressmen and senators, whose votes were essential to increase appropriations for national defense.

The nation’s security, he explained, depended first on a stronger American economy. And this meant reducing unemployment through a Manpower Development and Training program that would give hundreds of thousands of workers displaced by technological changes new job skills. Second, business and labor needed to improve America’s balance of payments at the same time they held down prices and wages. He also proposed a new Act for International Development that could raise living standards in developing countries and make them less vulnerable to communist subversion. An increase in funding for the United States Information Agency would also combat communism in the propaganda wars being waged on radio and television in Latin America and Asia.

Expanded military assistance programs for Southeast Asian, Latin American, and African countries were no less important. In addition, spending on new kinds of forces and weapons would give the United States greater flexibility to fight either a traditional ground war or an unconventional guerrilla conflict. This was not a recommendation for diminished nuclear fighting capacity; Kennedy believed it essential to maintain the country’s nuclear arsenal at the highest level as well. Improved intelligence, especially after the Bay of Pigs, was yet another priority. It was "both legitimate and necessary as a means of self-defense in an age of hidden perils."

Halfway through his speech, Kennedy came to even bigger ticket items. He wanted to triple spending on civil defense, with additional large increases in the future. "Apathy, indifference, and skepticism" had greeted past suggestions for a national civil defense policy, Kennedy declared. Indeed, comedians had ridiculed arguments that a "well-designed" program could save millions of American lives, facetiously instructing students during a nuclear attack to "move away from windows, crouch under desks, put your head between your legs, and kiss your ass good-by." As for survival in a nuclear war, 83 percent of people polled saw their chances as poor or no more than fifty-fifty. Ninety-five percent of the public had made no plans to prepare their homes for a nuclear conflict. A majority was more receptive to building community fallout shelters, but overcoming national skepticism about an effective civil defense program was a hard sell. Soviet citizens were no less cynical about civil defense. "What should I do if a nuclear bomb falls?" a Moscow joke went. "Cover yourself with a sheet and crawl slowly to the nearest cemetery. Why slowly? To avoid panic."

Initially, Kennedy himself had been skeptical of investing in a costly fallout shelter program. In early May, when he met with several governors urging an expanded program, he had doubts that a more extensive civil defense plan would "really do the job." Marcus Raskin, an aide at the NSC, reinforced Kennedy’s skepticism. Raskin expressed "great fears for this civil defense program," which he did not think would "decrease the probabilities of war" and might even increase them. Moreover, any proposal seemed likely to intensify an unresolvable argument over whether blast or fallout shelters would save more lives.

But shelter advocates gave Kennedy two reasons for going ahead. Publicizing a shelter program "would show the world that the U.S. ... is really prepared to suffer the consequences" of a war and "would thus strengthen our negotiating position" and allied confidence in America’s willingness to protect them against Soviet aggression. Second, an expanded civil defense program would put additional strains on the Soviet economy by forcing them to spend more on nuclear arms — in retrospect, an amazing, even nutty, prescription for protecting Americans from a potential nuclear attack.

There was more. Kennedy described the program as an insurance policy, "which we could never forgive ourselves for forgoing in the event of catastrophe." The slightest possibility that millions of lives could be saved was enough to convince any president that he needed to make it part of the country’s national defense. Criticism from New York governor Nelson Rockefeller, a likely Republican opponent in 1964, of the administration’s "complacency" on the
issue was not lost on Kennedy. Indeed, Rockefeller's political challenge was more important than any real hope that the so-called shelters could save millions of Americans from an initial nuclear blast or the subsequent radiation fallout.

Kennedy's other major initiative in his speech was a declaration of intent to land a man on the moon and return him to earth before the end of the decade. Such a mission, he believed, would be of compelling value in the contest with the Soviets for international prestige, as well as a way to convince allies and neutral Third World nations of American superiority. Because he saw such a commitment as certain to divert resources from other essential needs for years to come, he believed Americans would be reluctant to embrace the idea. Indeed, Sorensen noted that the only time Kennedy ever departed extensively from a prepared text in speaking to Congress was in emphasizing the pointlessness of going ahead with a manned moon landing unless the country was willing to make the necessary sacrifices. "There is no sense in agreeing or desiring that the United States take an affirmative position in outer space, unless we are prepared to do the work and bear the burdens," he said. And, as he anticipated, Kennedy faced substantial opposition — both among the general public and within the government. A panel of scientists Eisenhower had asked to evaluate a moon flight had believed it worth doing, but Eisenhower saw a manned moon landing as a "stunt" and said privately that he "couldn't care less whether a man ever reached the moon." Kennedy's science advisers conceded that successful space probes could advance America's international prestige, but they doubted that the U.S. could beat the Russians to the moon and warned that such a project could be prohibitively expensive. David Bell, Kennedy's budget director, wondered whether the benefits of manned space flights would exceed the costs and said that the administration could find better and cheaper means of raising America's international standing. A majority of Americans agreed: 58 percent of the public thought it a poor idea to spend an estimated $40 billion — roughly $225 per person — on something the Soviets might beat them at.

But Kennedy refused to accept what he saw as a timid approach to space exploration. Acknowledging in his speech that the Soviets had a lead on the United States and that no one could guarantee "that we shall one day be first," he did "guarantee that any failure to make this effort will make us last." Psychologically, the challenge of putting a man on the moon and beating the Russians in the effort to do it resonated with Kennedy's affinity for heroic causes and the whole spirit of the New Frontier. For Kennedy, it was "clearly one of the great human adventures of modern history." As he said in a later speech, "But why, some say, the moon? ... And they may well ask, why climb the highest mountain? Why, thirty-five years ago, fly the Atlantic? ... We choose to go to the moon in this decade, and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard; because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills."

Other considerations were at work in shaping Kennedy's decision. He shared with James Webb, the head of NASA, and Johnson, the chairman of Kennedy's National Space Council, the conviction that a manned mission would yield technological, economic, and political advantages. The thirty to forty billion dollars the government seemed likely to spend on the project promised to advance America's ability to predict the weather and achieve high-speed electronic communications with satellites. Space spending would also provide jobs, and the political gains in the South and West, where NASA would primarily spend its funds, were not lost on savvy politicians like Kennedy and Johnson.

More important to Kennedy, however, than any tangible benefit was the potential boost to America's world image. In April, after Soviet cosmonaut Yury Gagarin had orbited the earth and the Bay of Pigs had humiliated the administration, Kennedy had asked Johnson to make "an overall survey of where we stand in space. Do we have a chance of beating the Soviets by putting a laboratory in space, or by a trip around the moon, or by a rocket to land on the moon, or by a rocket to go to the moon and back with a man? Is there any other space program that promises dramatic results in which we could win?" Johnson had confirmed Kennedy's supposition that a strong effort was needed at once to catch and surpass the Soviets if the United States wanted to win "control over ... men's minds through space accomplishments." Landing a man on the moon would have "great propaganda value. The real 'competition' in outer space," Johnson had added, was between the communist and U.S. social systems. Control of outer space would "determine which system of society and government [would] dominate the future ... In the eyes of the world, first in space means first, period; second in space is second in everything." When people complained about the
costs of the moon mission, Johnson replied, "Now, would you rather have us be a second-rate nation or should we spend a little money?" The president obviously agreed.

Kennedy's concern about the impact of space travel on the country's morale and its hold on world opinion registered clearly before NASA's first manned mission. Prior to Commander Alan Shepard's brief but successful space flight on May 5, Kennedy talked to Rusk and Webb about the risks of television coverage. The president "is afraid of the reaction of the public in case there is a mishap in the firing," Evelyn Lincoln noted in her diary on May 1. Webb told Kennedy that "he had tried to keep the press away from this and likewise the TV but they had been given the go sign long before he took over. In fact, the previous administration had sold rights to Life magazine on reports of this launching." Kennedy, Lincoln added, had tried unsuccessfully to reach the network executive in charge of the TV coverage "to play down the publicity and this venture as much as possible." A Pierre Salinger follow-up call had had no better result.

By contrast with civil defense, which in time proved to be a wasteful, foolish idea, a manned moon mission amounted to a highly constructive program with benefits much beyond the boost to America's international prestige. When the Shepard mission was a success, the television and magazine coverage was greatly appreciated by the administration, which realized that similar reporting could galvanize public support for the moon program.

In June, as Johnson rode in a car with the president, FCC director Newton Minow, and Shepard to a National Convention of Broadcasters, Kennedy poked the vice president and said, "You know, Lyndon, nobody knows that the Vice President is the Chairman of the Space Council. But if that flight had been a flop, I guarantee you that everybody would have known that you were the Chairman." Everyone laughed except Johnson, who looked glum and angry, especially after Minow chimed in, "Mr. President, if the flight would have been a flop, the Vice President would have been the next astronaut."

Kennedy's May 25 Address was also a forum for justifying a trip to Europe to meet with de Gaulle in Paris and Khrushchev in Vienna. He described discussions with de Gaulle as "permitting the kind of close and ranging consultation that will strengthen both our countries." Left unsaid were differences with the French that — like those with Canada — seemed harmful to U.S. national security. Kennedy hinted at the problems, saying in his May 25 speech, "Such serious conversations do not require a pale unanimity — they are rather the instruments of trust and understanding over a long road."

De Gaulle was an inherited problem. Although the French leader liked to quote Sophocles' belief that "one must wait until the evening to see how splendid the day was," de Gaulle understood that he had become a legend in his own lifetime — "a great captain of the Western World," Kennedy called him. His leadership of the Free French in World War II and his restoration of French influence after 1945 had established him as one of the twentieth century's greats, but his determination to reestablish France as a European and world power had also brought him into conflict with every president from FDR to JFK. At six-foot-three-and-a-half-inches, his physical stature complemented an imperiousness that had angered previous American presidents. Roosevelt had compared the temperamental de Gaulle to Joan of Arc and Clemenceau. He irritated Eisenhower no less. Indeed, in their January 19 meeting, Eisenhower had told Kennedy that de Gaulle's attitude jeopardized the entire Western alliance.

But Kennedy had genuine regard for de Gaulle. He admired his courage in supporting unpopular causes and shared his conviction that only through difficulty could a leader realize his potential and that "small men cannot handle great events." Specifically, Kennedy agreed with de Gaulle's conviction that the West had to resist compromises with the Soviets over Berlin; needed to back self-determination in Africa, especially in Algeria, where de Gaulle was finally accepting an end to French control; and should integrate European economies as a way to avoid resurgent German nationalism. These common beliefs encouraged Kennedy's hopes for Franco-American cooperation.

Yet Kennedy also knew that differences over nuclear weapons, NATO, and Southeast Asia put considerable strain on America's relations with France. De Gaulle, who did not trust American commitments to defend Europe with nuclear weapons, wanted the United States to share nuclear secrets to help France build an independent deterrent. American proposals to provide "enough conventional strength in Europe to stay below the nuclear threshold" heightened de Gaulle's suspicion that the U.S. would not fight a nuclear war to preserve Europe from Soviet communism. De Gaulle also objected to American control over NATO's freedom to respond to a Soviet
offensive. He was unwilling to commit France to a larger role in defending Southeast Asia against communist subversion. He dismissed Laos as a “peripheral area that can be abandoned with impunity” and warned about the difficulties of fighting in Vietnam.

De Gaulle, Kennedy believed, “seemed to prefer tension instead of intimacy in his relations with the United States as a matter of pride and independence.” Harvard political scientist Nicholas Wahl, who had met de Gaulle several times, counseled the White House, “Even when there is a dialogue, one usually emerges with the impression that it has all been carefully ‘managed’ by de Gaulle from the beginning. . . . He often uses the third person to refer to himself, which is more his own historian speaking than the megalomaniac, the latter not being completely absent.” Still, Kennedy hoped that his discussions with de Gaulle would at least create the appearance of Franco-American unity. Such an appearance could serve him well in his subsequent discussions with Khrushchev and help reestablish some of his lost credibility at home and abroad after the Bay of Pigs. It was a shrewd assessment of what he could gain from the visit to France: The public ceremonies were much more helpful to Kennedy than the private discussions. In preparation for their meeting, Kennedy read de Gaulle’s war memoirs. De Gaulle’s recollection that “behind his patrician mask of courtesy Roosevelt regarded me without benevolence,” but that “for the sake of the future, we each had much to gain by getting along together” convinced Kennedy that de Gaulle would be publicly accommodating to him as well.

The only topic for discussion de Gaulle had agreed to in advance was Berlin. Since he had no hope that Kennedy would agree to trilateral (the U.S., France, and the U.K.) consultations about Europe or to share nuclear secrets, de Gaulle wanted no discussion of these subjects. De Gaulle, who understood perfectly what Kennedy hoped to gain from seeing him, may have had some expectation that he could bend the inexperienced young president to his purposes, something he hadn’t been able to do with Eisenhower. But his willingness to help Kennedy make the most of his Paris visit partly rested on concrete self-interest. Aside from possible improvements in France’s world position, positive newspaper articles and huge crowds lining procession routes eager for a glimpse persuaded de Gaulle that he would gain politically from Kennedy’s visit. De Gaulle, who almost never greeted English-speaking visitors in anything but French, asked Kennedy on his arrival, “Have you made a good aerial voyage?” The trip from Orly Airport to the center of Paris in an open limousine, with the two seated side by side and escorted by fifty motorcycle policemen decked out in special uniforms, demonstrated de Gaulle’s regard for his visitor. At a formal dinner that night, de Gaulle praised Kennedy for his “energy and drive,” and his “intelligence and courage.” Although de Gaulle privately regarded Kennedy as “suffering the drawbacks of a novice,” he said before the dinner audience, “Already we have discerned in you the philosophy of the true statesman, who . . . looks to no easy formula or expedient to lighten the responsibility which is his burden and his honor.”

Berlin, NATO, Laos, and Vietnam received their share of attention during three days of talks, but no minds were changed or major decisions made. Kennedy used the talks to flatter de Gaulle, showing him the sort of deference the seventy-year-old expected from the young, inexperienced American who had proved, in de Gaulle’s words, “somewhat fumbling and over eager” after the Bay of Pigs. Kennedy had memorized quotes from de Gaulle’s memoirs and gave him an original letter from Washington to Lafayette, which de Gaulle considered a thoughtful, tasteful gift. “You’ve studied being head of a country for fifty years,” JFK said to him. “Have you found out anything I should know?” De Gaulle advised him to hear the advice of others but to decide matters for himself and live by his own counsel. When de Gaulle told him that intervention in Southeast Asia would be “a bottomless military and political quagmire,” Kennedy expressed the hope that “you will not say that in public.” Kennedy had memorized quotes from de Gaulle’s memoirs and gave him an original letter from Washington to Lafayette, which de Gaulle considered a thoughtful, tasteful gift. “You’ve studied being head of a country for fifty years,” JFK said to him. “Have you found out anything I should know?” De Gaulle advised him to hear the advice of others but to decide matters for himself and live by his own counsel. When de Gaulle told him that intervention in Southeast Asia would be “a bottomless military and political quagmire,” Kennedy expressed the hope that “you will not say that in public.” Kennedy had memorized quotes from de Gaulle’s memoirs and gave him an original letter from Washington to Lafayette, which de Gaulle considered a thoughtful, tasteful gift. “You’ve studied being head of a country for fifty years,” JFK said to him. “Have you found out anything I should know?” De Gaulle advised him to hear the advice of others but to decide matters for himself and live by his own counsel. When de Gaulle told him that intervention in Southeast Asia would be “a bottomless military and political quagmire,” Kennedy expressed the hope that “you will not say that in public.”

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So the conference was a case study in symbol over substance. Photographs and television pictures of the two standing together were by themselves a boost to Kennedy’s prestige. The legendary de Gaulle treating JFK as an equal immediately raised Kennedy to the level of a world statesman. His was an image of vibrancy, competence, and strength.

The greatest enemy of this image was Kennedy’s health. During his visit to Canada, while turning over a spadeful of earth at a tree-planting ceremony at Government House in Ottawa, Kennedy had
aggravated his chronic back problem; he had triggered painful spasms by forgetting to bend his knees, but this was an injury waiting to happen. The bone loss and destruction in his lower back from steroids had been the source of back pain since at least 1940. And while the 1954 surgery that his Addison’s disease had made so risky had given him some limited relief, he continued to live with almost constant discomfort. As president, he sometimes took five hot showers a day to ease his pain. A rocking chair, which put less pressure on the muscles and nerves in his lower back than a conventional chair or sofa with soft cushions, gave him additional relief. Procaine, a variation of novocaine, injected into his lower back since 1951, also eased his pain. (During periods of travel, when he had less access to the hydrotherapy and the rocking chair, he relied more on the procaine.) During the campaign in 1960, he had begun seeing Dr. Max Jacobson, the New York physician who had made a reputation for treating celebrities with “pep pills,” or amphetamines, that helped combat depression and fatigue. Jacobson, whom patients called “Dr. Feelgood,” administered back injections of painkillers and amphetamines that allowed Kennedy to stay off crutches, which he believed essential to project a picture of robust good health. All of this was kept secret. When he went to France to meet de Gaulle, his long-standing physician Dr. Janet Travell, and Dr. George G. Burkley, an admiral and member of the White House medical staff, accompanied JFK on Air Force One. Unknown to Travell and Burkley, Jacobson flew on a chartered jet to Paris, where he continued giving the president back injections.

Biographers have speculated on whether Kennedy’s medical treatments, including daily cortisone for Addison’s and back injections, affected his performance as president. Previously secret medical records gathered by Janet Travell give us a more authoritative answer to the question. During the first six months of his presidency, stomach/colon and prostate problems, high fevers, occasional dehydration, abscesses, sleeplessness, and high cholesterol accompanied Kennedy’s back and adrenal ailments. Medical attention was a fixed part of his routine. His physicians administered large doses of so many drugs that they kept an ongoing “Medicine Administration Record” (MAR), cataloging injected and oral corticosteroids for his adrenal insufficiency; procaine shots to painful “trigger points,” ultrasound treatments, and hot packs for his back; Lomotil, Metamucil, paregoric, Phenobarbital, testosterone, and Transentine to control his diarrhea, abdominal discomfort, and weight loss; penicillin and other antibiotics for his urinary infections and abscesses; and Tuinal to help him sleep.

Though the treatments occasionally made him feel groggy and tired, Kennedy did not see them as a problem. He dismissed questions about Jacobson’s treatment, saying famously about the injections, “I don’t care if it’s horse piss. It works.” When he felt especially tired a few days before a press conference, he wanted additional cortisone to help buoy him up. Moreover, Kennedy did not concern himself with having a single physician oversee his medical care. There was no one, historian Michael Beschloss pointed out, who “was in overall charge to anticipate or deal with the danger that an interaction of cortisone, procaine, amphetamines, or whatever else Jacobson had in his syringe could cause the President to behave in Vienna in a way that could have had dire consequences.” Presidential biographer Richard Reeves said that “doctors came and went around Kennedy. In a lifetime of medical torment, Kennedy was more promiscuous with physicians and drugs than he was with women.” Though Kennedy’s doctors would eventually address this issue, in June 1961, it was unresolved. But if the combination of drugs was having a destructive impact on Kennedy’s ability to function effectively, it did not manifest itself in Paris.

The president was not the only White House resident treated by Dr. Feelgood. In May, after deciding to go to Europe, Kennedy had asked Dr. Jacobson to treat Jackie for the headaches and depression she was suffering after the birth of John F. Kennedy Jr. in November 1960. Kennedy wanted Jackie, who had met and impressed de Gaulle during his visit to the United States in 1960, to come with him to Paris. Jacobson administered a series of injections to Jackie that gave her the wherewithal to make the trip.

Kennedy’s instinct to bring his wife was a good one. Her command of the French language and expressions of regard for French culture and taste made her an instant hit with the French, who lined up by the thousands to catch a glimpse of her passing automobile or arrivals at and departures from well-publicized ceremonies. Dazzled by her beauty and knowledge of French history and art, de Gaulle publicly spoke of Jackie’s “charm.” The French press, thrilled by her appearance in a white silk Givenchy gown, anointed her “a queen” and described the Kennedy–de Gaulle dinner as an “Apotheosis at Versailles.” Kennedy delighted French and American journalists with
opening remarks at a Paris press luncheon: "I do not think it altogether inappropriate to introduce myself to this audience. I am the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris, and I have enjoyed it." When the journalist Marianne Means later interviewed Kennedy for a book on First Ladies, it was clear to her that he had actually resented Jackie's spectacular emergence from his shadow. But public images were much more important to Kennedy in Paris than any personal feelings, and his joke struck a perfect ending to a highly successful visit. A column in the *International Herald Tribune* reflected the renewed confidence in his leadership: Kennedy, journalist Marguerite Higgins declared, "intends to act not only as his own foreign minister but as his own Soviet expert, French expert, Berlin expert, Laotian expert, nuclear test ban expert, etc."

THE BACKGROUND MUSIC was less harmonious. On May 31, during his first day in Paris, Kennedy received word of the assassination of General Rafael Trujillo, the Dominican Republic's long-standing dictator. The failed Cuban invasion had triggered fears of a communist coup in the Republic and Haiti, and the White House saw the two countries as the "most vulnerable to a Castro takeover." In April and May, Kennedy had directed that the NSC develop emergency plans for intervention by U.S. troops to maintain order and preclude communist control. At the same time, however, he wanted no direct U.S. involvement in rumored plots to topple Trujillo. On May 24, Kennedy had received a State Department report of an imminent "attempt [by political opponents] to assassinate Trujillo." Consequently, when Pierre Salinger, unaware that news of Trujillo's death was still a secret, revealed the assassination to the press at a news conference in Paris, Kennedy was furious. The administration's early knowledge of the plot and Trujillo's death suggested that it might have been in on the killing, which it was not.

Kennedy's bigger problem was whether to send in the marines. Although there was no clear evidence that Joaquin Balaguer, Trujillo's likely successor, would tilt to the left, White House officials, led by Bobby, urged U.S. intervention. Bowles, who was heading the department while Rusk was in Paris, opposed an action that could "throw us into a war in the most casual fashion." Although Bowles agreed to the deployment of forces outlined in contingency plans, he emphasized the need to keep it as low-key as possible. But Bobby, who Bowles believed "was clearly looking for an excuse to move in on the island," raised a ruckus. Convinced that the new Dominican government "might team up with Castro," Bobby, supported by McNamara, Goodwin, and Schlesinger, wanted to take what Bowles accurately called "half-cocked action" or "action for action's sake." For starters, Bobby suggested that they consider blowing up the American consulate to provide the rationale for an invasion. When Bowles resisted, Bobby, whom Bowles described as "aggressive, dogmatic, and vicious," and ready to destroy the new government — "with an excuse if possible, without one if necessary" — attacked him as a "gutless bastard." Bowles reported the disagreement to Kennedy, and the president sided with him. "Well, I'm glad to hear it," Bowles replied, "and in that case would you clarify who's in charge here?" "You are," Kennedy answered. "Good," Bowles exclaimed. "Would you mind explaining it to your brother?"

The excessive fears about communist control of hemisphere countries extended to British Guiana, a small outpost of empire with a population of less than 600,000 — one half East Indian, one third African, and the rest British, Portuguese, native Indian, and Chinese. The British hoped to give the colony independence after elections in August. Cheddi Jagan, the head of the colony's People's Progressive party, a man with strong leftist leanings, seemed likely to become head of government. Although British authorities "tended to minimize, if not discount, the view that Jagan was a communist," and a CIA report concluded that "neither the Communist bloc nor Castro has made any vigorous effort to exploit the British Guiana situation" and that Jagan seemed unlikely "to establish an avowed Communist regime," Kennedy and the NSC unsuccessfully pressed the British to prevent or allow the U.S. to stop Jagan's election in August. It was a secret demonstration of limited regard for democratic elections, which, if known, would have deepened hemisphere skepticism about America's genuine commitment to an alliance for progress. For Kennedy, democracy in Latin America could never be put ahead of perceived threats to U.S. national security, even if those dangers might turn out to be more illusory than real.

IT WAS AGAINST THIS BACKDROP of anxiety about the communist menace in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and above all central Europe, where Moscow seemed determined to alter the status of East Germany and Berlin, that Kennedy met Khrushchev in Vienna. Kennedy had come armed with advice from America's leading Soviet experts —
Charles Bohlen, George Kennan, and Llewellyn Thompson — and de Gaulle on what to expect. Averell Harriman, who had represented Roosevelt and Truman in dealings with Moscow and was negotiating with the Russians about Laos, insisted on seeing Kennedy in Paris to give him his opinion. "I hear there is something you want to say to me," Kennedy told him at de Gaulle’s state dinner, which Harriman had arranged to attend. "Go to Vienna," the seventy-year-old confidently advised the president. "Don't be too serious, have some fun, get to know him a little, don't let him rattle you; he'll try to rattle you and frighten you, but don't pay any attention to that. Turn him aside, gently. And don't try for too much. Remember that he's just as scared as you are . . . he is very aware of his peasant origins, of the contrast between Mrs. Khrushchev and Jackie . . . . His style will be to attack and then see if he can get away with it. Laugh about it, don't get into a fight. Rise above it. Have some fun."

Kennedy had asked de Gaulle for his views on Moscow's policy toward Berlin, the most contentious East-West issue since 1945. At the end of World War II, Germany had been divided into British, French, and U.S. zones in the west and a Soviet area of occupation in the east. Berlin, which was 110 miles inside the Soviet zone, was also divided into four parts. The Soviets had agreed to guarantees of Western access to Berlin through their zone. A reunified and rearmed Germany allied with the West was Moscow's constant fear. Consequently, a separate East German state had been central to Moscow's German policy throughout the fifties. By 1961, the embarrassing exodus of East Germans and other east Europeans to the west through Berlin provoked the Soviets into warnings that they would sign a peace treaty with East Germany, creating an independent state that could then choose to end allied rights in Berlin by integrating the city under its control. Such a treaty promised to reduce chances of a unified Germany posing renewed threats to Moscow.

Kennedy's chief worry about Khrushchev was that after the Bay of Pigs, he would not believe JFK's resolve on Berlin or anything else. De Gaulle had urged Kennedy to be firm but to understand that the Soviet leader had no intention of going to war over the status of the city: "Khrushchev has been saying and repeating that his prestige is engaged in the Berlin question and that he will have to have a solution of it in six months, and then again in six months and then still in six months. This seems to indicate that Mr. Khrushchev does not want war. If he had wanted war about Berlin he would have acted already." De Gaulle further said that when he asked Khrushchev if he wanted war, he had replied no. "In that case," de Gaulle had told him, "do nothing that can bring it about."

"For domestic political reasons," Kennedy had wanted to announce specific subjects on which he and Khrushchev would confer and make progress. Although the Soviets resisted this request, Kennedy decided to go ahead anyway, believing that a summit could reduce differences and help avoid a nuclear war. The State Department encouraged Kennedy's hopes: "Khrushchev would prefer that the talks end on a note of accord, and may make some conciliatory gestures for this reason," a background paper advised the president. Ambassador Thompson in Moscow echoed the point: "Believe Khrushchev will wish meeting with President to be pleasant one and that he will desire if possible to make some proposal or take position on some problem which would have effect of improving atmosphere and relations." Even the Soviets had told him that there was no "unbridgeable gulf" between them.

George Kennan was less sure. He saw the Soviets in conjunction with the Chinese as primarily intent on shattering America's "world position and influence" and undermining NATO by a "series of sharp indirect political pressures, ruthless exploitation of colonial issue, and all-out propaganda attack." Kennan urged Kennedy to tell Khrushchev that "a political program founded on such calculation is not only wholly inconsistent with any attempt to improve international atmosphere" but seemed certain at some point to create a military confrontation beyond anyone's control. Such an approach represented "a grievous disservice to any efforts to improve world situation" and played into the hands of those who opposed any improvement in Soviet-American relations.

Initially, Kennedy's arrival in Vienna and first exchanges with Khrushchev promised to make the summit another public relations triumph for JFK. A tepid turnout for Khrushchev on the afternoon of June 2 as he rode in an open car from the Vienna railway station to the Soviet embassy contrasted with the excited crowds greeting Kennedy the next morning on his route from the airport to the U.S. embassy. Kennedy's pleasure at the reception registered on Rusk, who sat beside him in the car. "You make a hell of a substitute for Jackie," the president joked. The placard-waving crowd at the airport gave the feel of a political campaign rally for JFK: "Give 'em hell, Jack," "Lift the Iron Curtain," "Innocents Abroad Say Howdy."
The first encounter between the two leaders also favored Kennedy. Bounding down the steps of the American embassy, where the first meeting occurred at 12:45 P.M. on June 3, the youthful Kennedy towered over the short, squat sixty-seven-year-old Khrushchev. When photographers asked for more shots of the two shaking hands as they turned to go inside, Kennedy seized the initiative: "Tell the Chairman," he said to his interpreter, "that it's all right with me if it's all right with him." The smiling Khrushchev agreed. As they were led into the embassy's music room, where the two seated themselves on a rose-colored sofa, Khrushchev bantered with the president, who, as the morning's host, expressed pleasure at seeing the chairman and recalled a 1959 meeting of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee where they had met. Kennedy expressed the hope that a better understanding of the problems confronting the two nations would emerge from the meeting. Khrushchev also "wished the conversation to be useful," but he picked up on Kennedy's recollection of their first meeting to score a point against the president: Khrushchev remembered him as "a young and promising man in politics." Eager to mute the differences between them in age and experience, JFK replied, "He must have aged since then." Reflecting on how the young want to look older and older people want to look younger, Khrushchev said that "he would be happy to share his years with the President or change places with him."

Moving to a large table for their more formal conversation, Khrushchev turned what Kennedy had hoped might be a discussion of current issues into a philosophical debate about the virtues of their respective systems. Kennedy began the exchange by suggesting that they needed to find "ways and means of not permitting situations where the two countries would be committed to actions involving their security or endangering peace." In response, Khrushchev seized on Kennedy's friendly, essentially innocuous opening to begin a hectoring attack on America's past failures to advance Soviet-American friendship, emphasizing that the United States wanted to reach agreements with Moscow that would be "at the expense of other peoples." He would not agree to this, Khrushchev said. He also emphasized that there was no inherent conflict of economic interests between the U.S. and the USSR, and though the Soviet Union intended to eclipse America economically, it had no intention of standing "in the way of U.S. economic development." Kennedy, who had not yet realized the extent to which Khrushchev was intent on beating up on him, answered Khrushchev's insupportable claims by remarking how the Soviet growth rate had impressed him and "that this was surely a source of satisfaction to Mr. Khrushchev, as it was to us."

Khrushchev ignored Kennedy's polite affirmation of what JFK knew were false assertions to complain about America's anti-Soviet policies. He asserted that Eisenhower secretary of state John Foster Dulles had aimed to liquidate communism and that good relations between the two countries depended on a mutual acceptance of each other's systems. Kennedy, now rising to the challenge, declared that it was not the United States that was unsettling the global balance of power or seeking to overturn existing spheres of control but the Soviet Union. "This is a matter of very serious concern to us," Kennedy said. Kennedy's rejoinder seemed to incense Khrushchev or give him an excuse to follow through with his planned assault on the president. He disputed the assertion that Moscow aimed to impose its will on any country. Communism would triumph, he said, because history was on its side. Kennedy retorted that Americans did not share the chairman's view of an inevitable communist victory. But, trying to move the discussion back to current realities, Kennedy said that the problem was to find means of averting conflict in areas where the two sides had clashing interests.

Khrushchev acknowledged JFK's point but reverted to arguing that they faced a contest of ideas that communism would win. When Kennedy tried to restate the point that the clash of ideas should not produce a conflict of interests that could lead to a military confrontation, Khrushchev asked him if he was suggesting that any expansion of communist influence would be seen as a reason for Soviet-American conflict. Before Kennedy could answer, Khrushchev dismissed the president's view that the spread of communist ideology would threaten the peace. When Kennedy again tried to divert Khrushchev from his philosophical ruminations to worries he had about international "miscalculations," the chairman contemptuously dismissed the talk of "miscalculation" as an excuse for getting the "USSR to sit like a schoolboy with his hands on his desk." Talk of "miscalculation" was a means of trying to intimidate the Soviet Union and inhibit it from freely voicing ideas that would outstrip those advocated by the United States. After Kennedy countered by giving an example of miscalculation — the U.S. failure to anticipate Chinese intervention in the Korean war — Khrushchev...
conceded that their purpose was not to worsen but to improve relations.

The atmosphere eased a bit at lunch. When Kennedy asked about two medals on Khrushchev’s jacket, he described them as Lenin Peace Prizes. “I hope you get to keep them,” Kennedy answered. Khrushchev joined in the laughter, and Salinger had the sort of delightful anecdote for the press that added to the Paris image of the president as poised and quick-witted.

During the meal, Khrushchev alternated between being pleasant and combative, purposely encouraging impressions of himself as erratic and maybe dangerous — the leader of a country convinced it could outdo the United States in peace and war, if necessary. Exchanges about Soviet space gains brought a Kennedy suggestion that they might go to the moon together. Caught off guard, Khrushchev commented on the military advantages attached to space travel and then added weakly, “All right, why not?” Khrushchev advised Kennedy that he had voted for him by not releasing the RB-47 fliers until after the election and made fun of Nixon, bringing smiles to everyone’s face when he declared that a lot of people thought that the dour-looking Andrey Gromyko resembled the former vice president. Khrushchev followed a brief, gracious Kennedy toast with a rambling performance marked by professions of Soviet desire for peace, expressions of regard for Eisenhower, Kennedy, and the American people, additional harsh words about Nixon, denials that Moscow was responsible for communist insurgencies in other countries, and assertions of his readiness for a continuing competition with the much younger American president.

During a stroll in the garden after lunch, Kennedy tried to establish greater rapport with Khrushchev. But the Soviet premier was unrelenting. O’Donnell and Powers watched them from an upstairs embassy window: “Khrushchev was carrying on a heated argument, circling around Kennedy and snapping at him like a terrier and shaking his finger.” Later, while an exhausted Kennedy soaked in a tub, Powers said, “You seemed pretty calm while he was giving you a hard time out there.” They had been arguing over Germany and Berlin. “What did you expect me to do?” Kennedy said with some exasperation. “Take off one of my shoes and hit him over the head with it?” Eager to end their stroll on a more positive note, Kennedy asked how the chairman found time to hold prolonged, uninterrupted meetings with American visitors. Khrushchev, still looking to score points, described a system of shared power that freed him from distractions. When Kennedy complained that the American governmental system imposed on him a “time-consuming process,” Khrushchev shot back: “Well, why don’t you switch to our system?”

The afternoon’s formal conversations produced more sparring and antagonism. Kennedy began the second round of talks by coming back to his concern that the present competition between the U.S. and the USSR not lead to war. He tried to clarify what he meant by “miscalculation.” He had made a “misjudgment” over Cuba, he acknowledged. It was essential that their discussions “introduce greater precision in these judgments so that our two countries could survive this period of competition without endangering their national security.” Although Khrushchev agreed that this was a good idea, he seized upon Kennedy’s admission of a mistake as an expression of weakness. He attacked the United States for seeing people’s revolutions as communist plots. This was dangerous, he said, because the Soviets were on the side of anticolonialism not for self-serving reasons but out of an understanding that these were “holy wars.” The United States, which had once sided with democratic revolutions, now favored the status quo and mistakenly, as in Cuba, tried to suppress the aspirations of the people and threaten Moscow with war when it objected to U.S. imperialism. Moscow, by contrast, Khrushchev asserted, wanted only to keep the peace. Kennedy replied that America ruled out war for the simple reason that the current balance of military power between East and West meant that both sides would be losers in a nuclear conflict.

Kennedy’s admission of Soviet strength equal to that of the United States exhilarated Khrushchev, who took it as another reason to press the case for superior Soviet morality in international affairs and greater devotion to democratic hopes and world peace. After the afternoon meeting ended, Khrushchev told his comrades about JFK: “He’s very young ... not strong enough. Too intelligent and too weak.” Khrushchev’s gamble — that he should take advantage of the USSR’s current prestige (the result of its perceived missile superiority, the rise of procommunist insurgencies in Asia and Africa, Kennedy’s Bay of Pigs failure, and the success of the Soviet space program) and attack his American counterpart — seemed to be paying off. Khrushchev believed that if he bested JFK at the Vienna summit, it would undermine U.S. political standing. He had not come to negotiate. He had come to compete.
The afternoon meeting had ended on an ominous note. When Kennedy suggested that they discuss nuclear tests, disarmament, and Germany later that evening over dinner or the next day, Khrushchev said that he intended “to connect the questions of nuclear tests and disarmament.” The main problem with Germany was the need for a peace treaty, which he hoped both countries could sign. “This would improve relations. But if the United States refuses to sign a peace treaty, the Soviet Union will do so and nothing will stop it.”

Khrushchev’s behavior irritated and frustrated Kennedy. A British journalist who saw him as he escorted Khrushchev to his car thought he looked “dazed.” Pacing the floor of his bedroom in the embassy, he exclaimed, “He treated me like a little boy, like a little boy.” He asked Llewellyn Thompson, “Is it always like this?” The ambassador replied, “Par for the course.” Bohlen thought that the embassy, he exclaimed, “He treated me like a little boy, like a little boy.” He asked Llewellyn Thompson, “Is it always like this?” The ambassador replied, “Par for the course.” Bohlen thought that the president was “a little depressed.” And though he tried to comfort him by declaring that “the Soviets always talk tough,” he believed that Kennedy had gotten “a little bit out of his depth” by being drawn into an ideological debate. Kennan thought that Khrushchev had tied the president in knots and that Kennedy appeared hesitant and overwhelmed. Kennedy himself may have wondered what Harriman could possibly have meant when he used the word fun.

A long day under much tension certainly accounts for most of Kennedy’s weariness by the early evening, but we cannot discount the impact of the Jacobson chemicals on him as well. As the day wore on and an injection Jacobson had given him just before he met Khrushchev in the early afternoon wore off, Kennedy may have lost the emotional and physical edge initially provided by the shot. But more important than Kennedy’s energy level was the fundamental difference in approach that each leader brought to the summit. Kennedy’s eagerness to be reasonable and encourage understanding was no match for Khrushchev’s determination to debate and outargue the less experienced president.

In any case, it was clear that Khrushchev had won the first day’s debate. But to what end? It was absurd for Khrushchev to believe that scoring points against his younger opponent would do anything but stiffen Kennedy’s resolve to meet the communist challenge. Khrushchev may have believed his own rhetoric about Soviet ascendancy over the United States and been unable to resist bragging about it. In response to pressure from comrades in the Kremlin and Chinese efforts to supplant Moscow as the leader of international communism, Khrushchev felt compelled to act more like an aggressive advocate than a conciliator. As Kennan had accurately foreseen, a principal object of the summit for Khrushchev was to sustain Moscow’s momentum at the expense of the United States without driving Washington into a war. But Khrushchev’s actions were miserably shortsighted.

Today, perhaps, we can have some sympathy for Khrushchev’s dilemma. He presided over an ineffective economic system that had shown little room for improvement. In the long run, there was no escape from accepting the failings of Soviet communism, as Mikhail Gorbachev would understand thirty years later. But in 1961, Khrushchev could not see that far ahead; nor could he discount the possibility that a tough approach to the Americans might intimidate them into selling out Germany and even Western Europe, as de Gaulle feared, to save the United States and the world from nuclear destruction.

Although Khrushchev was principally responsible for the abrasive tone of the proceedings, no one should see Kennedy as blameless. True, he struck several conciliatory notes in the talks, admitting mistakes in Cuban and Asian policies and placating Soviet amour propre by conceding the equality of their armed might. But he was as intent on the competition for international prestige as the Soviets. It was common knowledge that the president regularly monitored United States Information Agency (USIA) polls on international opinion toward the U.S. and the USSR. His rhetoric at his Inauguration and in his May address to Congress left no doubt that the new president, if anything, would be more aggressive about asserting U.S. global influence and power than the more mature and secure Eisenhower had been. But however one distributes blame for the harsh Khrushchev-Kennedy exchanges, they marked an unwise escalation in the Cold War, which the talks had been meant to ease.

Concerned not to impress himself on the Americans and international opinion as simply a scold defending national and ideological interests, Khrushchev tried to produce a charm offensive during a formal dinner party at the Schönbrunn Palace, a seventeenth-century country estate built by the Hapsburgs. But he only went so far: Refusing to wear black tie, Khrushchev and his entourage thumbed their noses at Western imperial decadence by dressing in business suits. Nina Petrovna, Khrushchev’s wife, a matronly woman wearing no makeup, impressed Rose Kennedy, who attended the dinner, as
someone who could serve in an American household as an entirely reliable baby-sitter. Sitting next to Jacqueline Kennedy, Khrushchev regaled her with gags and stories that made her feel as if she were watching an Abbott and Costello movie. When Khrushchev, turning serious, tried to educate her on the greater number of teachers per capita currently in the Ukraine than in the tsar's time, Jacqueline admonished him, "Oh, Mr. Chairman, don't bore me with statistics"—and he suddenly laughed and became for a moment almost cozy."

The distinguishing feature of the second day of the summit, which took place at the Soviet embassy, was a focus on Germany, but not before Kennedy turned aside fresh attempts by Khrushchev to provoke a renewed ideological debate. When Kennedy began by asking the chairman what part of the USSR he was from, Khrushchev answered, in the vicinity of Kursk, near the Ukrainian border, where thirty billion tons of iron ore had been found, six times the amount in the entire United States. Kennedy did not take the bait. A discussion of Laos brought the renewed complaint that "the United States is so rich and powerful that it believes it has special rights and can afford not to recognize the rights of others." Moscow could not accept this, Khrushchev said, and intended to help subject peoples seeking freedom. "Look, Mr. Chairman," Kennedy countered, "you aren't going to make a communist out of me and I don't expect to make a capitalist out of you, so let's get down to business."

The principal "business" of Khrushchev was to attack U.S. proposals for a nuclear test ban and disarmament, and American resistance to a Soviet peace settlement with Germany. Unwilling to stop testing, which Moscow believed essential if it was going to achieve nuclear parity with the United States, Khrushchev objected to on-site United Nations inspections to prevent underground testing as "tantamount to espionage, which the Soviet Union cannot accept." The U.N.'s behavior in the Congo, Khrushchev claimed, demonstrated that Moscow could not trust Dag Hammarskjöld, whom it accused of complicity in Lumumba's assassination. Three inspections would be possible, but they would have to be done by a threemember commission consisting of an American, a Soviet, and a truly neutral representative. Moreover, Khrushchev argued, a test ban would be superfluous if the United States agreed to "general and complete" disarmament.

Kennedy agreed that a test ban would not inhibit arms production by the U.S. or the USSR but pointed out that it would make the development of nuclear weapons by other countries less likely. Without a test ban, the number of nuclear powers could multiply to ten or fifteen in a few years. Kennedy urged Khrushchev to balance the risk of espionage with the peril from nuclear proliferation, which "is bound to affect the national security of our two countries, and increase the danger of major conflicts." A test ban could be a first step, since it would take a very long time to reach agreement on general disarmament. When Khrushchev repeated his arguments about giving general disarmament priority over a test ban, an exasperated Kennedy declared that "the conversation was back where it had started."

The discussion of Berlin was even more frustrating to Kennedy. Whereas the failure of test ban talks would present long-term dangers, Berlin loomed as an immediate crisis. Khrushchev spoke with considerable passion; conditions in central Europe were clearly his greatest concern, and everything that had occurred in the first day and a half of the summit had been a prelude, a run-up to the real business of the conference—ensuring that a reunited Germany would be incapable of inflicting fresh suffering on Russia and closing off Berlin as an escape hatch for those oppressed by communist rule.

Khrushchev reminded Kennedy that the USSR had lost twenty million people in World War II and that Germany, the architect of that conflict, had regained the kind of military strength that opened the way to a third, even more devastating world war. The USSR intended to sign a peace treaty with both Germanys, if possible, or at least with East Germany, to guard against a reunited nation. Such a treaty, Khrushchev explained, would invalidate all post-1945 arrangements, including the West's access by road and air to Berlin through East Germany. If the U.S. signed a peace agreement, Berlin could remain a "free" city, but a refusal to sign would end all rights of Western access to Berlin.

Kennedy left no doubt that the United States would not be bullied into an agreement. "Here we are not talking about Laos," JFK said. "This matter is of greatest concern to the US. We are in Berlin not because of someone's sufferance. We fought our way there.... If we were expelled from that area and if we accepted the loss of our rights no one would have any confidence in US commitments and pledges." He urged Khrushchev not to threaten the existing balance of power in Europe and provoke a response from the United States.
But Khrushchev was unrelenting. "No force in the world would prevent the USSR from signing a peace treaty," he said. Khrushchev's only concession to Kennedy's strong response was a pledge not to sign the treaty until December. He declared that America would be responsible for any war fought over Berlin, and only a "madman, who...should be put in a straightjacket" would want such a conflict. Kennedy's counter that Moscow's assault on the existing power balance would be the cause of any war seemed to make no impression. Khrushchev ended the discussion by saying that Moscow had prepared an aide-memoire on Berlin that would allow the U.S. to "return to this question at a later date, if it wished to do so."

Exchanges over lunch offered no respite from Khrushchev's hostility. He raised the subject of nuclear weapons and noted that, like the United States, the Soviet Union had nuclear-armed submarines, that it had short-range, medium-range, and intercontinental missiles in production, and that renewed Soviet nuclear tests would only occur if the U.S. resumed testing. The USSR would not try to reach the moon ahead of the United States, he said, because it would weaken Moscow's defense buildup. Indeed, the president's message on defense spending had led him to consider increasing Soviet land forces and artillery.

Kennedy refused to give ground. He acknowledged the Soviet Union as a great power with weapons of mass destruction comparable to those held by the United States. It was essential, therefore, he said, that both countries act in responsible ways to avoid war. Germany was a case in point: "Each side should recognize the interests and responsibilities of the other side... This goal can be achieved only if each is wise and stays in his own area." Hoping to flatter Khrushchev, who had told Kennedy that at age forty-four he had been chairman of the Moscow Planning Commission, Kennedy said that when he reached the chairman's age of sixty-seven, he would like to be head of the Boston Planning Commission and perhaps chairman of the Democratic National Committee. But smarting from JFK's refusal to bend on Germany, Khrushchev "interjected that perhaps the President would like to become head of the Planning Commission of the whole world."

Khrushchev's unrelenting belligerence agitated Kennedy into asking him to meet privately for a brief review of issues. "I can't leave here without giving it one more try," Kennedy said to an aide. "I'm not going to leave until I know more." As he went back upstairs to the conference room, he told Rusk, "This is the nut-cutter." Kennedy began the final meeting by saying that he hoped Khrushchev would not confront the United States with an issue such as Berlin that "so deeply" involved its national interest. He also asked Khrushchev to see the difference between signing a peace treaty and challenging America's rights of access to Berlin. Khrushchev showed no give: The U.S., he said, was trying to humiliate the USSR, and Kennedy needed to understand that Moscow intended to counter any U.S. aggression against East Germany with force. Kennedy "then said that either Mr. Khrushchev did not believe that the US was serious or the situation in that area was so unsatisfactory to the Soviet Union that it had to take this drastic action." He regretted leaving Vienna with the impression that the U.S. and the USSR were heading toward a confrontation. Khrushchev replied that it was the United States that was threatening to impose the calamity of war on the world, not the USSR. "It is up to the US to decide whether there will be war or peace," he said. Kennedy somberly answered, "Then, Mr. Chairman, there will be war. It will be a cold winter."

Kennedy could not hide his distress over the harsh exchanges, which promised worse future relations. Before cameras, as the two men left the Soviet embassy, Khrushchev put on a show of merriment, but Kennedy was grim, unsmiling. In a conversation afterward with James Reston at the U.S. embassy, JFK came across as "very gloomy." He sank onto a couch, pushed a "hat over his eyes like a beaten man, and breathed a great sigh. 'Pretty rough?' Reston asked. 'Roughest thing in my life,' the President answered." Kennedy also told Reston that he had two problems: figuring out what accounted for Khrushchev's behavior, and figuring out how to respond. He believed that Khrushchev had "just beat [the] hell out of me" because of his weak showing over the Bay of Pigs. He now needed to convince Khrushchev that he could not be pushed around, and the best place currently to make U.S. power credible seemed to be in Vietnam. On Air Force One going to London, where he was to see Macmillan, Kennedy continued to stew over Khrushchev's nastiness. He called O'Donnell to his stateroom and vented his anger for over an hour about the conference and the dangers he would be facing in the coming months of a possible war with Russia. He characterized the atmosphere in Vienna to reporters in the plane press pool as "somber" and repeated his description of the exchanges as "rough."

His own performance especially troubled Kennedy. His anger and frustration were as much with himself as Khrushchev. For the second time in three months, he believed he had acted unwisely —
first in approving the Bay of Pigs attack, and now in thinking that he could reduce differences with Khrushchev by rational explanation. Instead of being responsive to Kennedy’s expressions of regard for Soviet power and appeals to reason over Berlin, Khrushchev had become more assertive and unbending. Kennedy was angry with himself for not having shown a tougher side from the beginning of the talks. He believed that his behavior had strengthened Khrushchev’s conviction after the Bay of Pigs that he was an inexperienced and irresolute president who could be bullied into concessions on Germany and Berlin. Worst of all, he feared that his performance at the meeting had increased rather than diminished the chances of an East-West war.

On one hand, he could not imagine that Khrushchev actually meant to go to war over Berlin. He told O’Donnell shortly after he left the last meeting, “As De Gaulle says, Khrushchev is bluffing and he’ll never sign that treaty. Anybody who talks the way he did today, and really means it, would be crazy, and I’m sure he’s not crazy.” Fighting a war that would kill millions of people over access rights to Berlin or because the Germans wanted to reunify their country impressed him as “particularly stupid . . . If I’m going to threaten Russia with a nuclear war, it will have to be for much bigger and more important reasons than that.”

Yet he also understood that smaller issues than those at stake over Berlin had sparked past wars, including World War I. And so he was “shaken” by and “angry” at Khrushchev’s rhetoric and behavior. It was the first time he had ever met “somebody with whom he couldn’t exchange ideas in a meaningful way.” Bobby Kennedy said later. “I think it was a shock to him that somebody would be as harsh and definitive” — as “unrelenting” and “uncompromising” — as Khrushchev was in Vienna. However difficult and frustrating the meeting had been, Kennedy understood that the greatest challenges to him as president now lay ahead.