KHRUCHCHEV SAW the political victory of the young John F. Kennedy in November 1960 as an important opportunity to push his national security agenda. Soviet Ambassador Mikhail “Smiling Mike” Menshikov hinted to almost anybody with a plausible link to Kennedy that Khrushchev was eager to resume the process of relaxing international tensions largely abandoned after the Paris summit. The Soviet Union sent a strong signal of its hope for better relations with the incoming administration by unconditionally releasing two RB-47 pilots it had detained since July 1960. And it seemed clear to the foreign policy community in Washington that the Kremlin was brushing aside any potential concerns about John Kennedy’s razor-thin victory margin, immediately treating him as a leader with a mandate to change the Cold War.

It was an indication of how much he disliked Richard Nixon that Khrushchev greeted the Democratic victor so eagerly. From everything Khrushchev had learned about Jack Kennedy, he had little reason to harbor high hopes for this particular American politician. On the campaign trail, Kennedy had criticized the outgoing administration for failing to meet the Soviet challenge vigorously enough. “I don’t want to be the President of a nation perishing under the mushroom cloud of a nuclear warhead,” Kennedy had told crowds of American World War II veterans like himself in the final weeks of the campaign. “But neither do I wish to be the President of a nation which is being driven back, which is on the defensive, because of its unwillingness to face the facts of our national existence, to tell the truth, to bear the burdens which freedom demands, a nation which may be declining in relative strength, and with the world coming to an end as T. S. Eliot said, ‘Not with a bang, but with a whimper.’”

On the two issues that mattered most to Khrushchev, disarmament and the German question, Kennedy during the campaign seemed to take positions that were tougher than those of his rival, Nixon. Kennedy assured voters that the priority of his administration would be to build up U.S. strength—accelerate missile development, expand conventional forces, restore America’s international prestige—before starting another round of talks with Khrushchev. He made repeated promises to defend West Berlin’s security and Western access to the city. Moreover, though he assured his audiences that the next U.S. president would have to negotiate with Khrushchev on Berlin, at no point in the campaign did Kennedy offer a diplomatic plan for solving the problem.

Another source of potential disappointment for Khrushchev was Kennedy’s repeated criticism of Soviet gains in the third world. “[The great struggle in foreign policy in the next decade will not take place in Western Europe and will not be directly between the Soviet Union and the United States,” said the candidate. “The great test will be which system travels better, which system solves the problems of the people of Latin America and Africa and Asia.” Among the places where communism had already traveled, Kennedy was most concerned about Cuba. “Castro is not just another Latin American dictator—a petty tyrant bent merely on personal power and gain. His ambitions extend far beyond his own shores. He has transformed the island of Cuba into a hostile and militant Communist satellite—a base from which to carry Communist infiltration and subversion throughout the Americas.”

The main biographical information on the new U.S. president available to Khrushchev also argued for caution. Born in Brookline, Massachusetts, in 1917, Kennedy was a child of privilege. A graduate of Choate and then Harvard, he gained an unusual political education when President Franklin Roosevelt appointed his father U.S. ambassador to the Court of St. James’s. In London Joseph P. Kennedy courted notoriety with statements suggesting that the British would wilt under the pressure of fighting the Nazis and advocating that the United States stay out of the European contest altogether. Joe Kennedy seemed to worry more about the threat from Stalin than about anything Hitler could do to America. Kremlin staffers pointed out to Khrushchev the possible effect that the elder Kennedy might have on John Kennedy’s views on foreign policy. Both the Foreign Ministry and the KGB, in their biographical sketches of the new president, pointed out Kennedy’s strident rhetoric in the campaign and awkwardly tied it to the notorious anticommunism of his father.

The Foreign Ministry did describe John Kennedy as “a typical pragmatist”
but was much less sanguine about the prospects for successful negotiations on any of the issues that mattered to Khrushchev. "[O]n relations between the USA and the USSR," Khrushchev was informed, "Kennedy's position ... is quite contradictory." The KGB saw a little more liberalism than pragmatism in the new leader. Khrushchev's key foreign spies had concluded that Kennedy was from the liberal Adlai Stevenson wing of the Democratic Party, which believed in seeking diplomatic compromises wherever possible to reduce Cold War tensions, thus making it more likely that Kennedy would consider innovative approaches to bilateral problems. Although the KGB and the Soviet Foreign Ministry disagreed on the extent to which the son shared the severe views of the father, analysts in both institutions noted that Kennedy accepted the fallacy of the missile gap and was unlikely to engage in any worthwhile negotiations before he had built up U.S. military power.

Buried in these papers, which Khrushchev may or may not have read, was a nugget that suggested some interesting corridor gossip in and around the Kremlin. Although the KGB was not yet ready to put on paper its verdict on the new president's leadership abilities, the Foreign Ministry was prepared to characterize him as "unlikely to possess the qualities of an outstanding person." There was a sense among some in Moscow that this scion of a wealthy American family, who lacked serious legislative or executive experience, was a lightweight.

It would have come as a surprise to many Western cold warriors, but this was not the kind of adversary that Khrushchev welcomed. He wanted a strong-minded pragmatist who could stand up to the forces of militarism and reaction, which he assumed were rampant in Washington. The experiences of 1960, culminating in the U-2 incident, served to reinforce his belief that U.S. foreign policy was inherently unstable. Khrushchev still believed that Eisenhower was a man of peace whose good instincts had been undermined by the CIA and the Pentagon. If John Kennedy were a strong leader, Khrushchev would expect him to tame these forces and negotiate in good faith with Moscow. Essential to this view was the Soviet leader's belief that his own proposals, whether regarding Western access to Berlin or superpower disarmament, were eminently reasonable.

In late November at the Kremlin Khrushchev outlined his strategy for dealing with the new president for the East German leader Walter Ulbricht. The Soviet leader intended to solve the Berlin problem in early 1961 at a summit with Kennedy. In a departure, Khrushchev would seek a one-on-one meeting, not a four-power gathering, and planned to offer the Berlin "concession" originally prepared for Eisenhower, an interim agreement on West Berlin with a fixed time limit, after which West Berlin would become a free city without any occupation forces or special access routes for NATO forces. If Kennedy proved unwilling to negotiate a reasonable agreement, then the Soviet bloc would again resort to an ultimatum.

Khrushchev's decision to force the Berlin issue early in Kennedy's first year in office came as a surprise to Ulbricht, who hadn't been warned that the Soviets were considering another ultimatum. The bruising experience of the 1958 ultimatum had made the German skeptical of Khrushchev's resolve. "Among our population," said Ulbricht, "there is already a mood taking shape where they say you only talk about a peace treaty, but don't do anything about it. We cannot act the same [way we did] ... ." Khrushchev assured him that things would be different this time. "[I]f there is not an interim agreement, then we will sign a peace treaty with the GDR and let them see their defeat." Khrushchev was confident that though this push would result in a period of tension, it would not spark a world war. "Of course, in signing a peace treaty," he said, "we will have to put our rockets on military alert. But, luckily, our adversaries still haven't gone crazy; they still think and their nerves aren't bad." What Khrushchev refused to predict was whether a crisis would occur. Perhaps Kennedy would agree to their demands.

A day or so after Ulbricht left the Kremlin, Khrushchev received an encouraging top secret message from Washington. On December 1, 1960, the president-elect's brother and victorious campaign manager, Robert F. Kennedy, granted a thirty-minute interview to a KGB officer working undercover as a Soviet journalist. It is doubtful that Robert Kennedy knew for sure that this journalist had special access to the leadership; the future U.S. attorney general probably had just assumed—rightly, as it turned out—that most Soviet journalists were spies. Using the KGB man, Robert sent a message to Moscow on behalf of his brother. The president-elect, Robert said, "was seriously concerned about the situation in Berlin and will strive to find the means to reach a settlement of the Berlin problem. However, if in the next few months the Soviet Union applies pressure on this question, then Kennedy will certainly defend the position of the West." Khrushchev wrote Ulbricht a few weeks later to explain that the Americans were rethinking their Berlin policy, as he had hoped.

Kennedy came to office intending to pick up the pieces of the diplomatic process that had exploded with Francis Gary Powers's plane over Sverdlovsk. For all his tough talk in the campaign about the Soviet challenge, Kennedy's
ultimate goal was to engage the Kremlin and reduce the dangers of the Cold War. "We arm to parlay," he had also said frequently in the campaign, invoking Winston Churchill. Kennedy believed that Eisenhower had fumbled the handling of the U-2 affair, thereby squandering a real opportunity to establish a modus vivendi with the Soviets that could have reduced the risk of war in Central Europe. "It would have been better," Kennedy told reporters later, "for the President to express regret at the [U-2] crash on Soviet territory rather than putting out a lie, as he did, which was later proved to be a lie before world opinion."7

During the ten-week transition between the election and the inauguration, the Kennedy team assembled experts to examine policy on all aspects of the U.S. relationship with the Soviet Union. Ideas for new proposals and strategies to ease the relationship came from these groups. It was suggested that the United States and the Soviet Union increase cultural exchanges, there were proposals that trade between the two countries be expanded beyond the sales of crab meat, and there were recommendations of possible cooperation in space.

But no new ideas on Berlin came Kennedy's way. Kennedy had brought Harry Truman's secretary of state, Dean Acheson, out of retirement to consider a way out of the Berlin impasse. Even before this process was over, however, longtime State Department German specialist Martin Hillenbrand expressed the problem for the Acheson group. "We can live with the status quo in Berlin but can take no real initiative to change it for the better," he wrote in January 1961. "To a greater or lesser degree, the Soviets and East Germans can, whenever they are willing to assume the political consequences, change it for the worse."8 Since 1948, when Stalin first tried to remove the Western allies from West Berlin, the defense of the city and its 2.2 million residents was a touchstone for U.S. prestige in postwar Europe. No president could consider giving it away. Ultimately each of the men Kennedy asked to review the problem reached Hillenbrand's un-Kennedy-like conclusion: "However impelling the urge to find some new approach to the problem, the ineluctable facts of the situation strictly limit the practical courses of actions open to the West."9

Yet another policy review of immediate significance remained hidden from the Kremlin's view. The final months of the Eisenhower administration brought an acceleration of covert preparations for removing Fidel Castro from office. Despite substantial fears in Moscow and Havana, the administration had never planned an operation to kill or forcibly to remove Castro in a bid to ensure Richard Nixon's election to the presidency. Nevertheless, a team of CIA officers, led by the former supervisor of the U-2 program, Richard Bissell, worked tirelessly to provide an array of covert options to the White House. By the time the guard changed, the specialists had come to believe that a force of about a thousand Cuban émigrés, trained in guerrilla warfare at secret facilities in Louisiana and Guatemala, could deliver a knockout blow against the regime.

A friend of Kennedy's from the Georgetown cocktail circuit, Bissell was likely the first person to have hinted to him that the CIA hoped to get White House approval for something dramatic in Cuba early in the new administration. After a meeting on November 18, 1960, at which Kennedy received his first formal briefing on the Cuban planning, both the CIA director, Allen Dulles, and Bissell came away confident that the new administration would continue what Eisenhower had started.10 There would be no change in the policy of removing Castro. In February 1961 the CIA completed its program of action, which the Joint Chiefs of Staff then received for their review and ultimately approved. In April Kennedy gave his provisional approval, though he always retained the right to cancel the operation at the last moment.

Although the Kremlin was not completely ignorant about Washington's anti-Castro activities, Khrushchev allowed himself to be lulled into a sense of complacency about Kennedy's intentions. Just as events in Eastern Europe in the fall of 1956 had clouded Khrushchev's analysis of the threat to Nasser in the Middle East, so events at home in early 1961 had a similar effect on the Soviet leader.

The seven-year plan to improve domestic conditions in the Soviet Union, announced with such fanfare in 1958, was failing. The Kremlin had drafted this plan in the wake of fears that the material concerns of Soviet workers would produce a political crisis similar to the one that Soviet tanks had crushed in Budapest in 1956. On his inspection tours around the USSR, Khrushchev saw mounting evidence that the Soviet state was not even meeting the most basic of its citizens' requirements. Dmitri Polyansky, the head of the Communist Party in the Soviet republic of Russia (the largest of the USSR's fifteen republics), had assured him that food supplies were ample in Russia. After Khrushchev discovered this was not so, Polyansky responded, "If one were to remove Moscow and Leningrad from our responsibility, then we could feed ourselves." Incredulous at this stupidity, Khrushchev asked, "But to whom will we give Moscow—Georgia?" In fact the Soviet people were experiencing shortages in meat, milk, and eggs. In peasant markets eggs,
when they appeared, were selling for the equivalent of three dollars a dozen when loaves of good Russian bread cost pennies. The Kremlin would have to sell twenty-three tons of gold in London, the equivalent of twenty-six million dollars, to buy European butter because it could not produce enough of its own. A joke was heard along the lines of people waiting to buy food: “What nationality were Adam and Eve?” The answer was “Russian.” To the question “Why?” came the answer “Because they were both naked, had only an apple to eat, and thought they were in paradise.”

Khrushchev understood all too well that his people were not living in paradise, and the problem was not simply the availability of butter. In the weeks after the Hungarian revolt, Khrushchev had warned his Presidium colleagues that housing was as politically important to the survival of the Soviet regime as was food. Consequently, in 1958 the Kremlin had promised two million cubic meters of new housing. By early 1961 housing starts had fallen so far short that Khrushchev decreed that all new apartment buildings would be built higher than the standard five stories to try to catch up with demand. Even this Band-Aid solution proved unworkable. Khrushchev had to rescind the order when he received the news that the USSR lacked the raw materials to build elevators for taller apartment buildings. Kremlin bosses were soon huddling to decide how they would fudge the numbers for all aspects of the seven-year plan, so that the gap between promise and reality would not appear as huge as it actually was.

Khrushchev marveled at how easily his subordinates were willing to accept this sad state of affairs. “Why are we bringing such shit into the bosom of the party?” he remarked upon learning of a regional boss who was promoted after he met his meat quota by slaughtering cows needed for milk production. One party secretary in a town three hundred miles from Moscow insisted on admitting failure by taking his pants down to be lashed personally by Khrushchev. “He repeated this three times,” Khrushchev said later, “I couldn’t take it anymore and said to him: ‘Why is it that you want your pants whipped off to show us your ass? Do you think you will give us some kind of thrill? What kind of secretary is this?’”

For all the humor, Khrushchev felt threatened by these failures. His promise to the Soviet people was that their society would catch and surpass the United States by 1970. These dismal reports from the field caused him to remind his colleagues that the regime had to be serious about achieving the goal of affording its citizens an American standard of living. “Do you remember how Molotov and Kaganovich yelled at me when I announced that we would catch up with America. . . . They got frightened by the call to catch up with America.” Khrushchev still believed it possible. But it meant working harder. “What does catching up to the United States mean?” he asked his colleagues in March 1961. “It means hard thinking. Stop all this fussing.”

Another annoyance and distraction in the early months of 1961 were China and its strange little ally in Europe, Albania. The xenophobic Albanian regime, led by Enver Hoxha since the collapse of Nazi power in the Balkans, had turned toward China out of fear that Khrushchev and Tito of Yugoslavia were scheming to divide up southeastern Europe. Ideology also played some role. Hoxha had no intention of giving Albanians even the modest liberalization associated with Moscow’s destalinization campaign. Tensions between the Soviet Union and Albania broke into the open at the Fourteenth Congress of the Albanian Communist Party in February 1961. Although personally annoying to Khrushchev—reports came to Moscow of Albanians replacing his official portraits in all their public buildings with old pictures of Stalin—the dispute was of almost no consequence to world affairs. However, when Khrushchev suggested breaking all trade ties to the country, Mikoyan reminded him that what really mattered was China, and Mao might overreact if the Soviet Union ganged up on his Balkan friend.

Mikoyan made good sense, and Khrushchev accepted his plea for caution. Besides, the Kremlin’s real concern was not Chinese influence in Europe but how Beijing was complicating the picture in Southeast Asia. The Chinese were lining up with the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese to press for a revolutionary victory in the kingdom of Laos. The situation had changed dramatically since U.S.-backed Phoumi Nosavan’s December 1960 offensive had forced the neutralist prime minister, Souvanna Phouma, and most of the leadership of the Communist Pathet Lao to flee the country. In January 1961 the Pathet Lao’s successful counterattack had raised the possibility that Beijing’s and Hanoi’s dreams might be realized. Even as the Pathet Lao continued to make gains, however, Khrushchev advised both regional Communist powers to seek a diplomatic solution in Laos. Convinced that the Pathet Lao risked U.S. intervention if the offensive continued, he argued that only patient political struggle would bring lasting success in the region.

In March Kennedy helped Khrushchev make this argument. In a meeting with Gromyko, who had flown to the United States to take a measure of Kennedy’s views on the situation in Southeast Asia, the U.S. president told the Soviets that Washington now supported the neutralist government of Souvanna Phouma. Kennedy hoped to create a united neutral Laos with a united army and a coalition government, exactly the policy Khrushchev had been advocating to Beijing and Hanoi. Four days later the Soviets gave the
North Vietnamese a copy of those sections of the Russian transcript of the meeting dealing with Laos and asked that they be shared with the North Vietnamese Politburo and the leader Ho Chi Minh. Moscow then issued a public statement in favor of a cease-fire in Laos and privately called on Beijing, Hanoi, and the Pathet Lao to follow suit. Although the Chinese later joined with the Pathet Lao in accepting the cease-fire, Moscow understood that Mao was firmly opposed to establishing a unified Laos under a neutralist government.

In this climate of disappointment at home and dispute abroad, the successful flight of cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin on April 12 came as a welcome distraction for Khrushchev and the Soviet leadership. Although unable to feed or house its citizens properly, the Soviet Union was the first nation to put a man in space. Khrushchev had feared that something would go wrong with the Gagarin flight and had turned down a May 1 date for the mission lest a failure mar the traditional holiday. His space advisers were confident they could succeed, however, and they advanced the schedule to ensure that Moscow would be ahead of the Americans, who were preparing astronaut Alan Shepard to fly in the first week of May.

Khrushchev greeted the news of Gagarin’s successful mission by calling for the largest national celebration since the war-ending festivities of May 9, 1945. Four MiG fighters escorted the Il-18 plane that brought Gagarin back to the Soviet capital, and the entire group circled Moscow before landing at Vnukovo Airport. People lined the streets, the roofs, and balconies along the route into the center of the city, and a huge parade in Red Square followed. The Soviet people were hungry for something to celebrate, and public enthusiasm for Gagarin rapidly spread throughout the USSR. Although the scale of these theatrics in Moscow surprised even his family, Khrushchev understood that the celebration helped distract the Soviet people from the grim reality of their daily lives and the apparent bankruptcy of his promises. Given the recent reports he had been receiving of widespread shoddy housing construction, he considered it a bonus that none of the balconies filled with onlookers collapsed during the show.

A M I D T H E S E E V E N T S the Soviet leadership chose to ignore the increasing evidence of U.S. plotting against Castro. In April a wave of terrorist bombings and suspicious fires occurred in Havana. On April 13 El Encanto, the largest department store in Cuba, was destroyed by arson. The day before, the KGB resident in Mexico City reported that sources in the Guatemalan Communist Party were predicting that a broader U.S.-sponsored attack was only days away. Since the summer of 1960 Soviet fears of a U.S. military strike against Castro had risen and fallen. Much as in the children’s fable of the boy who cried wolf, the value of these alarms had worn down with each subsequent discovery that U.S. Marines were not on their way.

Moreover, Khrushchev had received two signals from Kennedy that made a U.S. attack on Castro much less likely. In March U.S. Ambassador Thompson had traveled two thousand miles to Siberia to deliver a personal note to Khrushchev from the president saying that it was time for a face-to-face meeting and suggesting late May in a neutral European capital. On April 1 Khrushchev had sent his agreement to Kennedy. The date was still uncertain, but Kennedy’s willingness to meet was not. A week later the Americans asked to delay the meeting until June and for it to be in Vienna.

The U.S. agreement to a summit was taken as a sign of the new president’s respect for Khrushchev. The second signal that confused the Soviet leader came in the form of a statement by Kennedy that seemed to imply tolerance of Castro. The same day that the KGB in Mexico sounded the alarm, the president publicly denied the rumors that the United States was on the verge of attacking Cuba. In response to a question at a press conference, he stated that “there will not be, under any conditions, any intervention in Cuba by United States armed forces. This government will do everything it possibly can, and I think it can meet its responsibilities, to make sure that there are no Americans involved in any actions inside Cuba. . . . The basic issue is not one between the United States and Cuba. It is between the Cubans themselves.”

Kennedy’s answer not only strengthened Khrushchev’s assessment that this White House would restrain itself but also sent a wave of reassurance down the line of the Soviet national security system. On the assumption that nothing would happen in his absence, the KGB resident in Havana, Aleksandr Alekseyev, was permitted to leave Cuba in April for a trip to Brazil. Before leaving, Alekseyev had witnessed the opening phase of the U.S. campaign, a string of attacks by anti-Castro saboteurs in central Havana, that culminated in an invasion at the Bay of Pigs. He later recalled that even he thought that no greater threat loomed: “I had seen the [U.S.] bombings . . . But why did we not believe that it would be such a large invasion? I don’t know. . . . We just did not believe it.”

Cuban anxieties subsided somewhat after Kennedy’s press conference. Che Guevara, in a meeting with the Soviet ambassador Sergei Kudriavtsev on April 14, said that “the danger of invasion of the country by large beachheads of the external counterrevolutionary forces has now in all likelihood receded.”
The Cubans had evidence that the U.S. government had been behind the El Encanto fire. "One of such [small] bombs," Guevara reported to the Soviets, "was found unexploded in the [El Encanto] store building after the fire with a stamp 'U.S. Army.'" But even Guevara believed that though Kennedy was as much an enemy of the Cuban Revolution as Eisenhower had been, the new president was less comfortable with extreme measures. "[T]he tactics are being somewhat changed," Guevara told the Kremlin. At the moment the Cubans believed that the main emphasis of U.S. policy was on diplomatic isolation and economic sabotage.47

An intensification of the U.S.-sponsored bombing campaign the day after Che's meeting with the Soviet ambassador, however, put the Cubans back on alert. Explosions in Havana, Santiago de Cuba, and San Antonio de los Baños in the early morning of April 15 caused Castro to announce that this was a prelude to an invasion of the island. On April 16 the Cuban Air Force and Navy launched very visible patrols, though Havana had no real information on when the attack would occur.48 Meanwhile Moscow seemed not to be expecting any attack.

On the afternoon of April 17, 1961, reports reached Moscow that U.S.-backed Cuban rebels had invaded three beaches along the Bay of Pigs and a Cuban government-in-exile was calling for a national uprising.49 Khrushchev worried that the CIA's Allen Dulles had staged this provocation to undermine the forthcoming meeting with Kennedy, just as he had dispatched Francis Gary Powers's U-2 flight to ruin the summit in Paris. Unwilling to admit that he had misjudged Kennedy's dislike of the Cuban regime, Khrushchev took solace in KGB reports that pointed to Dulles as bearing the primary responsibility for the Cuban fiasco.50 For example, the KGB reported from London that officials in the U.S. Embassy were saying that Kennedy now regretted having retained Republicans like Allen Dulles and Secretary of the Treasury C. Douglas Dillon in his administration.51

Although the Kremlin was caught off guard and Cuban intelligence did not have detailed warning, weaknesses in the tactical aspects of the CIA's operation doomed it to failure. There was no guerrilla force nearby to fortify the beachhead. The twelve hundred men landed in a flat, marshy region that had only a single road. When dawn broke, columns of Soviet-supplied tanks rolled down that road to defend the beaches. Besides the weakness of the plan, the operation suffered from poor presidential leadership. At the last moment Kennedy had called off an air strike that could have assured that the invasion force enjoyed air superiority. Because it did not, the six planes of Castro's air force were able to sink two of the landing force's ships, one of which carried the brigade's radio equipment and some ammunition. By April 19 the United States had begun to withdraw whatever equipment and fighters it could from the area. More than eleven hundred survivors of the assault remained as prisoners in Cuba.52

The Bay of Pigs invasion ended Khrushchev's complacency about the Kennedy administration. Now the Soviet leader did not know what to think about the young president. Had President Kennedy been behind this attack, or were the hard-liners like Allen Dulles in control? Khrushchev did not immediately make up his mind about what all this meant. On April 18 he sent Kennedy a stinging written protest. But he also had Andrei Gromyko, who delivered the protest by hand to Ambassador Thompson, sweeten the bitter herbs with words indicating his desire that "the differences which have arisen recently would be resolved and U.S.-Soviet relations improved."53 Khrushchev hoped that Kennedy would signal which direction he intended to take U.S.-Soviet relations.

The Bay of Pigs fiasco revived Washington's interest in a superpower summit between Khrushchev and Kennedy. The president decided that though he had no real diplomatic concessions to offer the Soviets, he needed to show presidential leadership at a meeting with the Soviet leader. Although not deaf to the chorus of political disapproval, particularly in Western Europe, that followed the failure in Cuba, Kennedy was principally motivated by a concern that in the wake of the failure in Cuba the Soviets had concluded that he was a weak president.

The president's brother the attorney general gave him the opportunity to jump-start the summit. Naturally secretive, Robert Kennedy was the kind of man who found it liberating to work behind the scenes. "It would be extremely helpful if the Attorney General of the United States," wrote his longtime secretary Angie Novella, "would notify his immediate staff of his whereabouts at all times."54 When Robert Kennedy learned from his press secretary, Edwin O. Guthman, that a former president of the National Press Club claimed a special link to Moscow through a Soviet diplomat, Robert Kennedy wanted to meet this Russian.55 The journalist was the ubiquitous Frank Holeman, Richard Nixon's longtime press ally, who hoped to make inroads in the Kennedy White House, and the diplomat was his occasional lunch partner, Georgi Bolshakov, an agent of the Soviet military intelligence
service (GRU). “My guy wants to meet your guy,” Holeman told Guthman before a meeting was scheduled. Later the attorney general and the GRU officer called each other directly.

The Bolshakov-RFK connection became so important to the story of Khrushchev’s relationship with John F. Kennedy that its origins are worth some attention. After a few weeks of triangular diplomacy managed by Holeman, the first meeting was set for May 9. Bolshakov’s chief at the GRU station in the embassy had already disapproved of any meeting. The big bosses at GRU headquarters did not want Bolshakov to engage in diplomacy. He was in Washington to spy. It remains unclear whether Ivan Serov, whom Khrushchev had partially rescued by shifting him to the leadership of the GRU after Mikoyan successfully provoked his ouster from the KGB in December 1958, talked to his patron about this probe beforehand. In any case, Bolshakov was told not to press on with this meeting. What he did next he did on his own.

The Kennedy brothers also worked outside channels to make this meeting happen. They did not reveal to any of the statutory members of the president’s foreign policy team their scheme to sound out Khrushchev’s plans before the summit. The president’s patrician assistant for national security affairs, McGeorge Bundy, later philosophically described the Bolshakov channel as among “the unsharables” kept between the brothers. Although hired by Kennedy to coordinate foreign policy within the White House, Bundy was cut out of the Bolshakov initiative. So too was Dean Rusk, the new secretary of state. As a result, the country’s three most experienced Kremlinologists were left in the dark: Llewellyn Thompson, who had agreed to stay on as Kennedy’s ambassador to Moscow; Charles Bohlen, now ensconced at the State Department as chief Soviet specialist in residence; and George Kennan, who had returned to government after an eight-year hiatus to serve as Kennedy’s man in Belgrade. So too was Dean Rusk, the new secretary of state. As a result, the country’s three most experienced Kremlinologists were left in the dark: Llewellyn Thompson, who had agreed to stay on as Kennedy’s ambassador to Moscow; Charles Bohlen, now ensconced at the State Department as chief Soviet specialist in residence; and George Kennan, who had returned to government after an eight-year hiatus to serve as Kennedy’s man in Belgrade. Bundy later concluded that the Kennedy brothers had been too clever by half in cutting out all these potential sources of advice just to maintain the secrecy of the Bolshakov channel.

In preparation for the first meeting the brothers discussed the outlines of the U.S. positions on the major issues that separated the two powers. The president was especially eager to focus Khrushchev’s attention on securing a nuclear test ban treaty. Since 1958 the superpowers had been negotiating a comprehensive nuclear test ban while maintaining a voluntary moratorium on any testing. From the start, disagreement had arisen over how to make the agreement verifiable, and it had especially intensified as the nuclear powers moved their testing facilities underground. American and British negotiators pointed out there were hundreds of seismic events a year on the vast Soviet landmass, each of which potentially represented an unannounced nuclear test. The U.S. position was that it should have the right to mount a number of on-site inspections a year to verify that these were acts of nature.

The Soviet position on the test ban had hardened over the course of 1960. Kremlin negotiators had never agreed to any on-site inspections, seeing them as U.S. attempts to spy on Soviet territory. In the aftermath of the Congo crisis, Khrushchev had further complicated an agreement on verification by ruling out any role for the United Nations in monitoring compliance. Similar in spirit to his UN reform proposal, he wanted the monitoring to be controlled by a troika of countries representing each of the two blocs and the neutral world. Not fully trusting even the third world, Khrushchev also insisted that the troika had to be unanimous for any inspection to occur.

Kennedy was certain he could not give in on letting the Soviets veto an inspection of a suspicious event on their territory, but he was confident he could get the number of on-site inspections down to something Khrushchev would accept. JFK was a strong advocate of a test ban. He also did not want to resume testing in part because a test ban would symbolize a rare foreign policy achievement for his fledgling administration.

Kennedy had a second important proposal to make. In late April his administration had seriously considered sending U.S. Marines into Thailand to shore up Souvanna Phouma’s position in Laos, and the president did not want the Soviets and their allies to push the United States that close to intervention again. If possible, at Vienna he wanted to formalize the understanding that he seemed to be reaching with Khrushchev over neutralizing a united Laos.

At his first meeting with Bolshakov on May 9, Robert Kennedy rolled out the president’s thoughts on the outlines of a test ban deal amid pleasantries about better relations and the possibility of a neutral Laos. The president, he reported, would be prepared to accept a limit of ten on-site inspections per year and an international commission to monitor compliance with the treaty, so long as neither side had a veto over its operations. The attorney general expressed his brother’s impatience for a real achievement in Vienna: “The President does not want to repeat the sad experience of Khrushchev’s meeting with Eisenhower at Camp David and hopes that this forthcoming meeting will produce concrete agreements.”

The Kennedys expected the Kremlin to move fast once Khrushchev understood that the U.S. president had become personally engaged in reaching real agreements before the start of the summit. They hoped that after Bolshakov’s
had come absolutely out of the blue for Khrushchev, whose thoughts were still on setting a date for the summit. On May 12, possibly without even having read Bolshakov’s report on his meeting with Robert Kennedy, Khrushchev signed a letter to President Kennedy calling for a summit in June or July. The letter said nothing about achieving a test ban but mentioned optimism about progress in Laos before stressing that the problem of West Berlin “urgently require[d]” a solution. Once Khrushchev finally digested the report from Bolshakov—he did not know the GRU officer, though his son-in-law, Aleksei Adzhubei, was acquainted with him—he was disappointed. Kennedy had said nothing of interest about Berlin, the main reason Khrushchev had wanted to meet in the first place. He had little interest in achieving a test ban agreement at Vienna. On the contrary, his military chiefs were advising him that after a delay of two years it was time for the Soviet Union to resume nuclear testing. Despite the fears of some in the U.S. intelligence community, the Soviets had not violated the test ban moratorium. Soviet generals appealed to Khrushchev’s interest in curtailing the costs of the Cold War with arguments that testing would make the Soviet nuclear arsenal more efficient. Although Khrushchev liked that argument, it did not completely neutralize his unwillingness to be the first to break the moratorium. World public opinion would turn against the first superpower to resume atmospheric testing, which was believed to spread harmful radioactive ions. Unlike the United States, the Soviet Union could not yet do any of its testing underground.

With Kennedy determined to make the test ban the focus of the summit, Khrushchev realized there was nothing much he could offer in his reply through the back channel. The only exception would be a kind word on Laos. Khrushchev asked that the message go back that he was pleased to hear Kennedy confirm the policy on a neutral Laos that he seemed to be following since March. Otherwise, the foreign and defense ministries were to produce boilerplate responses on the test ban and the Berlin question to encourage the Kennedys to come back with something more creative.

Gromyko’s Germanists had to juggle preparing these talking points for Bolshakov with completing a few think pieces for Khrushchev and the delegation to take with them to Vienna. The Soviet Foreign Ministry had learned the hard way the pain of being caught off guard by the country’s mercurial leader. Once in 1958 and twice in 1960 Khrushchev had changed the country’s entire approach to a major foreign policy problem at the last minute, without any warning to his foreign policy staff. Perhaps in the expectation that he was about to do the same again, as of mid-May the Foreign Ministry had prepared far less for the Vienna meeting than it had in the months before the abortive summit of May 1960.51 Gromyko and his people were watching what Robert Kennedy had to say in these secret talks with as much anticipation as Khrushchev.

Meanwhile, as if he had needed more pressure, Khrushchev was receiving information that hardened his resolve to focus the summit on Berlin. Ulbricht sent word in mid-May that he could not wait much longer to do something about the flood of East Germans leaving the country through West Berlin. In April 1961 twice the number of refugees signed in at the registration center in West Berlin as in the same period a year earlier. This was largely because East Germany’s economic woes had increased dramatically. An attempt to lift wages and reduce the number of hours in the workweek had failed in the East German parliament. With industrial production down and export income declining, the regime could not afford these luxuries. So the number of people voting against socialism with their feet was increasing. As Ulbricht himself had to reluctantly accept, “it is not possible for a socialist country such as the GDR to carry out peaceful competition with an imperialist country such as West Germany with open borders.”64 The Soviet ambassador in East Germany, Mikhail Pervukhin, warned Moscow that even though this might complicate “the struggle for a peace treaty,” the East Germans wanted to close the sectoral border between East and West Berlin now. Perhaps the summit could be used, Pervukhin suggested, to reach at least a provisional agreement on Berlin, which would precede a general settlement of the German question.

When Robert Kennedy met again with Bolshakov on May 21, this back channel scheme began to take a very negative turn. The attorney general was as disappointed in Bolshakov’s message as Khrushchev had been when he heard the gist of the May 9 meeting. Nevertheless, Robert Kennedy came armed with one more offer to make on the test ban. Washington would accept a troika of inspectors but no veto. Kennedy impatiently called Bolshakov two days later, hoping for better news from Moscow. “Please hurry the response to the issues raised,” he said.

Khrushchev had set progress on Berlin as the test of American statesmanship, yet now he could see from the GRU report on the meeting in Washington
that President Kennedy wanted to talk about practically anything else but Berlin. In response to Bolshakov’s statement about the need for a peace treaty, Robert Kennedy had said on behalf of his brother, “The President will discuss this subject with Khrushchev in Vienna, but only to discuss it and not to seek any kind of agreement at this meeting.” The attorney general’s effort to sugarcoat the White House’s inability to come up with anything new on Berlin only increased Khrushchev’s frustration. The president, Robert Kennedy added on May 21, “understood the importance of resolving the German question, but this was a very difficult problem, which had historical roots and for any resolution of it the US government would need time.” Khrushchev believed he had already waited long enough.

The Kennedys were clamoring for a response, so Khrushchev decided to give it to them himself. Taking advantage of the visit of some American figure skaters, Khrushchev invited Ambassador and Mrs. Thompson into the Kremlin’s box at the rink. He would give Washington one last chance to understand that Berlin was the main obstacle to better relations. If Kennedy truly wanted détente, he would have to come to Vienna with concessions on Berlin.

The ice rink discussion was the toughest any U.S. envoy had had to sit through in years. Khrushchev relentlessly poked and prodded the Thompsons on Berlin. When the U.S. ambassador asked why the status quo could not be maintained for another seven years, the Soviet leader blew up. The status quo was unacceptable to him. Jane Thompson, the ambassador’s wife, became so uncomfortable that she came to the assistance of her husband, debating with Khrushchev how long the Soviets could wait for a resolution. Ultimately Khrushchev heard an angry Llewellyn Thompson threaten him: “Well, if you use force, if you want to cut off our access and connections by force, then we will use force against force.” Khrushchev responded: “You don’t interpret it quite right. We have absolutely no plans to use force. We will sign the peace treaty, and this is how your rights stemming from the conditions of capitulation will end.” He added that the United States could count on the Soviets and the East Germans signing a peace treaty after the West German elections in September and certainly after the Soviet party congress in October. He warned that U.S. forces in West Berlin “might have to tighten their belts.”

Unfortunately for Kennedy, who needed to know that he was heading into an ambush in Vienna, Thompson discounted much of what Khrushchev was telling him. This longtime Kremlin watcher understood that the Soviet leader had invested a lot of his personal prestige into finding a way out of the Berlin impasse. Thompson had been the ambassador in 1959, when Khrushchev had backed down on Berlin the first time. Having seen that retreat, Thompson now doubted the Soviet leader would provoke a second crisis. If he did, the U.S. ambassador assumed, it would not come until after the party congress in mid-October. It is quite “possible Khrushchev will attempt to slide over Berlin problem in sweetness and light atmosphere.” He couldn’t have been more wrong.

In the years since the collapse of Soviet power in 1991, with the flood of revelations that so much of the red menace had been made of papier-maché, it has been natural to question how dangerous the Cold War really was. How close did we ever come to nuclear war? The Central Committee documents of Nikita Khrushchev reveal that starting with the Presidium meeting on May 26, 1961, the world moved closer to nuclear war than at any time since the Soviets tested their first atomic bomb in August 1949. Even if Khrushchev’s war talk was the product of a frustrated man, rather than a sign of mental breakdown, the Soviet leader on that day deliberately set in motion the machine of war. In the prenuclear age such a decision had only local consequences. In the Kennedy-Khrushchev era this act of willfulness immediately had global significance.

The May 26 meeting was to be the last Presidium meeting before Khrushchev left to see Kennedy in Vienna on June 3. The Soviet leader planned to travel by train so that he could view progress in the cornfields of the Ukraine. The Czechs had also asked him to make a short stop, and the Austrian Communists were hoping for some time with him, too. Khrushchev’s mind was not really on these requests, however. Instead he wanted to set a new, more dangerous course for Soviet foreign policy. It appears that the only warning the other Kremlin leaders had was that Khrushchev invited his stenographer to this meeting on the Vienna summit. Since 1958 he did this only when he intended to announce a new policy. “I attach a lot of significance to the meeting with Kennedy,” Khrushchev began, “because we are approaching the moment when we must solve the German question. This is the key issue.”

Then Khrushchev let his colleagues know what he thought of Kennedy: “He is a son of a bitch,” he said. In the two days since the ice show, the Soviet leader had made up his mind that he had no choice but to seek an early confrontation with the Kennedy administration. The back channel through Bolshakov and the front channel through Ambassador Thompson confirmed that Kennedy was no more prepared to accept Khrushchev’s Berlin demands than Eisenhower had been.
"We are not afraid of German aggression. . . . Germany . . . will not start a new war," Khrushchev said; "the most dangerous country is America." He blamed the U.S. system of government more than any individual for American misbehavior. The Bay of Pigs and the disappointing back channel that followed had convinced him Kennedy was not in control of his government. Kennedy, like Eisenhower, was a captive of the Pentagon and CIA. "That's why we cannot vouch for America. Its decisions are not based on logical principles; rather [it is] governed by different groups and sudden coincidental events. That's why America could easily start a war, even if it is fully aware—according to military circles—of the fact that the situation could grow worse. That's why certain forces could emerge and find a pretext to go to war against us."

Under these circumstances, a patient leader might have suggested a quiet period, building up Soviet strength to meet the dangers of an erratic United States, but Khrushchev was impatient. He announced to his colleagues that he intended to drag the world through the greatest nuclear crisis of the Cold War. Khrushchev did not believe he was choosing war, but he was prepared to take that risk. East Germany, the keystone of the Soviet position in Eastern Europe, would die without an agreement that closed the West Berlin loophole and strengthened its sovereignty. The Soviet demands regarding Berlin, he believed, were reasonable, and the Americans had to be made, even at the point of a sword, to accept them. "The risk that we are taking is justified; if we look at it in terms of a percentage, there is more than a 95% probability that there will be no war."

Khrushchev described how this crisis would begin. The Soviet Union would sign a peace treaty, then turn over control of the air, rail, and road access routes to the East German government. He then revealed how he expected the end game over Berlin to play itself out: "We don't encroach on West Berlin, we do not declare a blockade; [but] we cut off air traffic. We show that we are ready to permit air traffic but on the condition that Western planes land at airports in the GDR, near Berlin. We do not demand a withdrawal of troops. However, we consider them illegal, though we won't use any strong-arm methods for their removal. We will not cut off the delivery of foodstuffs and will not sever any other lifelines. We will adhere to a policy of non-infringement and noninvolvement in the affairs of West Berlin. Therefore, I don't believe that because the state of war and the occupational regime are coming to an end it would unleash a war."

Khrushchev's confidence that he could pull this off stemmed from his assumption that international public opinion and the Western European members of NATO would prevent the United States from using force to defend its position in West Berlin. "[French President Charles de Gaulle and British Prime Minister Harold] Macmillan will never side with the Americans in unleashing war in Europe now," Khrushchev told his colleagues, "because the main deployment of nuclear weapons will be in the territory of West Germany, France, and England. They are intelligent people, and they understand this."

In the United States Kennedy's advisers were telling him that Khrushchev faced opposition from hard-liners who disliked his efforts at détente with the West. In truth Khrushchev fathered all the offensive policies directed at the United States and had no one of any consequence pushing him to be more aggressive. After listening to Khrushchev's description of this new policy, only one man in the room stood up to oppose this descent into danger.

Just as in November 1958, when Khrushchev had advocated ending four-power control over Berlin unilaterally, Anastas Mikoyan was the lone voice of reason in the Presidium. Mikoyan believed the probability that war would result from Khrushchev's proposal was much greater than he had predicted. Mikoyan was not convinced that fear of a nuclear engagement would be sufficient to deter the NATO countries from going to war over their rights to West Berlin. "In my opinion," he said, "they could initiate military action without atomic weapons. Essentially, Mikoyan and Khrushchev were disagreeing over the value of nuclear deterrence in a local conflict like Berlin. Khrushchev assumed that the West would be so afraid of the possibility of a general nuclear war that Kennedy would choose not to initiate any military action whatsoever in reaction to a Soviet blockade of West Berlin. Mikoyan believed that the Americans might respond to the Soviet provocation by using conventional weapons. Mikoyan was also not yet ready to discount the character of the new American president. Under pressure, Kennedy might prove a worthy opponent. He mentioned only a 10 percent possibility of war, but this was a rhetorical ploy to prevent Khrushchev from looking like a fool. Mikoyan sought to rally his colleagues around the idea that Khrushchev's proposal would most likely corner Kennedy, with potentially disastrous consequences. He stressed that closing down the air corridors would create "a great aggravation." Perhaps, he suggested, keeping them open would make the fait accompli acceptable to the West.

Khrushchev's anger grew as he listened to Mikoyan. This was not 1958. He was not prepared to compromise with anyone. "Then nothing will change, in fact," he declared. "If only we maintain air communication, then there will be no real changes, except for the legal ones. The Americans will accept what you suggested with pleasure because it maintains their rights."
The unwelcome debate with Mikoyan forced Khrushchev to remind his colleagues why West Berlin mattered. The central issue for him was the defense of the Soviet bloc in general and the protection of East Germany in particular. Nothing that compromised either goal should be tolerated. He did not fear an attack by West Germany, although Konrad Adenauer’s drive for nuclear weapons was worrisome, or by the rest of NATO. The main threat to East Germany was internal. Every week thousands of German professionals were fleeing the country through West Berlin. Mikoyan’s compromise would not meet the Soviet leader’s needs.

“You see,” Khrushchev said, “if we maintain air communication, this will make the Germans, the Ulbricht government anxious. He already stresses that it is impossible, we train engineers, doctors, they leave the country and we can do nothing about it, it’s true that they are better paid out there; educated people have greater opportunities. This is how it is! Therefore, if we declare this position, then in the first place, our Warsaw Pact allies will sense in this action our inconsistency and uncertainty. As a result, we will shake their confidence in our policy and in the first place in the GDR, and not only Ulbricht’s confidence. They will feel uncertainty. We shouldn’t do this. It means introducing different legal grounds, but de facto it remains the same, the gates remain open.”

Annoyed by Mikoyan’s interruption, Khrushchev decided to go a step further. Not only would he force the closure of the air corridor, but he would make his determination known by shooting down any allied plane that attempted to land in West Berlin: “Our position is very strong, but we will have, of course, to really intimidate them now. For example, if there is any flying around, we will have to bring aircraft down. Could they take any acts of provocation? They could. If we don’t bring the plane down, this would mean that we capitulate. I think that they will put up with it. This is also a confirmation that if we declare something, we do it. In a word, a policy is a policy. If we want to carry out our policy, and if we want it to be acknowledged, respected and feared, it is necessary to be firm.”

Khrushchev did not agree that the West would risk even a conventional war over Berlin. In his eyes, the balance of forces in Central Europe was unfavorable to NATO that this would not make sense. There was an ecstatic quality to his speech as he made this point. In recent weeks the Presidium had been deciding questions for military assistance to countries as far-flung as the Congo and Laos. Khrushchev was plainly tired of having to find ways to neutralize the U.S. advantage in areas of interest to Moscow. Berlin should be different. Here the Soviets enjoyed a conventional superiority. “These days with regard to conventional weapons . . . these considerations do not concern Berlin. This is a matter of consideration for Laos, for Cuba, for the Congo, even, perhaps for Iran. But [in Berlin] meanwhile we are stronger than they are, and they say, ‘The Russians have the advantage . . . .’ This means, they will agree. We will present this proposition and insist on it. Then this matter will be accepted.”

To ensure that the Soviet conventional advantage was as obvious as possible, Khrushchev ordered his three top marshals—Defense Secretary Rodian Malinovsky, Army Chief of Staff Matvei Zakharov, and Commander of the Warsaw Pact Andrei Grechko—to thoroughly examine the correlation of forces in Germany and to see what is needed.

At the end of the meeting, a touch of absurdity crept into this high drama. Just as Khrushchev finished his speech on behalf of starting an international crisis, he was asked if the Foreign Ministry should go ahead with preparing gifts for President and Mrs. Kennedy and the members of the U.S. delegation. Knowing the president’s taste for fine foods and assuming he liked classical music, Gromyko’s team suggested giving him twelve cans of black caviar along with an assortment of phonographic records in leather covers filled with music by Russian and Soviet composers. For Mrs. Kennedy, the Soviets thought that a silver coffee service for six among other gifts might be appropriate. Khrushchev had a mordant response for his diplomats: “Presents can be made even before a war.”

As Khrushchev rode a train through the Ukraine and Czechoslovakia, Kennedy and his delegation flew to Paris for a presummit discussion with the French president. De Gaulle had hosted the last meeting of an American president and the Soviet leader, and Kennedy was seeking some pointers. De Gaulle’s principal advice was that it did not make sense to negotiate on Berlin. It was up to Kennedy to stand up to Khrushchev, so that the Soviets would finally learn to accept the status quo. “It is annoying to both sides that Berlin should be located where it is; however, it is there.” De Gaulle did not worry about Khrushchev’s ability to retaliate. He reminded Kennedy that the Soviet leader had a habit of issuing ultimatums and then forgetting about them. “If he had wanted to go to war,” de Gaulle explained, “he could have already.”

De Gaulle found Kennedy very concerned that Khrushchev doubted Western resolve. “[T]he West is not as weak as people think in regard to the Berlin question,” de Gaulle told Kennedy, revealing that just recently the Soviets had bought sixty thousand tons of meat from France.
The Kennedy-Khrushchev discussions began the day after Kennedy left Paris. Midmorning on June 3 the two leaders met on the steps of the U.S. Embassy in Vienna. The smiles at that point may well have been genuine, but they did not last long.

After exchanging some pleasantries over Khrushchev's and Kennedy's first brief meeting in 1959 during Khrushchev's visit to Capitol Hill, the opening session dissolved into a fruitless exchange over the possibility of miscalculation in world politics. At its core the disagreement reflected the disparate views of world politics that each leader had brought to the table. Khrushchev knew that the United States could dominate militarily in any part of the third world. Kennedy, for his part, did not understand that in the third world Khrushchev had rarely been the initiator of conflicts. More often than not the Soviets had reacted to opportunities.

The afternoon session went no better. Kennedy had taken stock during lunch and seemed to realize that the discussions had gotten off to a bad start. In the hope of developing some kind of rapport, he asked Khrushchev to join him for a short walk in the embassy's garden, with only their interpreters present. Khrushchev was more than half a foot shorter than Kennedy, so the stroll put additional strain on Kennedy's tender back. But it seemed worth the effort. Kennedy recalled that at the otherwise frosty discussion at the ice rink, Khrushchev had told Thompson that he would be able to speak more openly with the president when the two men were not surrounded by aides.

Kennedy asked how it was that Khrushchev was able to find the time to give lengthy interviews to the journalist Walter Lippmann and to the visiting U.S. senator Hubert Humphrey, both of whom had been to Moscow in the spring. Khrushchev explained that the Soviet system permitted him the time for these sorts of meetings. Kennedy was amazed and pointed out that because of the tripartite nature of the U.S. system, he spent a lot of time persuading, cajoling, and consulting with the various branches of government. "Well, why don't you switch to our system," Khrushchev asked.

With rapport still elusive, Kennedy suggested the leaders continue the discussion inside but without reconvening the rest of their delegations. Returning to very general themes about what each country was doing to advance its vision of the future in the third world, the president gave the impression of wanting some sort of general meeting of the minds on reducing military tensions in the third world before delving into the specifics of the various problems facing them, especially the test ban and Berlin. Feeling good about how the discussions were going, Khrushchev agreed to devote another few hours to talking about such abstract propositions. There was still another day for the Americans to present him with something new on Berlin, and he was not hopeful that a confrontation could be avoided anyway.

So the two world leaders spent another three hours talking about very little of consequence to Khrushchev. From an Olympian perspective—if that is possible—Kennedy said nothing of which he might later be ashamed. But the conversation played to Khrushchev's strengths. Before long Kennedy found himself having to explain why the United States maintained relations with dictatorships in Spain and Iran. "U.S. policy," said Khrushchev in attributing Fidel Castro and the slain Patrice Lumumba's behavior to simple anti-imperialism, "is grist on the mill of Communists." Unwilling to give up all hope of developing some understanding with Khrushchev, Kennedy refused to counterattack. He never once mentioned Hungary or the riots in East Berlin in 1953.

The two leaders finally got down to specifics the next day. Kennedy, again in search of the human side of Khrushchev that his Soviet experts had told him about, started with some biographical questions about the Soviet leader's childhood.

Khrushchev, who was in no mood for personal recollections, responded with a speech on the magnificence of Soviet iron ore deposits, especially those near his birthplace. Kennedy then switched to Laos, the only area where there seemed to be any semblance of agreement. Had Khrushchev been interested in engaging Kennedy, this was his chance. Khrushchev had his own problems in Laos, where the Chinese, the North Vietnamese, and the Pathet Lao were trying to force his hand away from neutralization. He could have mentioned that the superpowers had a shared interest in seeing that these regional conflicts did not spin out of control. Had he done so, Kennedy would have given him a knowing nod. But Khrushchev didn't. Instead he attacked U.S. policy and its allies like Thailand and Taiwan as if these were the only sources of instability in Laos. He also attacked Kennedy personally when the president tried to pass off the situation in Laos as something he had inherited. Khrushchev disagreed. He had heard that Kennedy himself had ordered the U.S. Marines into the region but that then the order had been rescinded. Kennedy knew this to be untrue, but he also knew that he had come very close to giving that order.

Tiring of the Laos discussion, Khrushchev took the initiative to move the conversation to disarmament, nuclear testing, and Germany, knowing that otherwise their time would run out without their covering these subjects. Before they turned to these matters, Kennedy nailed down the fact that he and Khrushchev agreed that Souvanna Phouma should be supported and that the
neutralization of Laos should be achieved. Gromyko and Rusk, who had joined the leaders for this session, were then given instructions to follow up over lunch.

The discussion on Laos turned out to be the brief high point of the meeting. Kennedy would be disappointed in what Khrushchev had to say about the test ban treaty. Years later Robert Kennedy explained his brother’s disappointment as having been a by-product of some deception the Kremlin fed to the White House through Bolshakov.84 Soviet records make the existence of this deception highly doubtful.85 More likely Kennedy just couldn’t understand the basis for Khrushchev’s stubbornness. He spoke as if he wanted détente, yet here was a first step, and he was afraid to take it.

Khrushchev spent some time trying to explain that he wanted disarmament, not arms control. He was not about to admit to Kennedy, as he had to Cabot Lodge in a careless throwaway line in February 1960, that the Soviets were facing a missile gap. Instead he explained that he wanted to eliminate all weapons, in stages, and that the United States could have its inspections but not before these weapons were destroyed. He characterized the test ban as far less important than disarmament. Indeed, in a world without nuclear weapons the test ban would be a natural by-product. If Kennedy insisted on a test ban, Khrushchev would agree to one, but the Soviet Union had to have a veto on any enforcement mechanism, and in any case, there could not be a significant number of on-site inspections of suspicious seismic activity in the USSR. Khrushchev’s one concession was that the Soviet Union would permit three inspections a year. Kennedy was downcast. He had come to Vienna expecting Khrushchev to accept ten on-site inspections and thought the Soviet leader understood that there could be no veto for either party. He told Khrushchev that his proposition was akin to a situation in which Khrushchev and he lived in adjacent rooms and neither could visit except by invitation. “Under such conditions, how could any of the two be certain that nothing suspicious is going on in his neighbor’s room?” Khrushchev had no response other than to insist that the United States display the necessary courage to embrace disarmament.

Then came Berlin. For a day and a half Khrushchev had been well behaved. There had been no shouting, and the truculence that he had displayed in the Kremlin had remained discreetly veiled. The veil came off as he handed Kennedy an aide-mémoire that outlined the new ultimatum from Moscow.86 Khrushchev admitted that his position on Germany would affect U.S.-Soviet relations “to a great extent and even more so if the United States were to misunderstand the Soviet position.” He then set out his basic position. The Soviet Union sought no special advantage in Central Europe. It merely wished to extinguish the last embers from World War II. To do so, it was eager to sign a peace treaty with East Germany that would automatically bring an end to all the institutions of the occupation, including the corridors to West Berlin. Before he took this step, he wanted to reach an agreement with Kennedy personally so that the United States would accept the new situation. But if that proved impossible, he was determined to move ahead with a peace treaty unilaterally. What kind of agreement? Western troops could stay in the free city, but only if the Soviets could also place their own troops there. There could also be an international agreement to protect West Berlin’s communications with the world, but no more special-access routes—air, road, or rail—for NATO.

Kennedy tried to explain why Khrushchev’s preferred settlement was as unacceptable to him as it had been to his predecessor. “Here, we are not talking about Laos,” said Kennedy. He deplored the Western alliance as fragile enough that a decision to abandon occupation rights in West Berlin would lead his allies to regard U.S. commitments “as a mere scrap of paper.” He added: “[W]hen we are talking about West Berlin, we are talking about West[ern] Europe.”

The president tried to understand why Khrushchev was so insistent on changing the status quo in Central Europe. He told the Soviet leader that he was convinced that the USSR was as powerful as the United States and that Khrushchev wished to improve relations. Then why try to force the United States to abandon the rights that it had won by fighting the last world war? Repeating his concern that the United States would lose its allies if he accepted Khrushchev’s position, Kennedy said that he had not become president of the United States “to preside over [the] isolation of his country.”

Khrushchev coolly interrupted Kennedy. “So I am to understand that you do not want a peace treaty?” He then added that Kennedy’s ambitions seemed to extend to downtown Moscow if what he wanted was to improve the strategic position of the United States. Khrushchev recalled that he had lost a son in World War II. Gromyko had lost two brothers, and Mikoyan had also lost a son. Ending the occupation of Germany would help block the revanchists in West Germany who wanted to reunify their country by force. Khrushchev regretted that Kennedy refused to see the value for world peace of eliminating that opportunity for mischief.

“No further delay is possible or necessary,” said Khrushchev. “Will a peace treaty block access to Berlin?” Kennedy asked. Khrushchev said it would. Then he calmly told Kennedy that he could still agree to a six-month interim agreement, the agreement he had hoped Eisenhower would accept in Paris.
The gesture was as meaningless now as it had been then, for as Khrushchev
explained, once the six months were up, the Soviet Union would sign the
agreement that it wanted with the East Germans regardless. In any event, he
told Kennedy that he would sign a peace treaty by the end of the year.

The meeting broke up for the last meal of the summit. It was an unpleas­
ant lunch for Kennedy, who was determined not to have the meeting end on
such a sour note. His hopes of a concrete improvement in superpower relations
had been dashed. Seeing this as his last chance, he asked Khrushchev to
meet with him privately after lunch. The president still believed that Kru­
shchev’s hard-line opposition at home was the source of his obstinate posi­
tions. Perhaps he would speak differently alone.

Taking Khrushchev aside, Kennedy stressed that he did not want to travel
home with the sword of a Soviet ultimatum hanging over his head. He
wanted the Soviet leader to understand the differences for him between a
USSR-GDR peace treaty and the loss of rights of access to Berlin. He could
accept the former, but not the latter. Khrushchev was equally frank. He told
Kennedy that if the United States tried to exercise these rights after a peace
treaty had been signed, there would be a military response. He, who had
already prepared the Kremlin for this possibility, was deadly serious. Kennedy
could see that this was not a bluff. “It is up the United States,” Khrushchev
said, “to decide whether there will be war or peace. . . . The decision to sign a
peace treaty is firm and irrevocable and the Soviet Union will sign it in
December if the U.S. refuses an interim agreement.”

Then it will be a cold winter,” replied Kennedy. The summit was over.

Khrushchev had seen the effect of his bluntness on Kennedy and was
pleased with his own performance. At their final meeting he had observed
that the young American leader was “not only anxious, but deeply upset.”
This impression of a somewhat crestfallen Kennedy was later confirmed by
the Austrian chancellor, Bruno Kreisky, who met with Khrushchev just after
seeing Kennedy off at Vienna’s airport. “The President was very gloomy at the
airport,” Kreisky told Khrushchev. “He seemed upset and his face had
changed. Obviously the meeting did not go well for him.” This was exactly
the impression that Khrushchev had intended to create. He had hoped to get his
way on Berlin, but now that he hadn’t, he wanted the U.S. president to be anxi­
ous. Khrushchev said as much in response to the Austrian’s observation.
Kennedy was upset because “the President still doesn’t quite understand the
times in which we live. He doesn’t yet fully understand the realignment of
forces, and he still lives by the policies of his predecessors—especially as far
as the German question is concerned.”

In 1958 Khrushchev had lacked the power in Moscow to launch his assault
against the West in Berlin. This time he intended to get his way no matter
how hard he had to push. Immediately after Vienna, Khrushchev increased
the pressure on the United States and its allies. The next day he went to East
Berlin to announce a December 31 deadline for a Berlin settlement. On June 9
TASS published the aide-mémoire on Berlin that Khrushchev had handed to
Kennedy in Vienna. On Soviet television a week later Khrushchev repeated
the vow to sign a peace treaty by the end of the year. Then, for a speech on
June 21 marking the twentieth anniversary of the Nazi attack on the USSR, he
donned the dark green uniform of a Soviet lieutenant general and vowed that
those who tested Soviet resolve on the Berlin question would “share the fate
of Hitler.”

When he returned to the Kremlin, Khrushchev pushed his stenographers
to produce a clean copy of the minutes of his first meeting with Kennedy. He
wanted copies distributed far and wide as a part of the political campaign for
West Berlin. “The meetings demonstrated the wisdom of taking a hard line
on the Berlin question,” intoned a Central Committee resolution passed at
Khrushchev’s instruction. “There must be no illusions that President
Kennedy or the American government are as yet prepared to take steps to
improve U.S.-Soviet relations.” The distribution list for the usually top secret
Soviet document showed both the extent of Khrushchev’s self-confidence in
his handling of Kennedy and the ways in which he viewed his alliances.
Foreign Communist leaders were to receive their own copies. The Central
Committee made a point of including Fidel Castro in that list, even though
Cuba was not as yet considered a Communist or socialist country. Friendly
but not doctrinaire leaders were to be briefed on its contents. Soviet ambassa­
dors in Cambodia, Egypt, Iraq, India, Brazil, Mexico, and Ghana—to name
just a few of the eighteen countries listed—were to make appointments to see
the foreign leaders to read from the document. Finally, even Tito was to be
honored with an oral briefing. He was not considered dependable enough to
be given his own copy, however.

Khrushchev’s mood was not simply determined; it was dark. The impa­
tience that governed his approach to the new U.S. president now carried over
to his treatment of the Soviet Union’s domestic problems. Having received
additional reports on higher joblessness, theft, and vagrancy, he called in mid­
June for a reversal of some of the reforms in the Soviet judicial system associ­
ated with the wave of destalinization that he had initiated. His language was
crude, bitter, and the most authoritarian since the removal of Kaganovich and
Molotov in 1957.
He blamed the increase in civil discontent and crime on too much liberalization. The reform of the repressive organs of KGB and the militia had gone so far, he believed, that “everything got focused on the moral.” When Roman Rudenko, the chief Soviet public prosecutor, explained that not all thieves were given the death penalty, Khrushchev responded: “Go to hell... Thieves, they’re stealing, and you’re writing laws for them. What is this? What liberals you’ve become, what is it that you are expecting—praise from the bourgeoisie when no one gets shot, and all the while they are robbing the workers and the peasants.”

RUDENKO: No matter how you scold me, if the law does not provide for the death penalty, we can’t apply it.

KHRUSHCHEV: The peasants have a saying: “Get rid of the bad seeds.”

Stalin had the correct position on these issues. He went too far, but we never had any mercy on criminals. Our fight with enemies should be merciless and well directed.

The tenor of Khrushchev’s statements was ominous enough with respect to the average Soviet citizen, but considering the international crisis that he had just launched, this dangerous mood had potentially catastrophic implications. Angry, arrogant, and frustrated, he rammed through in July 1961 a series of changes in the Soviet criminal justice system that increased the use of the death penalty and the size of the police units within the KGB and reversed the mild liberalizing trend that Soviets had been experiencing progressively since 1956.

Khrushchev’s determination was plain in other ways. In a speech to the graduates of Soviet military academies on July 8, he announced a one-third increase in the Soviet defense budget and a suspension of additional reductions in the size of the Soviet armed forces planned for 1961. At a time when the entire leadership understood that the Soviet economy was a failure, this represented a dramatic reversal of the grand policy of 1959-1960. Khrushchev’s personal crusade to improve the domestic standard of living through demilitarization and détente. If that were not proof enough that he was preparing for a dance on the brink of war, he was also talking about unilaterally ending the test ban moratorium, something he had earlier told the Presidium he would not do.

John Kennedy blamed himself for Krushchev’s risk taking. He “just beat [the] hell out of me,” the president confessed to James “Scottie” Reston just after the Vienna summit. He was convinced that it was his own failure at the Bay of Pigs that had inspired Krushchev to push him hard on Berlin. He had been concerned before Vienna that this might happen and had tried to communicate to the Soviets through his brother Robert that they ought not underestimate him. Clearly something had gone wrong. Kennedy wondered if his performance with Krushchev had made matters worse. Joseph Alsop and the publisher of the Washington Post, Philip Graham, were among the close friends invited to listen as Kennedy read aloud from the transcripts of the meetings prepared by the State Department. Like a quarterback reviewing films of a game that he should have won, he scrutinized these exchanges to see whether there was something else he should have said or if perhaps there was something he should not have said at all.

Kennedy took a few days off at the family home on South Ocean Boulevard in Palm Beach after flying back from Europe. He looked bad. He had twisted his chronically weak back in March during a tree-planting ceremony in the Canadian capital of Ottawa. The stress after Vienna had caused the pain to flare up, and White House correspondents noticed in June 1961 that his crutches were out again. Those accompanying him on the flight back from Florida watched as a fruit picker crane was used to lift the hobbling president onto Air Force One. Kennedy was also fighting a virus, for which his doctors had increased his daily dose of cortisone. The lack of exercise caused by the bad back and the puffiness attributable to the cortisone made him look noticeably sluggish and fatter.

Kennedy returned to a Washington taut with fear. Headlines blared that a new Berlin crisis was on. Krushchev’s uncompromising aide-mémoire