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 Khrushchev’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 Khrushchev 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 Khrushchev 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. Khrushchev’s uncompromising aide-mémoire
appeared in U.S. newspapers after the Soviets released it, along with what seemed like daily reports of his various statements reaffirming the December deadline. Other evidence that Khrushchev was serious flooded in. In early July the head Soviet negotiator at the test ban discussions in Geneva announced that Moscow considered the talks a waste of time in light of American attitudes. A few days later the Soviet Air Force organized its first major air show since 1956 to show off a long-range four-engine supersonic plane, nicknamed Bounder by NATO. The West had seen Bounder before, but the flyby near Moscow was a reminder of Soviet strategic capabilities. So too was a prominent article in Aleksei Adzhubei’s newspaper, Izvestia. Referring to an apparently unflattering statement by Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy on the Soviet submarine fleet, the newspaper warned: “[Do not make any miscalculation, Mr. Kennedy, and do not overestimate your atomic weapons. The United States ceased long ago to have a monopoly on such arms.”

A policy debate raged in the White House over how to respond to Khrushchev’s new Berlin ultimatum. Kennedy again invited a veteran of Stalin’s 1948–1949 Berlin blockade, Truman’s former secretary of state, Dean Acheson, to participate in the discussions. Acheson had headed the working group on Berlin for Kennedy’s transition, and now the young president asked the old cold warrior to coordinate his administration’s responses to Khrushchev.

Acheson rose to the challenge and prodded, pressed, and humiliated the administration’s younger hands into offering Kennedy a series of options designed to convey U.S. toughness. He believed that it was Western resolve that had proved decisive in forcing a peaceful end to Stalin’s Berlin crisis. Despite the change in Soviet leadership and the recent reforms in Soviet society, Acheson sensed that the lessons of that earlier crisis still fitted the circumstances of the current confrontation. He advocated an immediate conventional buildup in Europe and refused to consider negotiations with Khrushchev before the Soviets understood the nation’s determination to defend its interests by force, if necessary.

It was curious that Kennedy had enlisted Acheson’s help. As a congressman Kennedy had been very critical of the Truman administration’s foreign policy. He joined the chorus of those who blamed Truman for having “lost” China by mishandling Chiang Kai-shek and questioned the president’s firing of Douglas MacArthur during the Korean War in 1951. One Kennedy broadside against the Truman administration had caused a Massachusetts paper to editorialize that “the political point of the Kennedy speech is that the Republicans should try to sign him up for a job with their speaking bureau.”

Kennedy also did not much like Acheson, whom he found overbearing, arrogant, and not always trustworthy. “[Dean Acheson] thinks that nothing has been done right since he left office,” Kennedy confided to the journalist Theodore White in 1961. Nevertheless, Kennedy understood that the institutions that made it easier for the United States to contain Soviet power were in large part the handiwork of this martinet.

Kennedy also shared many of Acheson’s concerns. He knew that he could not negotiate at gunpoint. Once again it was a matter of “we arm to parlay.” Khrushchev would need to be convinced that the United States was prepared to fight to retain its access to West Berlin. Kennedy was already a devotee of Maxwell Taylor’s ideas on the importance of conventional weapons in the superpower contest. A thinking man’s war hero who had proved his grit at the Battle of the Bulge in World War II, Taylor had almost single-handedly inspired a public debate over Eisenhower’s nuclear policy in the late 1950s. Taylor argued that by relying so heavily on the threat of massive nuclear retaliation, Ike had devalued the currency of deterrence. Taylor advocated instead a more balanced approach to deterring Khrushchev, including building up U.S. nonnuclear forces so that the Kremlin understood that conventional war was still possible in the nuclear age. The fact that Khrushchev kept threatening to alter the status quo in Central Europe was strong proof for both Taylor and Kennedy that the Soviet leader believed the United States was too afraid of the consequences of massive retaliation to fight for anything but its homeland. The remedy was to present him with credible U.S. commitments to defend regional interests abroad with conventional forces.

In mid-July specific recommendations on how to demonstrate U.S. resolve to the Soviets flowed to Kennedy. Most his advisers believed that this was essentially a military crisis like 1948 and not the political crisis of 1958 that Eisenhower had handled so well by doing nothing. Acheson led the group that believed the potential was greater now for a military clash than in 1958. Khrushchev was so bloody-minded now that he might have to be defeated in a localized conventional struggle in Germany. “Khrushchev has, I believe, sensed weakness & division in the West and intends to exploit it to the hilt,” Acheson wrote to his former boss, Harry Truman. “It wouldn’t take more than an error or two on each side to carry us over the edge into nuclear war.” Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson and Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze joined the former secretary of state in advocating maximum preparations at the earliest possible time. A note of alarmism soon crept into their arguments. The hawks wanted Kennedy to declare a national emergency. Acheson predicted a congressional revolt if he did not declare a national
emergency by the end of July. Johnson agreed, arguing that Congress expected a demonstration of presidential leadership. Nitze asserted that without this declaration of emergency now, there would be no hope of having enough soldiers and pilots in place by the end of 1961, when they might be needed for the next Battle of Berlin.14

Kennedy had not yet made up his mind whether to embrace the full Achesonian program when he received some unusually good intelligence that suggested that the main threat was more political than military.5 On July 13 Allen Dulles, who remained CIA director until November, informed him that for some months the CIA and the British had been jointly operating an agent who had remarkable insight into what the Kremlin might be thinking. He was Oleg Penkovsky, an unusually well-connected colonel in the GRU, the Soviet military intelligence service.16

Penkovsky was a social friend of Chief Marshal Sergei Varentsov, a member of the Central Committee and a deputy to the Supreme Soviet. On June 25 Varentsov took Penkovsky aside at a party to chat with him about Khrushchev’s intentions. It turned out to be much more than gossip. The gist of Khrushchev’s May speech to the Presidium had managed to leak out to Varentsov. “Soon after the Party Congress [October 1961] a peace treaty will be signed,” he told Penkovsky. “The Soviet government knows that signing this treaty means a certain risk and danger, but they are not worried, because they know that the FRG [Federal Republic of Germany, West Germany] still is not ready for war and needs two or three years more. The U.S., Britain and France, because of this, will not start a big war and will retreat. We also do not want a big war, but we want to force the West to begin to negotiate with the GDR on the procedures for movement along the access routes, the procedure for entrance and exit from Berlin, etc.”97 The mole then repeated this conversation to his Western case officer.

The spy’s report alone might not have been that reassuring, but at the same time, and from highly reliable technical sources, Kennedy received information that Khrushchev was playing an extremely weak hand.18 A U.S. satellite had just produced an unprecedented set of photographs showing the status of the Soviet missile program. After Powers’s U-2 had been shot down, the United States had put its faith in the Corona satellite program to determine the size of the Soviet missile threat. Information from the most recent mission revealed that there were no more than two ICBM sites between Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) and the Ural Mountains, with a combined total of eight launchpads.19

Kennedy had believed in the missile gap.20 Despite some contrary indica-
ble without a declaration of national emergency, and he did not want to declare one. McNamara had assured him that this drastic call-up could be postponed until early September, and Kennedy hoped that Khrushchev might have given up on his ultimatum by then. In addition, Kennedy signed off on a tepid aide-mémoire that warned Khrushchev to stop trying to force unacceptable settlements down Western throats.

The human and satellite intelligence, as well as the advice from Eisenhower and others, had bolstered Kennedy's natural caution. In Vienna he had warned Khrushchev about the dangers of miscalculation in a nuclear struggle, and he was not about to make that mistake himself. In teeing up the decision for the president, McGeorge Bundy had noted that the country's prominent sparring columnists, Walter Lippmann and Joseph Alsop, both believed that Kennedy would have to take the lead in resolving this problem. Kennedy agreed. He would use a televised speech to the nation on July 25 to request the additional $3.25 billion from Congress for defense, announce the call-ups, and also introduce a new program of civil defense, which was more a public confidence measure than a realistic approach to protecting the country in future nuclear crises.

Kennedy intentionally cut Acheson and Vice President Johnson out of the meeting at which he first tried out his decision. Once he had built consensus among McNamara, Bundy, Secretary of State Rusk, Treasury Secretary Dillon, Maxwell Taylor, and his brother, the attorney general, he subjected his program to formal approval from the entire National Security Council and Acheson. Although he had the firm support of his inner circle of advisers, this had been a very difficult decision for Kennedy. Since Khrushchev's challenge at Vienna the world had been watching how he would react. Kennedy, who could be quite a pessimist, sensed that he did not have a lot of political capital either at home or abroad. "There are limits to the number of defeats I can defend in one twelve-month period," he told his former Harvard tutor John Kenneth Galbraith.

The administration told the European allies the gist of these decisions before Kennedy gave his speech. On July 20 letters from the president were delivered to Adenauer, de Gaulle, and Macmillan. The next day Rusk, who had flown from Washington to Paris, met with the French, British, and West German foreign ministers to discuss what Kennedy intended to do. The White House had not consulted with the Western Europeans before Kennedy made up his mind, but Washington wanted the Europeans to be willing to assist in the crisis that the Americans expected.

As Washington debated its response to the Soviet ultimatum, Khrushchev headed south for his annual vacation at Pitsunda to think about his next step in the Berlin chess match. "[H]ere I work more fruitfully," Khrushchev wrote, "because my attention is not diverted to routine matters of which I have plenty... Here I can concentrate on the main things." His dacha had been built with the leader's comfort in mind. From its large windows and three balconies, he enjoyed a magnificent view of the Black Sea. To allow the portly Khrushchev a little exercise, a pool, a luxury practically unheard of in the country, was set next to the house.

By mid-July, however, there was little tranquility for him to find at this beautiful place. Most unsettling were the reports on the ever-increasing number of East Germans fleeing their country through West Berlin. In the first six months of the year a hundred thousand had left, twenty thousand of them in June alone. Since his ultimatum speeches of late June and early July, the numbers had become even more dramatic. The flow of East German refugees to West Berlin was now the heaviest it had been since October 1955. As Khrushchev had said to the Presidium in May, he knew that a disproportionate number were professionals, who would be difficult to replace. Even harder for him was the fact that these people were seeking better lives in the West because the standard of living in the GDR could not yet compete. "The question of whether this or that system is progressive ought to be decided in political terms," said Khrushchev. "However, many people decide it in the pit of their stomach."

The news that reached the Soviet leader at Pitsunda from the United States was no more encouraging. Kennedy's formal response to the Soviet aide-mémoire on Berlin finally arrived on July 28 and was a major disappointment. Calling the Soviet effort "a document which speaks of peace but threatens to disturb it," the president in a message accompanying the U.S. response advised Khrushchev to reconsider the West's proposals of 1959, which included free elections for a unified greater Berlin. There was no suggestion of negotiations or bold new offers. Washington instead called on the Kremlin "to reconsider its course."

Around the third week of July intelligence reports that reached Khrushchev reinforced the impression that the White House was girding for a protracted crisis. Khrushchev later said that the most influential was one that predicted Washington intended to take advantage of the situation in East
Germany. In 1953 the Eisenhower administration had declined to intervene to help the rioters in East Berlin who had launched a short-lived revolt against the East German regime. But Khrushchev, who was unsure that Kennedy really controlled his own government, gave credence to the possibility that this U.S. government might not be as cautious.37

From his protégé Aleksandr Shelepin, the chief of the KGB, Khrushchev learned on July 20 that NATO was preparing to deal with the Berlin matter as a military problem. Soviet sources in some Western European governments were reporting that NATO was united in its determination to prevent Moscow from signing a peace treaty with East Germany that would affect access rights to West Berlin. The KGB predicted that if Khrushchev went ahead with his plan, the West would "be ready to take steps that could threaten the security of the Soviet Union." Evidence had reached Moscow of serious Western military planning to counter any attempt to isolate West Berlin. There was also intelligence indicating plans for political, economic, and other nonmilitary sanctions to put pressure on Moscow to desist.38

Khrushchev may have also received hints of the conventional buildup that Kennedy had outlined in his letters to the big three European leaders or that Rusk discussed in Paris with the foreign secretaries. Soviet penetration of those governments was impressive in the early 1960s. In May, for example, the Kremlin had received copies of papers delivered by the French government to NATO that outlined the various countries' positions on the Berlin question.39 Similarly Presidium members were able to read copies of the West German ambassador's correspondence with Bonn.40

Confronted with the rigid U.S. aide-mémoire and the related intelligence, Khrushchev decided that he would have to prepare for a much longer and tougher confrontation than anticipated. He had already canceled some military leaves and reapportioned funds to his Defense Ministry, but the situation in East Germany needed immediate attention. Ulbricht's regime already seemed to be cracking under strain of this crisis, and now it seemed the international tension would probably last through the end of the year.

Khrushchev decided to build a wall through the center of Berlin. This was in part a reaction to a suggestion from Ulbricht. On the eve of the Vienna summit the East Germans had communicated to Moscow that their immediate objective was to close the sectoral border through which so many East Germans were fleeing. This was more important to them in 1961 than a peace treaty.41 Khrushchev had long understood that this would have to be part of the peace agreement, but he was hesitant to proceed with this step before exhausting his negotiating strategy. He knew that a Berlin wall would be viewed as a provocation by the West and would therefore complicate all efforts to achieve a general settlement. He now thought he could no longer wait for the West to come around to a general settlement.

The decision to build the Berlin Wall was Khrushchev's alone to make. He oversaw all aspects of the Soviet bloc's strategy for settling the German question. Only he could decide to divorce border control measures from the larger effort of isolating West Berlin through a peace agreement. He therefore bore sole responsibility for the many lives that would be inalterably hurt by this decision.

Khrushchev had no moral qualms about separating millions of German families, some of whom, as it turned out, did not see one another for a decade. Although he reluctantly understood their motivations, he was just as dismissive of the thousands of East Germans who educated their children in West Berlin schools and of the tens of thousands of workers who worked for higher pay in West Berlin. They were not as reprehensible to him as the thieves, those he called economic criminals, that he had put to death in the Soviet Union. But the callousness of that recent decision could be seen in his treatment of the Berlin problem. For all his empathy for those who did not live as well as they should under communism, Khrushchev had no human feeling for those individuals who by their actions threatened his plans. It was this authoritarian blindness that prevented him from ever understanding the concept of human liberty.

Instructions were sent to the Soviet group of forces in Germany and the East German Ministry of Internal Affairs to work together on a plan for establishing control over "Greater Berlin," including the boundary between the Eastern and Western sectors. "Exit or entry into West Berlin," the plan specified, "would be outlawed for all citizens of the GDR, except for those with special permits."42 Approved by the chief of staff of the Soviet forces in Germany on July 21, the plan did not address political matters. On its face, it seemed designed to be part of the measures that would take effect once Khrushchev and Ulbricht signed the peace treaty that would transfer Moscow's remaining responsibilities to East Germany. Of course it could be implemented earlier. All that was required was a political decision to build a wall.

Khrushchev wanted the formal decision to be made by the leaders of the Warsaw Pact in the first days of August. The Presidium had already decided in late June to arrange a meeting of the pact members on August 3 to discuss the Berlin situation. In the third week of July Gromyko drafted an agenda and prepared invitations for the meeting at which closing the Berlin sectoral border would be discussed.43 Khrushchev insisted on maximum secrecy; any
leak to the West might provoke a preemptive strike. Only Ulbricht would be
told the reason for the session beforehand. The other Warsaw Pact leaders
would be told only when they arrived in Moscow on August 3. Khrushchev
wanted the invitations to go out on July 26.44

There was a buzz in Washington on the morning of July 25. The New
York Times predicted the speech would be Kennedy's second inaugural
address. "This one," observed the Times' James Reston, "will inaugurate a
new flexible policy, not only for Berlin but for the whole 'cold war' front."
Rumors about this speech had been appearing in newspapers for days, and it
was expected that Kennedy would meet Khrushchev's threats with counter-
measures that demonstrated the resolve of the United States.

Theodore Sorensen, Kennedy's principal speechwriter, took the president's
reading copy up to him in the family quarters of the White House that
morning and found him propped up in bed with a heating pad supporting his
aching back. He was making some last-minute changes to the speech, adding
a final, very personal note, in longhand. "When I ran for the Presidency of
the United States," he scribbled in his nearly illegible handwriting, "I knew
that this country faced serious challenges, but I could not realize, nor could any
man realize who does not bear the burdens of the office, how heavy and con-
stant would be those burdens. . . . In these days and weeks I ask for your help,
and your advice. I ask for your suggestions, when you think we can do better.
All of us, I know, love our country, and we shall do our best to serve it."46
Sorensen took the changes and had them typed up.

The handwritten addendum was uncharacteristically confessional for a
man who believed that leadership required cool detachment. The estimated
fifty million television viewers and those listening on radio would be invited
to peer through to the insecurities that Kennedy usually hid from almost all
but a few family members. From the man who only six months earlier had
spoken confidently of "bearing any burden," there would be an admission of
vulnerability. Yes, he would bear this burden, but it wasn't going to be easy.
No words ever spoken by this president, and there were many more in the
crisis-filled years to come, would be as poignant.

Giving the speech proved to be just as difficult as writing it. Although the
broadcast had been delayed until 10:00 P.M., when at least children on the East
Coast would be asleep, the heat of a July day in Washington still hung heavily
that night. Air conditioners in the early 1960s were especially noisy contrap-
tions, and the president's television producers thought they had to turn down

Khrushchev barked at John J. McCloy.50 Khrushchev had invited McCloy,
Kennedy's special adviser on disarmament, to Pitsunda so that he could
respond immediately and personally to the much-anticipated U.S. response.
McCloy was well known to Khrushchev as a charter member of the U.S. for-

gern policy establishment. A former deputy secretary of war under Franklin
Roosevelt, McCloy had served Harry Truman as U.S. high commissioner in
occupied Germany. But McCloy had not come to the Soviet Union in mid-July
1961 to discuss Germany; he was leading a State Department delegation to
discuss arms control when he received the unexpected invitation to see
Khrushchev on July 25. McCloy was therefore the first Westerner to experience
the heat of Khrushchev's displeasure at Kennedy's Berlin speech.

Although McCloy had no inkling of this, the speech redoubled Khrus-
chev's determination to install the wall before the Americans made any
move. On July 26 Khrushchev instructed the Soviet ambassador in East Berlin
to tell Ulbricht that in his judgment "we have to use the tension in interna-
tional relations now to circle Berlin in an iron ring. This must be done before
concluding a peace treaty."51 Khrushchev explained that the international situ-

Kenedy has declared preliminary war on the Soviet Union,"
atura heat of the Oval Office. Journalists covering the speech
described the room as being "like an oven." Television viewers, who had no
idea of the temperature their president was enduring, concluded that
Kennedy's frequent mopping of his brow reflected tension, thus heightening
the effect of the speech.47 "[West Berlin] has now become—as never before—"
Kennedy told the American people, "the great testing place of Western courage
and will, a focal point where our solemn commitments . . . and Soviet ambi-
tions now meet in basic confrontation."48 Then, if there were any doubt that
Kennedy was ready for this test, he added, "I hear it said that West Berlin is
militarily untenable. And so was Bastogne. And so, in fact, was Stalingrad.
Any dangerous spot is tenable if men—brave men—will make it so."49
Ever the engineer, Khrushchev was interested in the details of how this barrier would be build. He instructed Pervukhin to send him the plans recently worked out by the East Germans and the Soviet Army and to ask Ulbricht for an estimate of how long the entire operation would take. He also wanted to see what Ulbricht planned to say at the Warsaw Pact meeting. Khrushchev wanted the East German leader to take the lead at the session in explaining to the other leaders why this iron ring was necessary.

Khrushchev received the response from Ulbricht the next day. It was pithy and enthusiastic. "This is the solution!" Ulbricht exclaimed. He went on to assure the Soviet government that once the decision had been made it would take a mere eight days to prepare all the measures required to initiate the closure of the border between East and West Berlin and to tighten the control around all Berlin. Khrushchev was especially concerned about the transit systems—the S-Bahn and the subway—that crossed the sector boundaries. The East Germans assured him that closing those down would take only between four and five weeks. The first day guards would be posted at all the crossing points, and over time they would be replaced by physical barriers.

After McCloy's departure from Potissud on July 26, Khrushchev had spent a few days touring farms in the Ukraine before returning to Moscow on July 31 to see Ulbricht. The East German leader was due to arrive in Moscow before the other Warsaw Pact leaders so that he and Khrushchev could plan their strategy. Although Ulbricht was relieved, his old concerns about the Western reaction to any East German and Soviet provocation had returned. As he had in November 1960, the German worried about a Western economic blockade.

The Kremlin had anticipated this problem. Even before Khrushchev returned to Moscow, Mikoyan and Gromyko drafted a proposal for countermeasures should the West impose an economic blockade on East Germany. They suggested that East Germany retaliate by preventing all nonmilitary transportation from West Berlin to West Germany. This would be "a blow to West German firms that obtained manufactured products from West Berlin but would not interfere with the operation of West Berlin industry or the supply of food to the population." Another suggested form of action came from the KGB chief, Shelepin, who on July 29 proposed a series of measures around the world that "would favor dispersion of attention and forces by the United States and its satellites, and would tie them down during the settlement of a German peace treaty and West Berlin." In particular, Shelepin advocated assisting revolutionary movements in Latin America to distract Washington.

These recommendations, if accepted, would mark a major shift in how Khrushchev competed with U.S. power in the third world. Up to now the Kremlin had not created any national liberation movements and had been reluctant to sponsor revolutionaries who preferred armed rebellion to creating socialism through political subversion. Among the KGB's recommendations was a plan to work with the Cubans and the Sandinista movement in Nicaragua, the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), to sponsor revolutionary movements throughout Latin America. The FSLN was itself to be built up so that it had a credible chance of overthrowing the Nicaraguan dictator Anastas Somoza.

On August 1 Khrushchev and the Presidium accepted the KGB plan to distract the United States by "creating a hotbed of unrest" in Latin America. It was evidence less of new thinking about the third world than of an almost desperate desire to chip away at U.S. resolve in the Berlin crisis. Khrushchev was kept informed of the planning in Latin America. Shelepin reported to him that the KGB was funneling a modest amount of money to the FSLN and exercising influence over the movement through three confidential contacts—PIMEN, IDROLOG, and LOT. In this way, the KGB gave the FSLN ten thousand U.S. dollars to buy weapons and subsequently recruited twelve Nicaraguan students in Mexico City to train for operations against the Somoza regime.

Khrushchev's main concern remained the situation in Berlin, and on August 3 he met with Ulbricht to discuss it. Not wishing to encourage Ulbricht's slight defeatism, Khrushchev opted to conceal the Kremlin's emergency plans from the East German. Instead Khrushchev merely suggested that once the barriers were up the Soviets and the East Germans would announce in a joint communiqué that this had been done in the interests of the socialist world. When Ulbricht asked that his people be told something before the wall went up to prevent fear of economic strangulation, Khrushchev disagreed. Predicting a mass rush for the exits, he told the East German that the best way to create panic would be to tell the public anything before the barriers were erected. "We have to do this the way we introduced the new currency regime," Khrushchev said, referring to how the Soviet regime had suddenly introduced an East German mark in the early 1950s. He wanted the wall to be built without warning, a sudden fait accompli.

Khrushchev went on to outline his thinking on how this border closing should proceed. Although he wanted the wall to go up secretly, he also pro-
posed to position Soviet tanks along the border with the Federal Republic of Germany behind a wall of Soviet troops. His intention was to send a signal to the Western governments without creating a war scare among the populations of Europe and the United States. He did not want public hysteria; he just wanted to do enough to deter Washington, Bonn, Paris, and London from intervening to prevent the closure of the border. Ulbricht worried that these steps might not be enough. "Perhaps your units will need reinforcements," he said. Khrushchev disagreed. "[T]his would evoke a negative reaction (from the Germans) and as a demonstration [of power] this step would not have any decisive meaning.,,61

Again Khrushchev asked how long this would take. Ulbricht now believed the iron ring could be constructed within two weeks, instead of the eight days he had previously predicted. This was good enough for Moscow. In a moment of generosity, Khrushchev assured the German that it would be up to the GDR to decide the best moment to start the operation. Whenever it decided to go ahead, Moscow would be ready. “The date for the beginning of border control was to be August 13, 1961,” Khrushchev later recalled. “We kidded among ourselves that in the West the thirteenth is supposed to be an unlucky day. I joked that for us and for the whole socialist camp it would be a very lucky day indeed.”62 August 13 was a Sunday, and it made sense to launch this operation in the middle of a weekend, when few East Germans would be working in West Berlin.

Despite the Penkovsky penetration and the timely visit of John McCloy, the Kennedy administration did not pick up on any of Khrushchev’s plans. The Kremlin followed a very strict policy of secrecy about the plan for Berlin, even at the risk of annoying its allies. Moscow stonewalled the nosy Polish leader Wladyslaw Gomulka, who kept asking about the agenda items for the forthcoming Warsaw Pact discussions.63 The wall operation was also closely held in Moscow. Instructions to the KGB and the other relevant ministries regarding a worldwide propaganda campaign to accompany the unveiling of the wall were not distributed until the last possible moment.64

In a message to the Kremlin, Ulbricht insisted on even stricter measures to preserve the security of the operation. Remembering perhaps how quickly copies of Khrushchev’s secret speech to the Twentieth Party Congress had reached the West in 1956, he didn’t want the Soviet government to prepare any materials for the visiting delegations that could reveal the secret. "In connection with this meeting," he wrote, "we will provide to the representatives of the fraternal parties only those materials that can be published.”65

The Warsaw Pact representatives gathered in Moscow on August 3 for a three-day session on Berlin.66 In his speeches Khrushchev prepared the entire group for the building of the Berlin Wall and the expected international tensions that would ensue. “No one can give a guarantee that there will be no war,” he told them.67 Although he did not expect any Western attack, he advised his comrades that the bloc should “strengthen our defense, strengthen our military forces... We must, comrades, show them our will and decisiveness, or they will say that we are bluffing and consequently will strengthen the pressure against us.”68 Khrushchev and Ulbricht, who gave his main speech on August 4, both addressed the more likely possibility of a Western economic embargo against East Germany. Moscow and East Berlin hoped that the Poles, the Hungarians, and the Czechs would be able to find a way to reduce some of the pressure on the East German economy were this to happen.

The meetings ended on August 5 with a partial victory for Khrushchev and Ulbricht. Their socialist allies were generous in offering moral support for the wall operation. The pact passed a resolution in support of closing the border. However, each of the Eastern European leaders also reminded the Kremlin that there was a limit to the economic assistance that they could offer East Germany. They had weak planned economies of their own.69

Returning to Berlin immediately after the conference, Ulbricht turned to the many preparations required before the border could be closed a week later. On Monday, August 7, he informed the East German Politburo of the talks in Moscow and the decision to close the border on the night of August 12–13.70 On Wednesday, August 9, he assured the Soviets that all necessary preparations would be completed by Saturday and supplied a timetable for the weekend’s events.71

Ulbricht laid out for Khrushchev via the Soviet ambassador in East Berlin how he planned to choreograph the night of August 12–13 to minimize the possibility of leaks to the West. He would invite the formal cabinet of the East German government (the Council of Ministers) to his country house outside Berlin at the last possible moment on August 12. Around midnight he would convene this group to approve the Warsaw Pact resolution calling for the closure of the border. As the group was rubber-stamping the decision, East German policemen would form lines along the sectoral boundary and begin unrolling barbed wire, which would have been distributed to them in advance as part of an “exercise.” Ninety minutes later, if all went according to plan, an
official announcement of the sealing of the East Berlin border would be sent to the GDR's press agency for distribution to the world.  

Khrushchev received this report from Ulbricht on August 10, the same day the Kremlin announced that Marshal Ivan Konev, the former commander in chief of the Warsaw Pact forces, who had played a major role in Stalin's military campaign against Hitler, was returning as commander in chief of Soviet Forces in Germany. Khrushchev was responding to Ulbricht's earlier request that something be done to prepare the East German population for the tense days to come. The selection of a war hero like Konev to be in Berlin signaled Moscow's direct involvement in what would be happening there.  

The new commander in chief reached Berlin slightly ahead of Khrushchev's statement. A bulldog of a man with the hands and face of a Ukrainian peasant, Konev took some pleasure in surprising the Western liaison officers assigned to his new command. The American, British, and French missions in East Berlin had already been invited to a late-afternoon meeting with Colonel General Ivan I. Yakubovsky, the commander in chief of the Soviet Group of Forces in Germany. Standing next to Yakubovsky when they arrived was the diminutive Konev. "Gentlemen, my name is Konev," he reportedly said with a twinkle in his eyes. "You may perhaps have heard of me." The gathered mission chiefs could only smile.  

Konev's appointment was the only public act that any Western intelligence professional could later point to as a possible signal of what was to come. At the time, however, the appointment passed without anyone in the White House or even at the Pentagon suspecting a change in Khrushchev's tactics.  

Konev quickly met with Ulbricht to assure himself that the East Germans were indeed ready for the operation. According to the plan created in July, the Soviet armed forces would remain in the background throughout the operation unless the Western powers made a provocative move. There was no mention in the plans sent to the Soviet Presidium in the first days of August of what steps the Soviet armed forces might take if the U.S. Berlin command tried to test the East German police action in the early moments of the operation. In his meeting with Ulbricht, Konev stressed two points: First, the operation had to proceed quickly, and second, the ability of the citizens of West Berlin to move back and forth to West Germany should not be affected by this action.  

As Ulbricht met with Konev, the top level of the East German security police received its first briefing on the coming operation. On Friday, August 11, the East German police chief, Erich Mielke, revealed to them the code name for the closure of the Berlin border, Operation Rose, and instructed them to do all their preparatory work "under the strictest secrecy."
already over eighteen hours old, and he was angry that neither the CIA nor the State Department's representatives in Berlin had given him any warning. But there was really nothing he could do about Khrushchev's wall. Theodore Sorensen later summarized the view shared by the president and his closest associates: The wall was "illegal, immoral and inhumane, but not a cause for war." Much harder to admit was the sense that it might prove to be, in the words of Kennedy biographer Robert Dallek, a "godsend." The Kennedy administration knew that the flight of East Germans via West Berlin—it was estimated that 3.5 million East Germans had already left their homes for the refugee centers in the enclave—posed a daily threat to the stability of Khrushchev's German satellite. In bringing this hemorrhaging to an abrupt end, the wall might reduce the pressure compelling Khrushchev to crusade for a peace treaty. Kennedy's only responses were therefore designed to restate the U.S. commitment to West Berlin. He immediately dispatched retired General Lucius Clay, the hero of the 1948–1949 Berlin airlift, and Vice President Lyndon Johnson to West Berlin to reassure the population of the divided city. A week later he sent a convoy of sixteen hundred troops along the autobahn to show the flag and to reinforce the U.S. occupying force.

Kennedy faced the same moral dilemma as had Eisenhower during the Hungarian uprising of 1956. Now, as then, the U.S. president believed he had to turn his back on the plight of the citizens of the socialist bloc to prevent a wider war. Kennedy had not considered that the building of the wall might be a possible scenario flowing from the Vienna ultimatum. His greatest concern had been, and remained, a Soviet military effort to strangle West Berlin. Although the new wall now seemed to rule out a Soviet military assault into West Berlin, the Western access routes remained vulnerable. Kennedy was not prepared to risk everything by destroying a wall that was being built on East German territory.

Protests in West Berlin underscored the moral implications of the wall. The stunned acceptance of the early morning was followed by waves of protest, especially along the corridors of freshly laid barbed wire separating the two Berlins. Three thousand people gathered by early evening at the western end of the Brandenburg Gate. When they started throwing stones east, the East German police opened water cannons on them from the other side. In the southwestern corner of the city, the East German police lobbed tear gas canisters and then used truncheons to disperse an angry West German crowd that had surged into East Berlin. Meanwhile desperate East Germans, including policemen, tried to crash through or jump over the barriers, which were flimsy in these early hours of the division.

Despite the hurt and fear felt by Berliners, the federal government in Bonn also recognized instantly the utility of the wall. The day after the first barriers went up, Adenauer announced he would not cut trade ties with East Germany. The dreaded economic sanctions would be imposed only if the Kremlin went through with its threat to sign a peace treaty. Even Adenauer's hard-line defense minister, Franz Josef Strauss, appealed for calm among West Germans. "If shooting starts," he said, "no one knows with what kinds of weapons it will end."

Khrushchev was relieved by the lack of a forceful Western response. "War might have broken out," he said. Not only had there not been any Western efforts to remove the barriers, but Kennedy, Macmillan, de Gaulle, and Adenauer seemed to have ruled out any immediate plans to penalize the Eastern bloc for this step. The Kremlin's secret retaliatory measures could be kept on the shelf.

The building of the wall did not end the Berlin crisis of 1961. Neither the Soviets nor the East Germans believed that stanching the flow of refugees had solved the problem. For the remainder of the month of August the Soviet government continued its campaign of psychological pressure on the West in preparation for a treaty showdown. For the first time in nearly twenty years foreign military attaches were invited to observe Soviet army maneuvers. On display were units equipped with nuclear-tipped battlefield missiles. No effort at military posturing was more impressive than the announcement at the end of the month that the USSR planned to break its self-imposed moratorium on nuclear testing. Two days later, after three years of abstinence, the Soviet Union began a nuclear test series at its testing range at Semipalatinsk in Central Asia.

Soviet saber rattling emboldened the East Germans to engage in provocations of their own. On August 22 they announced the establishment of a hundred-meter no-man's-land on both sides of the Berlin Wall. The residents of West Berlin were warned that they might be shot if they approached closer than a hundred meters to the boundary. The residents of West Berlin were warned that they might be shot if they approached closer than a hundred meters to the boundary. The next day the East Germans unilaterally reduced the number of crossing points that could be used by the West from seven to one, which became known as Checkpoint Charlie, at Friedrichstrasse.

The Soviets were prepared to accept additional border controls so long as
they did not raise the risk of confrontation with the West in Berlin. However, Ulbricht's new policies, neither of which had been cleared ahead of time by Moscow, involved taking rights away from the West. On August 24 the Soviet ambassador and Konev met with Ulbricht to explain why it was wrong to declare a no-man's-land on the Western side of the Berlin boundary. "The establishment of a 100-meter security zone on West Berlin territory and the granting of permission to the police to use force against trespassers in this zone," the Soviets said, "could lead to a clash between the GDR police and the forces of the Western powers." The next day Ulbricht issued a statement rescinding the zone and assuring the West that the agencies of the GDR had "no intention of interfering in the internal affairs of West Berlin." However, he refused to back off his plan to maintain only one checkpoint, and Moscow tolerated this small act of defiance.

By the end of August Soviet and East German actions were suggesting a policy in flux. All Soviet actions were of course authorized, but Khrushchev was changing his mind. He was back in Pitsunda, where the sunny isolation had again set the wheels of his imagination in motion.

Although Kennedy had responded meekly to the Berlin Wall, the daily reality of the U.S. military commitment to West Berlin was wearing at Khrushchev's determination to sustain this self-made crisis. For all the hints and intelligence that he had received before Kennedy's July 25 speech, Khrushchev apparently was not prepared for the scale of the conventional buildup initiated by the U.S. president. At the meeting with McCloy, Khrushchev had tried to scare him by stressing the Soviet Union's conventional superiority in and around Berlin. "Each division you send to Europe," he said, "we can match with two of our own." From the start of this crisis he had based his confident prediction of a 5 percent chance of war on the assumption that the United States was so outgunned in Berlin that it had no realistic military options to defend its position. The measures laid out by Kennedy in his speech, which had since been implemented by the United States and accepted by Europe, invalidated the basic premise of Khrushchev's Berlin gambit. Mikoyan's prediction of U.S. willingness to engage in a conventional battle, not Khrushchev's assumption that war was impossible in the nuclear age, seemed to have been borne out.

Khrushchev, who was not one to engage in honest postmortems, did not leave to history the exact reasons for his change of heart. But he knew that he had backed himself into a corner. By late August he was looking for an excuse to call off his ultimatum. He still dreamed of a German peace treaty as a capstone of a new European settlement, but the last few months had demonstrated that crude pressure tactics alone were not enough to get the Kennedy administration to yield. A new approach was needed: a few carrots to go with the sticks.

Thousands of miles away Khrushchev's shifting strategy was as yet unknown. Instead a sticky pessimism settled over Washington as the tension dragged into the late summer. Dean Acheson wrote Harry Truman, who served as his father confessor throughout this crisis: "I believe that sometime this autumn we are in for a most humiliating defeat over Berlin.... I hope I am wrong, but do not think that there is the remotest chance that I am. The course is set and events are about to take control." George Kennan, another architect of the U.S. strategy of containing the Soviet Union, was equally morose. Returning in August from Belgrade, where he was serving as Kennedy's ambassador, Kennan confided to his friend Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "I do not propose to let the future of mankind be settled, or ended, by a group of men operating on the basis of limited perspectives and short-run calculations. I figure that the only thing I have left in life is to do everything I can to stop the war." Schlesinger, who described these as "strange, moody days," shared the pessimism. "I feel more gloomy about international developments," he wrote to a friend, "than I have felt since the summer of 1939."