The Chancellor wanted his adversary to know that he fully agreed with Khrushchev that the developing serious situation must be approached soberly, not yielding to emotions. The Federal Republic knows that neither Eisenhower nor Khrushchev wanted war. But the outbreak of war was possible. The two greatest dangers: when tanks stand opposite tanks, at a distance of just some meters, as is the case now in Berlin, and the even greater danger of an incorrect assessment of the situation. The Federal Republic is convinced that negotiations constitute the sole exit from the situation, which must begin within the shortest possible time. The Federal Republic's position regarding the direction of negotiations fully coincides with the positions of the USA and Great Britain. As is

small-man arrogance" and "walking almost on tiptoe to appear taller." In the late summer of 1961 this eighty-three-year-old former French prime minister was due to visit the Soviet Union to close an exhibition of French goods and technology on display in Moscow. The Kremlin's unscheduled approach to Reynaud for a session with Khrushchev was rife with symbolism. It was Reynaud who had resigned in despair when Hitler attacked France in May 1940. This phantom of France's past was about to be asked to help arrange a less dramatic, though significant, Western surrender in 1961.

Khrushchev had decided at Pitsunda to initiate feelers to the West in an effort to jump-start negotiations. The approaches to Sulzberger and Kennan were designed to establish a new back channel to Kennedy. Khrushchev was probing for some change in Kennedy's negotiating position. From Spaak and Reynaud Khrushchev wanted understanding and support. When he set his Berlin strategy, he had expected the Western Europeans to magnify the pressure on the United States to avoid war by accepting Soviet terms. Still convinced they could be used to break America's resolve, Khrushchev decided to court prominent Europeans who had already demonstrated an interest in conciliation.

As his representatives were putting this diplomatic offensive into place, Khrushchev was himself the recipient of a surprising initiative. If a personal message from Khrushchev was a most unexpected thing for Kennan, Reynaud, Spaak, and Sulzberger that summer, its shock value was far surpassed by Konrad Adenauer's private approach to him. On August 29, 1961, the West German chancellor sent a secret message to his Russian counterpart. As interpreted by the Soviet Foreign Ministry, after its delivery by West German Ambassador Kroll, the message read:

"THE STORM IN BERLIN IS OVER" • 389

"small-man arrogance" and "walking almost on tiptoe to appear taller." In the late summer of 1961 this eighty-three-year-old former French prime minister was due to visit the Soviet Union to close an exhibition of French goods and technology on display in Moscow. The Kremlin's unscheduled approach to Reynaud for a session with Khrushchev was rife with symbolism. It was Reynaud who had resigned in despair when Hitler attacked France in May 1940. This phantom of France's past was about to be asked to help arrange a less dramatic, though significant, Western surrender in 1961.

Khrushchev had decided at Pitsunda to initiate feelers to the West in an effort to jump-start negotiations. The approaches to Sulzberger and Kennan were designed to establish a new back channel to Kennedy. Khrushchev was probing for some change in Kennedy's negotiating position. From Spaak and Reynaud Khrushchev wanted understanding and support. When he set his Berlin strategy, he had expected the Western Europeans to magnify the pressure on the United States to avoid war by accepting Soviet terms. Still convinced they could be used to break America's resolve, Khrushchev decided to court prominent Europeans who had already demonstrated an interest in conciliation.

As his representatives were putting this diplomatic offensive into place, Khrushchev was himself the recipient of a surprising initiative. If a personal message from Khrushchev was a most unexpected thing for Kennan, Reynaud, Spaak, and Sulzberger that summer, its shock value was far surpassed by Konrad Adenauer's private approach to him. On August 29, 1961, the West German chancellor sent a secret message to his Russian counterpart. As interpreted by the Soviet Foreign Ministry, after its delivery by West German Ambassador Kroll, the message read:

"THE STORM IN BERLIN IS OVER" • 389
well known, France occupies a special position regarding the timetable for undertaking negotiations.10

The West German leader's public stance was that negotiations with Moscow were dangerous because they were likely to result in Western concessions on Berlin. Through Kroll, however, Adenauer stressed to the Kremlin that there was no reason for the Soviets to wait until the September 17 West German elections to begin negotiations. Moreover, the West German asked Moscow to show its willingness to reduce tensions by releasing the last group of German citizens who remained captive in the USSR.11 Adenauer's initiative played into Khrushchev's stubborn notion that eventually he could attract Bonn away from Washington. Perhaps this was just a pre-election trick by the wily German chancellor. Nevertheless, Khrushchev needed all the European help he could get in the negotiations to come.

Khrushchev spent five hours with Cyrus Sulzberger on September 5. He gave the journalist enough fodder for a series of front-page articles and then got around to the reason for the meeting. Sulzberger was handed, for Kennedy's eyes only, a private note in which Khrushchev suggested that the two leaders establish "some sort of informal contact . . . to find a means of settling the crisis without damaging the prestige of the United States." All he asked was that Kennedy agree "in principle with the peace treaty and a free city."12 For the first time he did not demand that Kennedy accept the loss of Western access rights.

The initiative fell on fertile ground. Kennedy was also thinking hard about how to negotiate a way out of this crisis.13 The president faced some unpleasant decisions in September 1961. If he wanted to have six more divisions deployed in Europe by the beginning of the new year, he could not delay declaring a national emergency much longer. The Joint Chiefs and some of his civilian aides continued to interpret his July decision as just a postponement of the inevitable. But Kennedy wondered if those six divisions were really needed after all.14 Pressure was also building on him to decide whether to resume U.S. nuclear tests. An ever-larger group of Kennedy advisers were saying that in light of the Soviet test series at Semipalatinsk, the United States really had no choice.15

Kennedy had already reacted positively to news of the Soviet approach to

George Kennan before Khrushchev even met with Sulzberger. The Kremlin seemed prepared to talk instead of shout, though Kennedy wanted these discussions to take place at a higher level than Kennan and Soviet Ambassador Aleksei Yepishev. Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko was likely to be in New York later in the month for the opening of the UN General Assembly. On September 3 the State Department instructed Thompson to propose Rusk-Gromyko talks to the Soviets.16 Thompson was outside Moscow at the time, and it would take him a few days to let Khrushchev know that Kennedy was interested in talking.17

In Washington Kennedy sent a strong signal to his advisers that he wanted to give these talks a real chance of success. He ordered Secretary of State Rusk on September 12 to gather a small group of advisers to prepare the government's position for negotiations to end the Berlin crisis.18 It was a mark of Kennedy's desperation that he assigned a leadership role to the State Department for this initiative. Since the start of the crisis Kennedy had come to refer to American diplomats as collectively "a bowl of jelly."19 He doubted that in the absence of firm guidance State could come up with something new and creative to offer Khrushchev. "I am talking about a real reconstruction of our negotiating proposals," he exhorted Rusk, "and not about a modest add-on." The formal U.S. reply sent to Khrushchev's June Berlin ultimatum, which Rusk had crafted with the French, British, and West Germans, had been sterile. Kennedy knew very well that German reunification or the reunification of Berlin on the basis of free elections was a nonstarter in any discussion with the Soviets. "These are not negotiable proposals," he reminded Rusk; "their emptiness in this sense is generally recognized."20

Kennedy decided to confine this effort to rethink the U.S. position to a very small group. Dean Acheson and Lyndon Johnson, who were inflexible on negotiations, were to be cut out, and Kennedy did not want anybody at the Pentagon to know what he was doing. In the White House only the president's assistant for national security affairs, McGeorge Bundy, and speechwriter Sorensen would know. The president did give them some room for creative thinking. He was prepared to consider turning West Berlin into a free city. But he wanted NATO to be able to protect the city and its inhabitants without Soviet or East German interference.

Kennedy, who knew nothing of Adenauer's personal approach to Khrushchev, expected the West German leader would be the hardest ally to convince of the need for new proposals, especially anything that implied that West Berlin could not become part of West Germany. Once the new negotiating package was ready, he intended to send someone Adenauer respected,
possibly even Acheson, to sell it to him. That is, of course, if Kennedy could
sell the package to his own hard-liners first.

In mid-September, just as his meetings with the two specially selected
Europeans were to begin, Khrushchev received the news that Kennedy
wanted Rusk and Gromyko to meet in New York. The U.S. ambassador had
not indicated any new U.S. position, but Khrushchev was encouraged that at
least Kennedy seemed prepared to discuss his Berlin demands. He approved
Soviet participation in the talks, scheduled to begin on September 21.

Meanwhile events in Germany were a reminder of the risks that both sides
were taking in allowing this crisis to continue. Just after 5:00 P.M., Central
European time, on September 14 two West German Air Force F-84 Thunder­
jet fighters crossed into East German airspace near Zlend, seventy-six kilome­
ters southwest of Magdeburg. The Soviet Air Force had standing orders to
shoot down planes that violated East German airspace. None of the eight
Soviet fighters scrambled, however, was able to intercept the F-84s in the
twenty-one minutes before they landed at Tegel Airport in the French zone
of West Berlin. The very next day another West German F-84 again violated East
German airspace. This violation lasted only four minutes, a less glaring fail­
ure for the Soviet Air Force but still unwelcome evidence of the flimsy nature
of East German sovereignty nonetheless. These two incidents worried the
Soviet military command in Germany and raised some questions in
Khrushchev’s mind that despite Adenauer’s secret message two weeks earlier,
the West Germans might be trying to provoke a conflict.21

The Russian translation of a timely article by Walter lippmann in the
York Herald Tribune crossed Khrushchev’s desk as he was considering the
implications of these incidents. Entitled “Nuclear Diplomacy,” it was the
American pundit’s astute observation on the nature of international politics in a
world where either of the superpowers had the capability of destroying the
other.22 “We cannot understand the realities of the Khrushchev-Kennedy
encounter,” wrote Lippmann, “unless we remind ourselves that nuclear war is
not just another war as history describes war, but a wholly new order of vio­
cence.” Khrushchev agreed with this analysis. It was after all the basis of his
risky strategy to force the West to accept a new status for West Berlin. The
Soviet leader believed that in a world dominated by nuclear weapons, rational
men should be afraid to go to war, choosing diplomacy, even surrender, instead.

On September 16, Khrushchev praised Lippmann and the column in front
of Paul Reynaud: “This is a man who understands and I agree with a lot of his
conclusions. He is certain that today war means suicide.”23 But Khrushchev
apparently had not comprehended or preferred not to discuss the tag line of
Lippmann’s piece. “This being the nuclear age,” Lippmann concluded, “it is
the paramount rule of international politics that a great nuclear power must
not put another great nuclear power in a position where it must choose
between suicide and surrender.”

Any hopes that the fear of general nuclear war would make his two
European guests pliable were quickly frustrated. Khrushchev’s three-hour
meeting with Reynaud was little other than opéra bouffe. The Frenchman
turned out to be an unapologetic white imperialist, more concerned about the
yellow peril than nuclear danger. “The first two European wars gave world
supremacy to the Americans,” said the former prime minister in arguing that
Khrushchev had an obligation to stop his saber rattling. “A new war would
bring the suicide of the white race, giving China the chance to dominate the
world.” These comments were not at all helpful to Khrushchev, who wasted
no time telling Reynaud that as an internationalist he put class over race. The
Soviet leader certainly had his problems with Mao, but he was not about to
talk about his Chinese allies in racial terms with this representative of the
French bourgeoisie.24

The meeting with Spaak a few days later was less strange but no more suc­
cessful. The Belgian had drawn the Kremlin’s interest by telling the Poles that
the “proposal of granting West Berlin the status of a free city with certain
guarantees of access, as the Soviet Union has declared it would, could bring
an agreement by the western countries with him [Khrushchev].”25 Spaak had
thus become the first Western foreign policy maker to endorse the concept of
a free city of West Berlin in a conversation with a Soviet bloc diplomat.
However, Khrushchev’s hopes were soon dashed once the Belgian was in his
office and the two discussed specifics. Spaak, while still in favor of a free West
Berlin, also wanted NATO to retain its special access routes to the city.
Khrushchev left the meetings with Reynaud and Spaak thinking that he had
yet to meet a Western European figure who accepted his definition of a free
city of West Berlin.26

Khrushchev could be forgiven if he believed that he was now giving the
Europeans more than he received in return. With Reynaud and Spaak,
Khrushchev revealed that he would be prepared to see the United Nations
move its headquarters to West Berlin.27 This admission dramatized his will­ing­
ness to let a future West Berlin remain independent and even capitalist.
Indeed, Dwight Eisenhower had once mused about offering to put the UN in
West Berlin, though John Foster Dulles had put a stop to the idea.28
Khrushchev had also let slip in the course of his discussion with Spaak that he had no deadline in mind for the start of negotiations, meaning that he might be willing to lift the looming ultimatum in 1961 as he had done in 1959. As Spaak told a special session of the NATO Council at the end of September, Khrushchev was not especially in a hurry. The Soviet leader, he said, "preferred delayed negotiations to a hasty war."29

In New York, Rusk and Gromyko began their discussions after a long lunch on September 21. Neither had anything new to say or present.30 Khrushchev assumed that the ball was in Kennedy's court, and the review of the administration's Berlin policy that Kennedy had initiated on September 12 was still weeks away from completion.

Khrushchev was nevertheless satisfied with this first meeting of the foreign ministers. He noted approvingly that Rusk had said nothing critical about the Berlin Wall. As Gromyko later affirmed to the Central Committee, the "representatives of the USA recognize in [these] talks that the measures of 13 August 1961 correspond to the vital interests of the GDR and other socialist states."31 Khrushchev presumably also liked the fact that the Kennedy regime had dropped the Eisenhower administration's insistence on only talking about a free city of Berlin. On August 31 the administration's Berlin policy that Kennedy had initiated on September 12 was still weeks away from completion.

With this encouraging news from New York, Khrushchev threw even more energy into creating as favorable a climate for negotiations as possible. Since late August he had been signaling to key socialist allies in areas of particular interest to Kennedy that they should show restraint. In late September he redoubled his efforts to avoid trouble in Southeast Asia and the Caribbean. Aware of U.S. sensitivity to events affecting Laos and Cuba, Khrushchev understood that any provocations there could upset Kennedy's willingness to reconsider U.S. policy toward Berlin.

Earlier in the summer the Chinese had predicted that under U.S. pressure Khrushchev might link his policies toward the third world with his plans for Berlin. During a visit to Moscow in July Chen Yi, the Chinese foreign minister, had expressed a concern that the Soviets would compromise on Laos to get a better deal from the United States in Central Europe.32 Beijing expected the West to try to blackmail the socialist bloc by linking these international questions and wanted Moscow to avoid the trap. "If we proceed with concessions on Laos," said the Chinese, "then this will lead them to think that we will concede on other international matters." Chen Yi hoped that the Soviets would choose to delink Southeast Asia from the turmoil over Berlin in an effort to gain some more tactical flexibility in Asia.33

As Beijing had feared, Khrushchev's tolerance for Vietnamese and Chinese risk taking in Laos, which was never great to begin with, waned as he looked for ways to ratchet down the Berlin situation. On August 31 the Kremlin adopted measures to restrain the Chinese and North Vietnamese and promote cooperation between the Communist Pathet Lao and the neutralists led by Souvanna Phouma.34 Throughout the summer the North Vietnamese and their Laotian clients had made a mockery of Khrushchev's and Kennedy's sole point of agreement at Vienna. Hanoi had refused to delay its policy of beefing up the military forces of the Pathet Lao and had trained the Laotians in a system of double bookkeeping to keep up the appearance of meeting Soviet demands for a coordinated policy with the neutralists.35 The Pathet Lao concealed troops as well as ammunition from its supposed ally Souvanna. Some were hidden in the areas under Pathet Lao control in the northeast; others were across the border in North Vietnam. The effect of this effort was that the Pathet Lao's forces were actually twice as large as it declared them to be to its Laotian partners.36 Souvanna was also not told of a secret contingent of two hundred North Vietnamese military advisers in his country.

For months Moscow had been complicit in this charade, contributing two-thirds of the cost of maintaining this secret army. Despite Khrushchev's understanding with Kennedy on supporting a unified, neutral Laos, the North Vietnamese expected the Soviets to continue this covert assistance, including the allocation of funds to build a secret road from North Vietnam to Laos that could be used to supply these undeclared forces.37 But in the third week of September the Soviets put the Chinese, the North Vietnamese, and the Pathet Lao on notice that this secret policy would have to stop.38 Moscow was not yet ready to call for an end to the secret army, but the Kremlin advised Hanoi and the Pathet Lao to start planning for a coalition government with Souvanna, to lower the figures for the force they expected to maintain, and to rework their demands for assistance because what they had requested was unacceptable.

Unlike the Chinese and the Vietnamese, the Cubans lacked a history of being disappointed by Moscow, leaving them ill prepared for Khrushchev's sudden adoption of a more cautious policy toward the island in September.
Abel. When Abel told him about the book idea, Kennedy became introspective. "Why would anyone write a book about an administration that has nothing to show for itself but a string of disasters?" Kennedy started talking about what was on his mind. Such was his concern that he was about to make a huge error over Berlin that he raised the history of the Bay of Pigs debacle. The minutes dragged on, yet Kennedy was too absorbed to leave, as he was scheduled to. He shouted at his aides to tell the helicopter pilot to "turn off that thing: I'm not leaving yet." Abel later recalled what happened next: "We sat there for a while in the odd position where I, a private citizen, was busy assuring the president of the United States that his administration would not turn out to be a string of disasters and that as he got hold of the job, he and I and all his friends would be proud of his administration, that he would do great things."

As Kennedy agonized over what step to take next to avoid an armed confrontation over Berlin, Khrushchev was wondering why he had not received any response to the feeler that he had sent to Kennedy through the New York Times's Cyrus Sulzberger. On September 24 the Soviet press attaché in the United States, Mikhail Kharlamov, asked the president's press secretary, Pierre Salinger, if Kennedy had received the message. "The storm in Berlin is over," Kharlamov said, "give it to him." 45

Kennedy, who had probably not received the note from Sulzberger, got this message. Salinger passed it to him late that night in a New York hotel suite, where Kennedy was staying before a speech the next day at the United Nations. Chewing on an unlit cigar, Kennedy liked what he heard. "He's not going to recognize the Ulbricht regime—not this year, at least—and that's good news." 46

If Khrushchev had sent the message to prevent the president from unilaterally ratcheting up the crisis another notch in his speech to the UN, he need not have worried. Kennedy had already planned to use the speech to hint that his government was rethinking the diplomatic approach to the crisis. "We are committed to no rigid formula. . . . We see no perfect solution. . . . But we believe a peaceful agreement is possible which protects the freedom of West Berlin and allied presence and access, while recognizing the historic and legitimate interests of others in assuring European security." 47 Although Khrushchev may not have viewed this as a step forward, Kennedy had also decided to send only one additional division to Europe, instead of the six that the Pentagon wanted to deploy. 48 The president was trying to avoid doing anything provocative while it was still possible to coax Khrushchev to back down from his threat to sign a peace treaty in 1961.
The message from Kharlamov was evidence that Khrushchev was getting impatient for some kind of dramatic recognition from Washington that the Berlin crisis was over. Probably aware that a note passed from one Soviet official to an American official would not be enough to end the tension, Khrushchev decided a few days later to write directly to Kennedy. He chose to make it a private letter to convey the seriousness of his concern and of his desire to reach an agreement. This would be a new tactic. He had never sent a private letter to Eisenhower, even though the leaders of their respective blocs had weathered crises over Suez, Iraq, and Berlin together.

The letter to Kennedy began with calculated insincerity. Noting that the world had expected the Vienna meeting to have “a soothing effect,” Khrushchev remarked, “To my regret . . . this did not happen.” In the same spirit, he offered a fanciful account of how he had tried to restore a better relationship. He said that he had been prepared to send a letter, with proposals that he did not specify, in late June but that Kennedy’s July 25 speech had made that impossible. Nowhere in his letter was any hint that at least until mid-August he had intentionally chosen a policy of pressure to get his way.

He now asked Kennedy to appoint a special representative for consultations. He wanted to supplement the Rusk-Gromyko talks with a conversation along a less formal channel. He again suggested George Kennan but this time added Llewellyn Thompson as a possible liaison through whom the two leaders could swap proposals directly. Khrushchev even raised the possibility of a quick summit with Kennedy in Moscow. It seemed as if the clock had been turned back to the spring, before Khrushchev had started the crisis.

Kennedy responded a few weeks later, but nothing came of this exchange of letters. Khrushchev was still hung up over Western access routes to West Berlin and refused to let the United States maintain its forces in the city without a “token” Soviet contingent nearby. Meanwhile Kennedy still had nothing new to say. What the U.S. president had not mentioned in his UN speech was how much his own policy review was bogging down. The Europeans were primarily responsible for this. The French were opposed to negotiations, and the West Germans were being coy. The State Department was also having difficulties developing new ideas. With no new proposals and the possibility of further complicating Western allied diplomacy, Kennedy had no interest in using his brother or anyone else to make the kind of private approach that he had experimented with on the test ban issue before Vienna.

Khrushchev did not react as one might have expected when Kennedy brushed off his private letters. Intelligence from Washington may have been the reason. From sources reporting to the Soviet military intelligence service, the GRU, Khrushchev had a reasonable idea of the difficulties Kennedy was encountering in trying to alter the U.S. policy on Berlin. Georgi Bolshakov, who had served as the intermediary between Robert Kennedy and the Kremlin in May 1961, collected much of this helpful information on Kennedy’s handling of the Berlin issue.

Despite Khrushchev’s requests to restart the back channel discussions, the Kennedy brothers had decided not to avail themselves of Bolshakov. He, however, was by now welcome to meet with members of the Kennedy policy elite, and he used this entrée to develop new sources on the Berlin policy review. From sources close to Walt Whitman Rostow, the head of State’s Policy Planning Staff (perhaps Rostow himself), Bolshakov reported that Kennedy was considering a three-point plan for resolving the crisis: (1) Make West Berlin into an international city, guarantee its rights and the rights of free access to it; (2) confirm the existing borders of Germany; (3) establish a demilitarized zone in the center of Europe and, possibly, a nuclear-free zone.

Bolshakov was also able to report on why the process seemed to be taking so long. His administration contacts were blaming the Western Europeans, especially the French. Washington believed that de Gaulle was choosing to be disruptive of efforts to forge an allied policy in a vain attempt to win the sympathies of West Germany. The good news for the Kremlin was that according to Bolshakov, the Americans had also noticed that Adenauer’s thinking on negotiations was changing. He seemed to be softening.

In October 1961 Khrushchev decided to take yet another step to create the right conditions for negotiations on Berlin with the United States. He chose the Twenty-second Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, scheduled for mid-October, as the occasion to announce that the Soviet Union would lift the Berlin ultimatum. Khrushchev did not intend to end the Berlin crisis—his demands and his goals remained the same—he was simply suspending it. Nevertheless, given all that he had said about the need for a resolution in 1961 (to the East Germans and, most important, to his Kremlin colleagues), this was going to be a retreat for him personally. What
did Khrushchev have to show for five months of dangerous international tension other than the ugly Berlin Wall?

When making the announcement at the party congress on October 17, he tried hard to cover this defeat by exaggerating what Kennedy had given him. He had taken this step, said Khrushchev, because "the Western powers were showing some understanding of the situation, and were inclined to seek a solution to the German problem and the issue of West Berlin."55

Khrushchev had originally intended to use this congress to reassert Moscow's leadership over world communism. The Albanians were still in ideological rebellion from the Soviet party, and the Asian parties were unhappy with Moscow's new caution in Southeast Asia. As a sign of their displeasure, the Laotian, Vietnamese, and Chinese Communists had refused to back Khrushchev in his criticisms of the Albanians. Even the Indonesians, who had echoed Khrushchev's criticisms of Stalin in 1956, refused to provide any rhetorical support in his crusade against the Albanians.

Khrushchev encountered a contradiction between his hopes to ease the Berlin crisis and his goal of pulling the socialist world closer together. Abandoning the pledge to resolve the Berlin situation in 1960 would further weaken the Kremlin's credibility as the beacon of socialism and incite even more criticism of Khrushchev's pet idea of peaceful coexistence.

The Chinese, masters at Communist semiotics, led the criticism. They knew well how to annoy fellow Marxist-Leninists. A few days after giving his own report at the party congress, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai announced he would return to Beijing before the end of the conference. Never before had the Chinese left in the middle of a major international Communist gathering. To make sure that Khrushchev felt the slap personally, Zhou made a solitary pilgrimage to the Lenin-Stalin Mausoleum in Red Square on the day of his departure. In spite of Khrushchev's destalinization campaign, the mummified Stalin remained on display next to Lenin. On Stalin's sarcophagus, Zhou left a telling wreath: "To Josif Vissarionovich Stalin—the great Marxist-Leninist."56

The most bitter response came from the East Germans. Ulbricht avoided open disagreement with Khrushchev in Moscow. Instead he chose even more dramatic means to vent his own displeasure. A year earlier the East German leader had followed willingly as Khrushchev set out to achieve his maximum objectives. Ulbricht's primary concern had been to close the gates in Berlin, whereas Khrushchev had insisted on trying to achieve everything East Germany needed to be a fully sovereign state at once, to "draw a line under the Second World War." In November 1960 Khrushchev had assured Ulbricht that this would be possible in 1961, once the East had a good feel for Kennedy's psychology. Now, after a six-month-long propaganda campaign, the East German people had come to associate a peace treaty with domestic stability. Ulbricht too had convinced himself that the wall alone could not assure him either political legitimacy or economic security. Khrushchev's sudden abandonment of the effort, without achieving any Western concessions, left his East German ally raw and vengeful. There had been no warning from the Kremlin before Khrushchev lifted the ultimatum, so it appears Ulbricht decided to initiate some unilateral changes of his own.57

On October 22, 1961, Allen Lightner, the senior American diplomat in West Berlin, tried to take his wife to the theater in East Berlin and instead found himself the star of an international incident. This was not his first visit to East Berlin. Since August 23 Lightner, like all Western allied personnel, had been restricted to the use of the border point at Friedrichstrasse known as Checkpoint Charlie to enter the Soviet zone. While the reduction of the number of entry points from seven to one had been inconvenient, Lightner had not had any trouble entering via Checkpoint Charlie and did not expect this particular evening to be any different. He had not counted on the complexities of Soviet-East German relations.

At 7:15 P.M. the East German police, the Vopos, stopped the Lightners as they attempted to enter at Friedrichstrasse in their personal car. When the Vopos requested that Lightner show identification, he refused and demanded entry, as was his right as a member of one of the four-power missions in Berlin. But the East Germans wouldn't let them in. Lightner then asked to see a Soviet officer. The East Germans stalled. This new East German tactic was directed as much at Moscow as at the West.

After waiting nearly an hour, Lightner decided to try his luck at driving around the maze of roadblocks that littered the first few yards of East Berlin territory. Luck was not with him that night. As the car cleared the maze, a group of East German guards formed a line to prevent it from going any farther. Again Lightner requested a Soviet officer. Again he was refused. The performance in East Berlin a lost cause, Lightner and his wife nevertheless refused on principle to turn around and go home.

When a Soviet officer finally reached the scene at 10:00 P.M., three hours after the Lightners had first reached Checkpoint Charlie, all he could do was apologize. The Soviet said the East German action "was a mistake and will be corrected."58
The East Germans, however, had no intention of correcting the error. The next morning, to the surprise of the U.S. command in Berlin and Khrushchev in the Kremlin, the East German News Agency (ADN) announced that civilians crossing the Berlin sector border had to show identification cards. This new regulation cut across established four-power practice. Up to that point, so long as the vehicles they were riding in had military or government license plates, civilian representatives breezed into East Berlin. If Ulbricht’s goal had been to cause a U.S.-Soviet clash, he very nearly got his wish.

General Lucius Clay, Kennedy’s official representative in West Berlin since the wall went up, assumed that the new policy was the next phase in a Soviet strategy to squeeze the West out of Berlin. Although handcuffed by Kennedy, Clay often operated on, in the words of one historian, “a totally different wavelength.”

Clay had arrived in Berlin thinking he had a mandate to prevent the loss of any additional authority in Berlin to the Communists, whatever the risks this might entail. A day after the East Germans announced the new policy, he impatiently requested instructions from Washington to challenge it. Although Clay overestimated Moscow’s control of the situation at the border, he had an uncanny sense of the East Germans’ objectives. “I have always believed,” he wrote Secretary of State Rusk on October 23, “that the elimination of Allied rights in East Berlin is of great importance to [the] GDR and that every effort will be made to accomplish this objective before any negotiations take place.” Clay believed that Moscow had to be made to pay for the Vopos’ actions and suggested that the United States halt all efforts at negotiations with the Kremlin on the Berlin question until the Russians were prepared “to guarantee full maintenance of the present status quo.”

Clay had his admirers in the Kennedy administration, but generally there was concern in Washington that he might draw the two sides into armed conflict over the right to go to dinner and a show in East Berlin. Although wary of letting the situation at the border between East and West Berlin spiral out of control, the White House did authorize a series of daily probes by civilians accompanied by an armed escort to defend the right of Western allied diplomats to cross the sector boundary. U.S. M48 tanks were also deployed as a rear guard on the western side of Checkpoint Charlie during each effort. The first such probe took place on October 25, when armed military police escorted a car carrying official U.S. license plates just inside East Berlin after East German police tried to have the Americans in the car show their ID cards. Clay, however, wanted an even larger demonstration of U.S. impatience with the Soviets and their allies. He requested high-level approval of a “raid in force into the Eastern sector which would tear down parts of the wall on its return.” The White House was appalled. Rusk responded quickly to remind the general that “we had long since decided that entry into East Berlin [was] not a vital interest which would warrant determined recourse to force to protect and sustain.”

It had been four days since the incident with the Lightners at the border, and Kennedy sensed that he and Khrushchev would have to intervene to prevent their local representatives from inadvertently causing a war. The same day that Clay’s request for armed escalation reached Washington, Kennedy employed two channels to convey his concerns directly to Moscow. While the State Department prepared instructions for Thompson, Kennedy asked his brother to resume his secret discussions with Bolshakov. The attorney general arranged a meeting with the GRU officer for five-thirty that evening, October 26.

President Kennedy wanted Khrushchev to understand the larger implications of these border tensions, that they were derailing the ongoing process of altering the Western negotiating position on Berlin. He had Robert Kennedy tell Bolshakov directly that the White House was in the midst of hammering this out with its allies. This was an arduous process, and President Kennedy assumed it would take at least another four to six weeks. One reason for the delay, not one the attorney general mentioned to Bolshakov, was that Konrad Adenauer would have some influence over the final product, and he was not scheduled to be in Washington until late November.

Kennedy hoped Khrushchev would realize that it was in his interest to help his American counterpart during this difficult period. “[T]he Soviet and Western sides should avoid any actions in Germany or Berlin that could lead to sad incidents, similar to those that had happened recently; and which could only complicate for the U.S. the process of agreement with its allies,” explained the attorney general to Bolshakov. “If Khrushchev would give similar instructions to his forces, [President] Kennedy would do the same.”

It is unlikely that Khrushchev received this report from Bolshakov before the situation in Berlin took its most serious turn since the construction of the wall. The next morning, October 27, ten Soviet tanks rolled along the Friedrichstrasse and positioned themselves in front of Checkpoint Charlie in anticipation of the daily U.S. armed probe. Although the East Germans had started these border tensions, the U.S. probes had provoked a Soviet counterreaction.

When the U.S. probe arrived at the checkpoint, American and Soviet tanks found themselves staring at each other across the sector boundary. The scene
made for dramatic photographs, which were then carried by all of the world’s newspapers. Because the tanks on the eastern side bore no identifying markings, which the Soviets had intentionally removed, the local CIA station sent a representative to the area to determine the nationality of the tank drivers. As Clay had expected, they all were Soviets.

Kennedy saw little advantage in getting his ambassador out of bed in Moscow, where it was already early the next morning, to make a run to the Soviet Foreign Ministry. Earlier on October 27 Thompson had been to the ministry to complain about the tensions in the divided city and had not elicited much of a reaction. The situation in Berlin was now heating up too quickly to wait for the U.S. Embassy in Moscow to get Khrushchev’s attention. Kennedy had called Clay after dinner for an update and been told that the number of Soviet tanks at Checkpoint Charlie had grown to thirty. After hearing this, the president for the second time in two days sent his brother to see Bolshakov.

The attorney general and the Soviet agent met at 11:30 p.m., Washington time, on October 27. “The situation in Berlin has become more difficult,” Robert Kennedy explained. “Today our ambassador met with Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko, who refused our declaration regarding the recent incidents that have occurred in Berlin. It is our opinion that such an attitude is not helpful at a time when efforts are being made to find a way to resolve this (i.e. the Berlin) problem.” Once again on behalf of the president Robert Kennedy asked the Kremlin for a period of four to six weeks without headlines about Berlin: “It seems to us that it is incumbent on both sides to take the necessary measures to establish a period of relative moderation and calm over the course of the next 4–6 weeks. One more refusal of our declarations could have a negative effect on future developments.”

Bolshakov rushed from this meeting to cable the message to Moscow, where it was already approximately 7:00 a.m., October 28. The message was received at GRU headquarters and may well have been the cause of Khrushchev’s next move, though no trace of the cable has been found in Kremlin archives. What is clear, however, is that sometime before 11:30, Moscow time, that same morning, Khrushchev decided to withdraw his tanks from the Friedrichstrasse checkpoint. “I knew Kennedy was looking for a way to back down,” he explained a few days later. “I decided therefore that if I removed my tanks first, then he would follow suit; [and he did.]”

The Soviet withdrawal from the border confrontation exacerbated Ulbricht’s sense of abandonment. The East German was in Moscow, attending the Twenty-second Party Congress, while the tense standoff occurred at Checkpoint Charlie. On October 27 Ulbricht had sent a special message from Moscow to stiffen the backs of his colleagues in East Berlin. He told them to continue requiring identification from Western military personnel in civilian clothing. The day after the Soviets backed down from the tank confrontation, Ulbricht did not hide his disappointment from his colleagues at home; though he initially avoided attacking the Soviets directly. Instead he criticized the East German Defense Ministry for not having placed antitank barriers at Checkpoint Charlie in time to have prevented U.S. tanks from approaching the border.

Ulbricht did not wait much longer to share his disappointment directly with Khrushchev. On October 30 he sent Khrushchev a formal document that laid out the reasons why the Soviet leadership had been wrong to cancel the push for a German peace treaty at the party congress. The wall had not solved East Germany’s fundamental economic problems. In fact, to the extent that closing the border had forced the movement of industries that were close to the border and led to increased defense expenditures, the GDR’s economy was now in an even greater mess. “The nonconclusion of a peace treaty in this year,” he explained, “and the exacerbation of relations between the two German states threatens the economic plan of the GDR of 1962.”

Ulbricht argued that he needed to establish East German sovereignty through a series of gradual gains. He asked Khrushchev not only to bless the unilateral actions that had led to the tensions at Checkpoint Charlie but also to consider issuing a warning to Washington that the U.S. Army did not have the right to send military patrols along the autobahn. Step by step he would acquire more control over the access routes to Berlin without ever forcing the West to consider going to war. Four days after sending this document, Ulbricht met with Khrushchev to make his case in person.

The Ulbricht-Khrushchev meeting of November 2, 1961, was a tough, bitter encounter that shook Khrushchev to the core. The Soviet leader did not like most of Ulbricht’s suggestions and hated his attitude. Khrushchev wanted Berlin to be grateful to him for the wall, which he now considered a victory of adroit Soviet policy. “Could we have closed the border sooner than August 13?” he asked Ulbricht. “No . . . the adversary could have carried out countermeasures,” was the reply, “but by the time of August 13 he was already worn out.” Khrushchev was now insisting that the ultimatum had been all about getting the wall. He had never made this argument before to Ulbricht. It also served Khrushchev’s purposes to blame the East Germans for making it impossible for him to sustain the crisis through the signing of a peace treaty. “You see we know what they are preparing for—for an economic block-
ade. Really would that then be easier for you?" Khrushchev's point was that he could not force the Berlin issue given the risk that the West would impose a crippling embargo on trade with East Germany.

Ulbricht refused to accept any blame for Khrushchev's decision to end the ultimatum short of a peace treaty. But the East German was not Khrushchev's equal, and the Soviet leader let him know it in no uncertain terms. When Ulbricht said that he did not know how to explain Soviet tactics to the East German public, Khrushchev told him that he did not care what he said to his own people. "All I want to know now," he said, "is what we will say to each other. I don't agree with those who argue that the longer the signing of the peace treaty is delayed, the worse will be the economy of the GDR. It is an old conversation that we are having: So long as the GDR does not free itself from economic dependence on West Germany, Adenauer will without fail [push you around]."

Khrushchev tried to beat Ulbricht into submission. When the East German explained that without West German goods "we will not fulfill the plan," Khrushchev told him that the Soviet Union had to sell $450 millions' worth of gold at the London gold exchange to acquire the hard currency that East Germany could use to buy what it needed from West Germany. "This is impossible, this is an irrational policy," protested Khrushchev. "We live independently, neither the dollar, the pound nor the mark controls us. And here the GDR cannot make it and we must provide gold to London. . . ."

The Soviet record of this tough meeting does not mention if Ulbricht ever stood up to leave.77 Khrushchev's bullying was relentless. The nearest the meeting came to the breaking point was when Khrushchev absentmindedly admitted that Soviet and East German interests were not the same in this crisis. For Khrushchev the only peace treaty that mattered was one that removed NATO from West Berlin. Sensing that Ulbricht just wanted a signed piece of paper, he yelled at his recalcitrant ally, "[A] Peace Treaty would provide no political advantage. . . . Of course, for propaganda purposes, but otherwise not. It is [however] advantageous for the GDR."

With this, Ulbricht blew his top. Bitterly he said, "OK, then all is clear." Khrushchev knew that he had lost a point to the East German and pressed for an explanation of Ulbricht's riposte. "What is clear? Go ahead explain what is clear and what is not clear." Ulbricht would not give him the satisfaction of a response.

Khrushchev said nothing about the ongoing negotiations with Kennedy or any expectation that he might return to the struggle for a peace treaty. Ulbricht was his subordinate and should be satisfied with at least getting the wall.

Khrushchev believed his secret diplomacy with the Americans was so important that he refused to permit Ulbricht to increase the harassment on the Western allied military personnel in Germany. The only concessions he threw to the East German were some suggestions for tightening civil controls at the border. "I am for order," Khrushchev said. "Let them then see that running away is impossible." But the rest of what Ulbricht wanted was too provocative.

For all his bluster, the meeting with Ulbricht had weakened Khrushchev's self-confidence. He resented the East German demands—he had been East Germany's stalwart ally in the Kremlin for years—but he knew that Ulbricht had a reason to be annoyed about how the Berlin affair had turned out. The East Germans had warned Khrushchev not to start a crisis over Berlin in 1961 unless he was willing to see it through to the signing of a peace treaty. Yet with his October 17 statement at the Twenty-second Party Congress, it was clear that the Soviet Union had effectively given up on getting a peace treaty in 1961.

A few days after the tense discussion with Ulbricht, Khrushchev prepared an unusually candid letter for President Kennedy about the Berlin issue.78 "Dear Mr. President, I am writing not to argue with you or to try to play better the next fall-back position as diplomats call it." He wanted Kennedy to understand that despite the suspension of the ultimatum, the Kremlin still regarded the achievement of a peace treaty and the end of NATO's special rights in West Berlin as an issue of the highest importance.

"Those who cling to the occupational regime in West Berlin would like, evidently, the Soviet Union to assume the responsibilities of traffic policemen securing continuous and uncontrolled transportation of military goods of the Western powers into West Berlin." He went on to complain that the West Germans used West Berlin as a staging point for subversive operations into East Germany. He concluded by reminding Kennedy that the German Democratic Republic could not forever be denied its right to regulate the access routes to West Berlin, all of which ran through or over its territory.

Amid this recitation of old positions, Khrushchev revealed to Kennedy the irreducible minimum for him. No agreement would be acceptable that permitted free air corridors to West Berlin. Unbeknownst to Kennedy, the air corridors had been the principal point of debate between Khrushchev and Mikoyan, his only vocal Kremlin foreign policy critic in 1961. Mikoyan had not regarded the continued existence of the air corridors as a deal breaker. Khrushchev saw the problem differently. Once West Berlin became a free city,
Western planes would not be permitted to fly directly into it. They would be required to land and take off at a nearby airfield in East Germany to allow the East Germans to process the passengers and to check the plane’s cargo. Plaintively Khrushchev wrote, “[This] cannot be considered as [a] worsening of the conditions of access to West Berlin.”

Khrushchev also decided to convey to his American adversary the difficult political situation that he had placed himself in. He had suspended the Berlin crisis without getting anything in return from the United States. “If you have something else to propose—also on the basis of a peaceful settlement—we would willingly exchange opinions with you. But if you insist on the preservation of the inviolability of your occupation rights I do not see any prospect. You have to understand, I have no ground to retreat further, there is a precipice behind.”

The language was not threatening. Khrushchev was in no way renewing the threat he had only recently rescinded. In an odd and unprecedented way he was appealing for Kennedy’s help in solving his Berlin problem. At the party congress Khrushchev had suspended the public bullying of the West for a new deal for Berlin in 1961. In this letter he seemed to be suspending his private bullying of Kennedy as well. For a moment, at least, Khrushchev was gambling that diplomacy would achieve what threats could not in Berlin.

In the fall of 1961 a dramatic shift took place in the balance of power in the Cold War. In terms of brute force, military and economic, the United States and its allies were as far ahead of the Soviet bloc as they had always been. What changed was the balance of influence, the factor nineteenth-century imperial historians called sway and modern political scientists refer to as soft power. Khrushchev’s self-inflicted wound over Berlin had an ever-widening ripple effect on the credibility of Soviet power. On one side of the ledger, it led to increased U.S. confidence; on the other, it stirred skepticism and doubt among Moscow’s most significant socialist allies.

Khrushchev’s decision to suspend the confrontation over Berlin strengthened the conclusion already reached by some in Washington that the United States was ahead in the strategic power game. On October 21, John F. Kennedy had Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric reveal to the very wary American public that the U.S. nuclear arsenal quantitatively and qualitatively exceeded anything that Khrushchev had. Kennedy’s motives for the Gilpatric speech, which was delivered four days after Khrushchev had lifted the Berlin ultimatum, were primarily domestic. Besides calming the American people, Kennedy hoped the speech would serve as a warning to the leadership of the U.S. armed services and their allies in Congress not to use scare tactics any longer to force unnecessary procurement. The air force, for example, was gearing up for a campaign to purchase an additional two thousand Minutemen ICBMs, and members of Congress were already posturing for a B-70 bomber to counter an assumed fleet of Soviet Bounder bombers.1

Robert McNamara had originally been supposed to officiate at this public burial of the missile gap, but when a scheduling conflict arose, it was his deputy Gilpatric who delivered the speech before a conference of businessmen in Hot Springs, Virginia.2 “Our confidence in our ability to deter communist action, or resist communist blackmail, is based upon a sober