The Cold War froze out serious summity for a generation. This was not Churchill's wish; he coined the term in 1950 as part of his quest for an easement of tension—what was later called détente. But Britain, its empire fast disintegrating, was no longer in the same league as the United States and the Soviet Union. By the end of the Second World War it was not so much the Big Three as "the Big 2 ½," to quote one despondent British diplomat.¹ In the West, America's leaders called the shots. Reflecting their country's essentially Manichean view of the world—a struggle between good and evil—they were skeptical of any kind of negotiations with the Soviets. And the lessons drawn from Munich and Yalta suggested that parleys at the summit were particularly dangerous.

In June 1961 the disastrous meeting at Vienna served to confirm that precept. The bruising encounter between John F. Kennedy and Nikita Khrushchev constitutes almost a textbook lesson in how not to do summity. And their meeting helped spark two of the most dangerous confrontations of the Cold War: the Cuban Missile Crisis and America's quagmire war in Vietnam.

PotSDAM IN JULY—AUGUST 1945 was the last wartime summit. Meetings of foreign ministers continued for a couple of years but
in the summer of 1948 America and Britain came close to war with the Soviets over Stalin's blockade of Berlin, still under Allied occupation. For nearly a year the Allies airlifted supplies into the beleaguered city, meanwhile turning the British, American and French zones of occupation into a West German state. The Berlin blockade also spurred the United States into an unprecedented peacetime alliance with Western Europe: the North Atlantic Treaty of 1949. In May 1955 West Germany became a member of NATO, while East Germany joined the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact. Exactly a decade after the end of Hitler's Reich, Europe had been divided into two armed camps, with the fault line running through Germany.

The two blocs were also nuclear arsenals. In August 1949 the Soviet Union tested an atomic bomb, signalling an end to America's monopoly. Then in 1953-4 tests of hydrogen bombs by both sides presaged weapons of far greater power. Reading reports of America's H-bomb tests, Churchill murmured that the world was now as far from the era of the atomic bomb as the atomic bomb had been from the bow and arrow. The launch of Sputnik—the first artificial earth satellite—in 1957 showed that the Soviets now possessed a missile of sufficient range to land a nuclear warhead on the United States within thirty minutes. For the first time, continental America was vulnerable to weapons of mass destruction, creating public paranoia comparable to that which had gripped Britain in the 1930s. Both blocs in the Cold War raced to build up their nuclear arsenals. While each side sought to deter the other from outright attack or nuclear blackmail, the cost of the arms race imposed grave burdens on their economies.

Stalin's death in March 1953 brought a new, reforming leadership to power in the Kremlin—initially led by the troika of Nikolai Bulganin, Nikita Khrushchev and Georgi Malenkov—and this offered hopes of a relaxation of tension. In 1953-4 Churchill, prime minister again, tried to arrange another Big Three meeting, picking up from where he had left off in 1945; across the Atlantic, President Dwight D. Eisenhower was keen to restrain the nuclear arms race. But both the British Foreign Office and the U.S. State Department
applied the brakes, insisting that a summit should occur only if and when specialist diplomats had prepared the ground for a real breakthrough. No such breakthrough occurred, but the political pressures for some kind of meeting became hard to resist.

Consequently the first Cold War summit, in Geneva in July 1955, was a carefully staged affair. The American, Soviet, British and French leaders, flanked by their advisors, sat around a square of tables in the Palais des Nations, reading prepared statements. They had brought some twelve hundred people to Geneva, making this more like an old-fashioned international conference than the intimate “parley at the summit” envisaged by Churchill. And it was all largely for propaganda purposes. The intended audiences were public opinion in the West, alarmed at nuclear war, and Moscow’s uneasy satellites in Eastern Europe.¹

The “spirit of Geneva” proved ephemeral and summitry remained under a cloud in the West. “I’m not enamoured of this individual business,” Ernest Bevin, the British foreign secretary, snorted after Churchill’s 1950 speech. “It was tried by Mr. Chamberlain with Hitler and it did not work very well. It was tried at Yalta and did not work very well.”² In the United States Republicans made Yalta a centerpiece of their attacks on the Democrats’ foreign policy. The “Yalta sellout,” declared Senator William Jenner, turned communism “loose around one-half of the world.” The Republican party platform in 1952 became almost an attack on summitry itself. “The issue of Soviet-American relations,” Kennan argued, “is in essence a test of the overall worth of the United States as a nation among nations.” This was an almost Darwinian struggle for the survival of the fittest.³

This American worldview left little scope for international dialogue, especially at the top, whereas Churchill’s enthusiasm for summitry was predicated on his basic faith in diplomacy. He was not even afraid to use what was now a dirty word in the United States. “Appeasement from weakness and fear is alike futile and fatal,” he warned in December 1950, but “[a]ppeasement from strength is magnanimous and noble and might be the surest and perhaps the only path to world peace.”⁴ Consistently after 1945 he looked to negotiate from a position of strength with the Soviets—that was the thrust of what is usually known as his “Iron Curtain” speech of March 1946 (his title was “The Sinews of Peace”). In May 1953 he told Eisenhower that he was ready to undertake a “solitary pilgrimage” to Moscow to meet the new Soviet leaders—few of whom had “any contacts outside Russia”—to talk with them “frankly and on the dead level.” Referring to the American majority,” backed by “terror and oppression.” Truman committed the United States to “support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation” anywhere in the world.⁶

The Truman Doctrine helped define the Cold War as a global and total struggle in which there could be little or no compromise. And, especially after the Chinese Revolution of 1949, the perceived threat became communism rather than simply Soviet expansion. In response American policymakers developed the policy of “containment.” Its prime author was the diplomat George Kennan, building on his bleak analysis of Yalta, who described containment as being “designed to confront the Russians with unalterable counter-force at every point where they show signs of encroaching upon the interests of a peaceful and stable world.” Kennan was confident that eventually the Soviet Union would collapse under the weight of its own imperial repression, presciently suggesting that this might happen during a power transition when a new leader tried to mobilize popular support. But in the meantime the United States simply had to tough it out. “The issue of Soviet-American relations,” Kennan argued, “is in essence a test of the overall worth of the United States as a nation among nations.” This was an almost Darwinian struggle for the survival of the fittest.⁷

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stance, he said he found it “difficult to believe that we shall gain anything by an attitude of pure negation.”

Churchill was also sure that the West should work for greater social contacts with the Soviet bloc. “If the Iron Curtain were lifted,” he declared in October 1948, “if free intercourse, commercial and cultural, were allowed between the hundreds of millions of good hearted human beings who dwell on either side, the power of this wicked oligarchy in Moscow would soon be undermined and the spell of their Communist doctrines would be broken.”

Churchill’s would-be mission to Moscow, though partly an ego trip, had a clear rationale: parleys at the summit would help thaw the Cold War and gradually erode the Iron Curtain. This was a very different approach from the no-negotiation, hang-in-there philosophy of containment.

This divide between the American and British attitudes to diplomacy was not absolute, of course. Diplomats on both sides were skeptical about letting their leaders loose at the summit, and not all Americans believed that dialogue with the Soviets was pointless. But Republican exploitation of the Cold War and of the Yalta myths made it particularly difficult for U.S. policymakers to show much flexibility in the 1950s, whatever their inclinations. Consequently the initiative for summitry tended to come from Europe.

On the Western side in the late 1950s it was Harold Macmillan, the British prime minister, who made the run for a summit—rather surprisingly, it might seem, considering his past. In 1938 he had been one of the few Tory opponents of Munich. He felt Yalta had been “a failure and a disaster” because “in an atmosphere of fervid rush and hurry, vast decisions were reached in a few crowded days.” And he noted in his diary in February 1957, weeks after taking office: “I am said to have lost touch with public opinion in England because I have not already set out for Moscow to see Khrushchev. All this is pure Chamberlainism. It is raining umbrellas.”

But, as Churchill once observed, “how much more attractive a top-level meeting seems when one has reached the top!” Once into his stride as premier, Macmillan saw the political benefits of summitry and in February 1959 he contrived a personal visit to Moscow. Politically the trip was a great success, helping Macmillan win an election by a landslide later that year. But Britain, like France, was no longer a serious presence at the top table. The real momentum for a summit in the late 1950s came not from Western capitals but from the Kremlin.

Born in 1894, Nikita Khrushchev was the son of poor peasants in southern Russia. Clever, ambitious yet uneducated, he wanted to become an engineer but, after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, he threw himself into politics instead, rising rapidly up the hierarchy to become Ukrainian party boss in 1938. As Khrushchev later acknowledged, he was Stalin’s “pet.” Energetic and loyal, he was also unthreatening because of his poor background, chatty exuberance and diminutive stature—at five foot one, he was even shorter than the self-conscious dictator. By the early 1950s Khrushchev was part of the inner circle in Moscow; he took over as party secretary after Stalin’s death yet none of his colleagues in the new collective leadership regarded this coarse little man as a real threat. Like Stalin after Lenin’s demise, he outmaneuvered his rivals to become the clear leader of his country by 1955.

Khrushchev retained a huge inferiority complex about his lack of education and culture and was always alert to condescension, real or imagined, at home and abroad. Stalin too had such a complex, but Khrushchev was not as good at concealing it. Nor, unlike his patron, could Khrushchev control his explosive temper: within seconds he could shift from good humor to foul-mouthed abuse.

At their first meeting in Geneva in 1955, the Soviet leader seemed a frankly “obscene figure” to the elegant, urbane Macmillan, who wondered how “this fat, vulgar man, with his pig eyes and his ceaseless flow of talk” could really be the head of a great country.

At home Khrushchev wanted to free his people from the nightmare of Stalinism. Addressing the worst abuses of Stalin’s rule, he liberated millions from the gulags. A genuine believer in the potential of communism, he strove to improve living standards through better food, housing and consumer goods. But that meant taking on the Soviet military-industrial complex, geared for three decades to arms production, its depredations justified by repeated war scares.
Increasingly the success of Khrushchev’s domestic program turned on foreign policy. If he could pressure the West to ratify the Soviet position in Eastern Europe, especially Germany, that would give his country greater security. And if he could represent the Soviet Union as winning the Cold War by peaceful means, then he could hold his domestic critics at bay and reduce arms spending. That is why he seized with glee on the new missile program, unveiled to the world with the launch of Sputnik in 1957. Now the Soviets could strike directly at the United States, and this justified slashing cuts in conventional forces. “In our country,” he boasted in January 1960, “the armed forces have to a considerable extent been transformed into rocket forces.” These were heady days for the Soviet leader, even more prone than usual to shoot his mouth off. “We will bury you,” he warned the West, explaining later that this should be understood ideologically not literally: “I meant that capitalism would be buried and that Communism would come to replace it.”

Yet world communism was no longer a unity. By the late 1950s there was an open rupture between the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China, led by Mao Zedong. This split involved personal animosity between the two erratic autocrats and Chinese resentment at Soviet efforts to stop them developing an atomic bomb. But its core was ideology: Khrushchev’s doctrine of “peaceful coexistence” with the West. By this he meant not an end to rivalry but continued Soviet expansion without the risk of World War III, and he was confident that his country’s new strength made the goal more feasible. Indeed his whole program, at home and abroad, depended on a measure of détente with the United States.

Mao, on the other hand, was still full of the rhetoric of armed struggle, even countenancing nuclear war on the grounds that the communist bloc had a much larger population. Even if “900 million are left out of 2.9 billion,” he told party leaders chillingly in 1958, “several Five Year Plans can be developed for the total elimination of capitalism and for permanent peace.” Khrushchev thought Mao was utterly crazy but the Chinese were now bidding for leadership of the communist bloc and the developing world; they argued that the Soviets had become reactionary. So Khrushchev’s relations with the West had to be conducted with one eye on the East.

Khrushchev had virtually no experience in foreign affairs while Stalin was alive. “The rest of us were just errand boys,” he recalled. From his boss he acquired an essentially Stalinist view of the world: the West had always been out to undermine the Soviet Union, plotting encirclement during the civil war, trying to bleed them dry with no Second Front during World War II and then fostering German rearmament. But Khrushchev was also determined to undo his master by getting his country out of the isolation of the early Cold War and showing the West, as Stalin had not, that the Soviet Union was impervious to nuclear intimidation.

That was a major reason for his enthusiasm about summitry: he needed to take the measure of his adversary, and he left Geneva in 1955 elated to sense that “our enemies probably feared us as much as we feared them.” Watching U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles passing Ike a stream of notes, which the president “read con­tentiously like a schoolboy,” strengthened his self-confidence. Summitry was also about status. At Geneva airport Khrushchev had been utterly humiliated that his two-engine Ilyushin looked like an insect next to the four-engine monsters carrying the other delegations. Thereafter he used the latest versions of Tupolev jet, flaunting them before Westerners, and he proudly displayed a model of the giant Tu-114 on his Kremlin desk.

What Khrushchev really wanted was an invitation to the United States. If he could browbeat the Americans into arms control, then he might win a real breathing space for reform at home. But Dulles and the State Department continued to block a summit unless and until the foreign ministers had made progress on the big issues. So Khrushchev decided to apply some “shock therapy” by engineering a new crisis over Berlin.

Although Germany itself had been divided, the former capital, deep within East Germany, remained under four-power occupation: America, Britain, France and the Soviet Union each administered a zone. The Western powers still refused to recognize the East German government of Walter Ulbricht, backing instead the prin-
principle of eventual German reunification. So in November 1958 Khrushchev demanded that, if they did not conclude a German peace treaty within six months, he would hand over all their rights in Berlin to the Ulbricht government, with whom the West would then have to deal if it wanted to maintain its access to West Berlin. He acted on his own authority, impatient to cut through the endless arguments with the West. But key allies such as Anastas Mikoyan were appalled at the risk he was taking and at this "flagrant violation of party discipline." Their struggle over policy was not known in Washington, where even the CIA thought Khrushchev now called all the shots, but it helps explain the on-off nature of the Berlin crisis over the next few years.20

Khrushchev's hope was that the Soviets would either get a formal German treaty that recognized the new order or else the West would have to extend effective recognition to the East German regime. "Berlin is the West's balls," he remarked. "Every time I want to make the West scream, I squeeze on Berlin."21

But the city was also a vulnerable part of Moscow's imperial anatomy. East Germans who got to the Western sectors of Berlin could take planes or trains to West Germany, where they had the right of citizenship, and they were now fleeing in great numbers. Between September 1949 and August 1961 some 2.7 million East Germans went west, making the country the only member of the Soviet bloc to experience a net decline in population during the 1950s.22 Moreover those who fled were mostly the young and better educated, whose skills and energies were economically vital. Ulbricht wanted to annex West Berlin but this, Khrushchev knew, could spark a major crisis. Yet the Soviet Union had to do something or its showcase country in Eastern Europe might collapse from within.

Khrushchev was also afraid of growing West German rearmament. In 1941 the Soviet Union had suffered a devastating surprise attack by Germany; not surprisingly fear and suspicion ran deep. If West Germany became a nuclear power, following Britain and France, then Khrushchev's arms reduction program would lose all credibility at home.

So Berlin was a high-stakes issue for both sides. Initially Khrushchev's brinkmanship achieved results. In London Harold Macmillan was persuaded that the Soviet leader showed signs of megalomania. "Could Khrushchev do as foolish things as Hitler did?" The need to dissuade him helped justify Macmillan's visit to Moscow, rather like Chamberlain's flight to Berchtesgaden.23

In their meetings the Soviet leader was often blustering and aggressive—telling one shocked aide that he had "fucked" Macmillan with a telephone pole." He did drop the six-month deadline and proposed a foreign ministers' conference to resolve the crisis but this got nowhere. Eisenhower, with only eighteen months left in office, was anxious for real progress on nuclear arms control. The death of Dulles in May 1959 removed a skeptical voice, and Khrushchev was invited to America in September. The Soviet leader was ebullient. "Who would have guessed, twenty years ago, that the most powerful capitalist country in the world would invite a Communist to visit? This is incredible," he told his son. "Today they have to take us into account. It's our strength that led to this."24

During the visit Eisenhower also agreed to a four-power summit. Khrushchev, now confident about reaching agreements on Berlin and arms control, cut Soviet conventional forces even further. Though admitting that there were still ardent Cold Warriors in very influential circles," he believed Ike had realized that Dulles' policies had got America into a "dead end street."25

In early 1960, however, hopes waned of any diplomatic breakthroughs. And on May 1, just two weeks before the scheduled summit in Paris, the Soviets shot down an American U-2 spy plane over the Urals and captured its pilot. Khrushchev gave Ike the opportunity to blame the flight on "Pentagon militarists" but the president declined to pass the buck. The Soviet leader flew to Paris to torpedo the summit for which he had agitated for years. Contrary to administration suspicions, Khrushchev genuinely wanted a summit: he believed Ike had shared this desire but was undermined by the CIA and Pentagon.26

Khrushchev also withdrew his invitation for Ike to visit the Soviet Union. This was all set for June 10–19, with five days of talks in
Moscow, side visits to Leningrad and Kiev, and three speeches on Soviet TV and radio. The president was chagrined at losing the chance of a Moscow summit to crown his administration, but Khrushchev was equally a loser. The progress he sought on Berlin and the arms race would have to await a new U.S. president.

ON JANUARY 21, 1961, John F. Kennedy delivered his inaugural address in front of the U.S. Capitol. It was a richly symbolic moment. The forty-three-year-old president, bareheaded and without an overcoat despite the biting cold, announced that “the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans—born in this century.” His predecessor, old enough to be Kennedy’s father, listened in silence as the new president promised, in the kind of language that Ike had sedulously avoided, to “pay any price, bear any burden” to “assure the survival and the success of liberty.” Such phrases could be read as a clarion call to Cold War confrontation. But Kennedy also pledged to “begin anew the quest for peace, before the dark powers of destruction unleashed by science engulf all humanity in planned or accidental self-destruction.”

Kennedy’s inaugural kept his options open. Khrushchev, who had wrong-footed the West for years, was now the man left guessing. The new president’s view of the Soviet Union had evolved over the years. He had visited it only once, in the summer of 1939, when he discovered “a crude, backward, hopelessly bureaucratic country.” A decade later, representing an ethnic, Catholic district in Boston, he mouthed the language fashionable at the time, blasting a “sick” Roosevelt for selling out China at Yalta. After the Geneva conference of 1955 he had warned that “the barbarian may have taken the knife out of his teeth to smile, but the knife is still in his fist.” Privately and more reflectively in August 1959, he pondered the motivation behind Soviet policy. Was it merely a search for security or was it “evangelical” with the aim of eventually achieving “world revolution”? Kennedy guessed it was probably a combination of the two, which meant that there was no “magic solution,” no “button that you can press” to reach a lasting accommodation.

Instead America was engaged in a “constant day-by-day struggle with an enemy who is constantly attempting to expand his power.” Perhaps, Kennedy mused, “the desire of everyone to be independent” would “screw the Russians ultimately.” He also spoke of education as a promoter of change: “Once the Pandora’s box of learning is opened, truth will be loose in the land of the Soviets—and the truth may make them free.”

Kennedy was clearly feeling his way beyond mere containment. But these were prescriptions for the long term and in the nuclear age humanity’s chances of surviving the short term did not seem high. This was the main reason why Kennedy came out cautiously but firmly in favor of a summit—as a form of damage limitation. In a speech on October 1, 1959, just after Khrushchev’s visit, he acknowledged that “the real roots of the Soviet-American conflict cannot easily be settled by negotiations.” Substantive change would depend on Soviet “deeds, not words.” But Kennedy believed that a summit could help prevent Soviet-American competition escalating from cold war to hot war: “It is far better that we meet at the summit than at the brink.” And he discerned in Khrushchev’s speeches the “germs” of some “potential common interests.” These included avoiding the horror of nuclear war, the pollution of nuclear tests and the crushing economic burden of the arms race.

The Paris summit, Kennedy claimed in June 1960, had been “doomed” long before the U-2 crashed onto Soviet soil because the Eisenhower administration had consistently failed “to build the dispositions of long-term strength essential to successful negotiations.” Kennedy had pondered this issue years before, in 1940: he wrote a Harvard senior thesis titled “Appeasement at Munich,” later published as Why England Slept.

Kennedy’s basic interpretation of Munich was strategic rather than personal; he wanted to shift responsibility away from individuals and dispel the American stereotype of Chamberlain as “a doddering old man being completely ‘taken in.’” He argued that the prime minister had “a double-barrelled policy”: to build up Britain’s defenses while seeking to remove potential causes of war. And although ultimately Chamberlain allowed his “sincere and strong
hopes" for peace to unbalance his policy, Kennedy insisted that in September 1938 the British leader "could not have fought, even if he had wanted to... Munich was inevitable on the grounds of lack of armaments alone."35

This was a structural explanation for appeasement, rooted in the balance of power, elements of which foreshadowed later revisionist histories of the 1930s.36 In consequence, however, it played down the more personal aspects of Chamberlain's summity, particularly his weaknesses as a negotiator. Moreover the book was published in 1940 when the world was in awe at the apparent might of the Nazi military machine. Kennedy did not appreciate that in 1938 Germany was as unprepared as Britain for world war. Bluff at the summit was critical in 1938. And it would matter as much in 1961.

From his undergraduate reading of Munich Kennedy drew two enduring lessons. The first was the deficiency, in the short term, of democracy as a decision-making system when competing with totalitarian rivals. Being peace loving and consensual, a democratic people take longer to gear up for war. Yet, secondly, readiness for war is essential to secure a lasting and secure peace. Otherwise you will be unable to bargain on equal terms with your opponent.37 These were the lessons that Kennedy (or rather Theodore Sorensen, his speechwriter) distilled so memorably in the Inaugural Address twenty years later: "Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate."38

Kennedy therefore came to power with a clear and somewhat Churchillian philosophy of summity. But his approach was never merely cerebral; it was also intensely personal. His father, Joseph P. Kennedy, a ruthless multimillionaire, was determined to get his family into the White House. When his eldest son, Joe Junior, was killed in the war the mantle of parental ambition fell on Jack. But whereas Joe seemed a natural politician—dynamic, sociable and easygoing—Jack, as his father admitted, was rather shy, withdrawn and quiet. "If Joe had lived," Jack said later, "I probably would have gone to law school."39

He didn't enter politics simply to satisfy his father's ambitions—having seen other politicians close up, he thought himself at least as capable—yet climbing the political ladder involved a huge effort of will. It was also physically taxing because Jack, despite his good looks and athletic appearance, was often virtually a cripple. Since his teens he had suffered from ulcers and humiliating diarrhea; the drugs he took for these probably exacerbated a severe adrenal condition known as Addison's disease. He had a weak lower back, into which a metal plate was inserted in 1954. He also suffered from repeated urinary and bladder problems, the result of his promiscuous sex life and probable venereal disease, and was prone to sinus and respiratory infections.40

Kennedy therefore became dependent on a daily cocktail of drugs, administered by various physicians with little knowledge of the likely side effects. He had to endure excruciating pain, finding it difficult at times to even put on his shoes or sit in a chair. Any of these ailments would have been the excuse for a quiet life, yet they seemed to have driven Kennedy on. Instead of using his health and politically influential father to avoid the draft in World War II, he not only entered the U.S. Navy but volunteered for hazardous duty as the commander of a motor torpedo boat in the Pacific. The heroism he displayed when his vessel was sunk in August 1943—hours swimming in the water and helping his men—made him a national hero. A decade later, while recuperating from back surgery, Kennedy finished a book entitled Profiles in Courage, about eight U.S. senators who risked their careers by taking unpopular stands. With most of Kennedy's books, the research was done by others, but the underlying ideas were his own. The product of a ferociously competitive family, Kennedy was fascinated by moral and political courage. This personal dimension, as much as an intellectual approach to summity, would shape his encounter with Khrushchev.

The two men met briefly on September 17, 1959, during Khrushchev's visit to the United States, when he spoke to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "Tan suit—French cuffs—short, stocky, two red ribbons, two stars," Kennedy noted. Only senior senators had a chance to ask questions but, shaking hands afterward, Khrushchev told Kennedy that he had heard of him as an up and coming politician, observing that he looked too young to be a
senator. This was the comment that stayed with Kennedy, always sensitive to hints that he lacked gravitas and experience. The session disabused Kennedy of any lingering image of the Soviet leader as a “vodka-drinking politician-buffoon.” In his speech on October 1 he portrayed Khrushchev as “a tough-minded, articulate, hard-reasoning spokesman for an ideology in which he was thoroughly versed and in which he thoroughly believed.”

Khrushchev paid more attention to Kennedy after he won the Democratic nomination in July 1960. A profile by the Soviet embassy in Washington stressed Kennedy’s belief that the superpower relationship was one of “constant struggle” and noted his “bellcose” position on Berlin. But it also emphasized his interest in arms control and a nuclear test ban, motivated by the desire for “a mutual effort to avoid nuclear war. For this reason,” said the embassy, “Kennedy, in principle, advocates talks with the Soviet Union.”

Within days of the presidential election on November 8, 1960, Khrushchev started pressing for a summit. The Soviet ambassador in Washington, Mikhail Menshikov, lobbied Averell Harriman, the veteran American statesman and Kennedy insider; Menshikov explained that Khrushchev hoped for “a return to the spirit of Soviet-American co-operation which we had during the war” when Harriman was U.S. ambassador in Moscow. Harriman relayed the message to Kennedy. The ambassador kept up Khrushchev’s pressure for a summit, badgering all who would talk to him.

On January 10, 1961, the president-elect asked George Kennan why the Soviet leader was so keen. The intellectual architect of containment suggested that Khrushchev’s political position had been weakened by the U-2 episode, the failure of the Paris summit and growing tensions with communist China. He thought there was now “a real urgency in Moscow about achieving agreements on disarmament” and surmised that the Soviet leader hoped, by concluding such a deal personally, to recoup “his failing political fortunes.” But Kennan urged Kennedy not to rush into a summit: advocates of such a meeting, he said, should show why the issues in dispute “could not be better treated at lower and more normal levels.”

This was the traditional line from diplomatic professionals. Secre-
two men sitting down together to talk about matters affecting the very survival of the systems they represent, each in a position to unleash unbelievably destructive power . . . Is it wise to gamble so heavily? Are not these two men who should be kept apart until others have found a sure meeting ground of accommodation between them?46

On the other hand, Democratic doves such as Adlai Stevenson viewed Kennedy “the most important first thing” the administration had to do was “discover what is in Khrushchev’s mind.” Stevenson offered himself as a high-level emissary, a proposal that held no appeal for Kennedy. He shared Stevenson’s sense of priorities but was determined to do the discovering himself.47

On January 6 Khrushchev gave a major speech about foreign affairs to party workers. In line with his slogan of peaceful coexistence, Khrushchev argued that the impending economic victory of socialism over capitalism would exert “a revolutionizing influence” around the globe; he insisted that world war in the nuclear age would be “the most destructive war in all history.” He also warned against letting the “imperialists” stir up “local wars,” which he said could easily develop into global nuclear conflict. To retain his ideological credentials against China, Khrushchev identified a special category of local wars, those of “national liberation” such as in Vietnam, Algeria or Cuba, which should be supported “wholeheartedly” by communists as “just wars.” Peaceful coexistence, he stated, helps the national liberation movement to gain successes.”48

The U.S. ambassador in Moscow, Llewellyn “Tommy” Thompson, advised Washington that the speech “should be read in its entirety by everyone having to do with Soviet affairs” because it sought together in one place Khrushchev’s point of view as a communist and a propagandist.” Yet, Thompson added, “there are other sides to him.” The ambassador also noted that much of the
speech was clearly directed at China, a point underlined in a State
Department analysis for the president. But Kennedy, who re-
ceived the translated text of the speech just after his inauguration,
was inclined to take it as a definitive statement of Khrushchev’s for-
egn policy. “You’ve got to understand it,” he told his top officials. “This is our clue to our future with the Soviet Union.”

How far the Soviet leader would go in supporting wars of
national liberation became one of the big questions for Kennedy.
Small crises could easily escalate—like Macmillan, he had much in
mind the July crisis in 1914, which started as a strike by Serbian na-
tionalists against the Austrian empire.

To sort out his thinking about the Soviet Union, Kennedy
arranged a special Saturday-morning seminar in the Cabinet
Room of the White House on February 11, 1961. He wanted to
pick the brains of three veteran U.S. envoys to Moscow—Harri-
man, Kennan and “Chip” Bohlen—as well as hear from Thompson,
who had been summoned home for the purpose. The ambassa-
dor—who had enjoyed unusual access to the Soviet leader, even
spending a family weekend at his dacha—emphasized that Khru-
shchev was the man who mattered: “While the Government is a
collective enterprise, it is increasingly a collective enterprise of
Khrushchev’s supporters.” Thompson believed Khrushchev wanted
“a generally unexplosive time in foreign affairs” so as to concen-
trate on economic progress; the Soviet leader therefore needed
some specific diplomatic successes in 1961. Thompson felt Soviet
interest in arms control was genuine, likewise its concerns about
Germany and China. On the other hand, as Bohlen emphasized,
Germany was “an excellent crowbar to pry at the seams of the At-
tlantic alliance.” Similarly in the Third World, the Soviets were ex-
ploiting “targets of opportunity” such as Laos, the Congo and
Cuba. This “double character” of Soviet policy, warned Bohlen,
would require both “courtesy” and “firmness,” the latter being es-
sential over Berlin.

At the February 11 seminar there was “considerable feeling
among the experts that a meeting in due course, for an exchange of
courtesies and the opportunity of becoming personally acquainted,
might be useful.” But the experts also agreed that “nothing ap-
proaching a summit, in terms of serious negotiations, should be
considered favorably for the present.” Over the next ten days, how-
ever, momentum built up. The principal reason was probably the
president’s own impatience to get a sense of his main adversary. As
Bohlen remarked later, on these matters “he really felt he had to
work out for himself.” And, as Thompson had already observed, a
meeting would enable Kennedy to set the tone of his relationship
with Khrushchev. He could convince the Soviet leader that he did
not intend to seek solutions by force and was ready for serious ne-
gotiations. If the encounter occurred soon, the president could
bid substantive discussion because he could not yet be expected
to have formulated positions on controversial issues. An additional
concern, raised particularly by Bohlen, was to head off a possible
visit by Khrushchev to the United Nations General Assembly in
September. When he attended in October 1960 he had used the occa-
sion for propaganda purposes, famously banging his shoe on the
table for emphasis. If Kennedy offered to go east, this might pre-
vent a repeat performance.

A mixture of these considerations probably explains why the
president decided to push ahead. In a letter to Khrushchev dated
February 22 he expressed the hope that “before too long” they
would “meet personally for an informal exchange of views” on
time of the questions in dispute between them. Of course, he said,
such a meeting would depend on such preconditions as “the gen-
nal international situation at the time” as well as on “our mutual
schedules.” He asked Ambassador Thompson to deliver the letter
in his return to Moscow and to discuss the question of a meeting
with Khrushchev.

Bohlen also urged on Kennedy some further, private conditions.
He should not talk to the Soviet leader until he had met with
America’s principal European allies. The president should be in Eu-

ope anyway because a special trip would heighten expectations.
And for reasons of equality it was desirable to meet in a neutral
country, such as Austria or Switzerland.

Ambassador Thompson had some problems delivering Kennedy’s
letter. Khrushchev was engaged in a lengthy tour of Soviet agriculture, and Thompson eventually caught up with him on March 9, in the Siberian city of Novosibirsk, some two thousand miles from Moscow. By then, the State Department had made progress in fixing talks with Allied leaders; Thompson was able to suggest a meeting in Vienna or Stockholm on the back of Kennedy's proposed trip to see President Charles de Gaulle. (The prickly French leader was less ready than his British and West German counterparts to cross the Atlantic for an audience in the White House.) Khrushchev told Thompson that he would need to study Kennedy's letter but indicated agreement in principle, with a preference for Vienna. The Soviet leader was "obviously pleased with the President's initiative," Thompson reported. Khrushchev confirmed his willingness for a summit when he saw Thompson on April 1 and news started to leak into the American press.

But, just when the "mutual schedules" were falling into place, Kennedy's other precondition for a summit, "the general international situation," took a decided turn against the United States. On April 12 the Soviet Union became the first country to put a man into space—Yuri Gagarin circled the earth for ninety minutes before landing safely. The handsome young cosmonaut, with his telegenic smile, became a national and international status symbol. Although the American astronaut Alan Shepard evened the score on May 5, his was only a fifteen-minute flight, blasted like a cannonball from the Florida coast into the Atlantic; it could not offset the basic point that, as with the so-called missile gap, the Americans were again seen to be lagging behind in high technology.

The reality of course was very different. Key areas of the Soviet military-industrial complex were indeed precocious, but its underlying economic base was far inferior to that of the United States. On the day that Gagarin was received in triumph at the Kremlin, the British ambassador to the Soviet Union, Sir Frank Roberts, had to drive from Moscow to Leningrad. There were only two gas stations on his 430-mile route and, at the one where Roberts stopped, the automatic pumps failed. While staff filled his Rolls-Royce by hand, Roberts looked at the posters of Gagarin and savored the irony.

But perceptions mattered as much as reality. "In the eyes of the world," Vice President Lyndon Johnson warned, "first in space means first, period; second in space is second in everything." Hitherto Kennedy had shown little interest in the issue but on April 19, a week after Gagarin's flight, he asked Johnson to identify a space program that "promises dramatic results in which we could win." Stymied by strong defense and aeronautical lobbies, Johnson pushed the project to land a man on the moon. Eisenhower had refused to take space into a race but his young successor saw no alternative. That was not just because of Gagarin's success, humiliating though it was for America; this coincided with a diplomatic fiasco nearer home, for which only the president could be blamed.

In January 1959 the guerrilla leader Fidel Castro had seized power on the island of Cuba, ninety miles off the Florida coast, toppling a corrupt dictatorship in pawn to American economic interests. Castro was not initially a communist but the growing opposition of the Eisenhower administration drove him into the Soviet camp. For more than a century the United States claimed South America as its sphere of interest, regularly intervening to replace governments that it opposed—most recently in a full-scale invasion of Guatemala in 1954. In Eisenhower's last months, the CIA drew up a plan to end the Castro regime and this landed on the new president's desk when he entered the White House. Although initially sympathetic to the Cuban revolution, Kennedy had come to see Castro as the Latin American vanguard of Khrushchev's plans to promote communism globally. The president's response to this challenge was the Alliance for Progress, a massive development program for the continent that he unveiled in March. He was also wary of committing the United States overtly to toppling Castro. The CIA therefore turned what had been a conventional invasion centered on U.S. forces into an operation by Cuban exiles with the minimum possible American support. The State Department and some senior advisors continued to voice op-
position but over the Easter weekend of April 1–3, the president made up his mind. He spent the break at his father's house in Palm Beach, Florida, and returned to Washington on the 4th fired up with determination.

Exactly what tipped the balance is not clear but various factors played a part. The CIA, backed by the joint chiefs of staff, had now made the plan politically acceptable and the veteran CIA director, Allen Dulles, assured Kennedy that its prospects were even better than those for Guatemala in 1954. An inexperienced new president would find it hard to demur. In any case Kennedy wanted Castro overthrown, and the operation appealed to his sense of daring. A weekend with his macho father probably had an effect. While at Palm Beach Kennedy received Ambassador Thompson's telegram confirming Khrushchev's willingness to meet in Vienna after his Paris trip at the end of May. With the road to the summit now open, Kennedy perhaps felt freer to deal with the problem of Castro.

The CIA's critics were still not convinced. Arthur Schlesinger, the Harvard historian who was special assistant to the president, presciently warned that the plan would probably fail between two stools. "No matter how 'Cuban' the equipment and personnel, the U.S. will be held accountable for the operation, and our prestige will be committed to its success." At the same time, without real American firepower, the operation would fail to topple Castro and would "turn into a protracted civil conflict." Schlesinger was right. A "deniable plan" led to an "undeniable fiasco." Landing on the remote Bay of Pigs on April 17 with virtually no air support, the Cuban exiles crumbled within a couple of days. By April 19 Kennedy could conceal neither their failure nor American involvement. Publicly and with dignity he accepted "sole responsibility." But in private his mood was angry and distressed; on several occasions he could not control his tears. Acute diarrhea and another urinary tract infection added to his misery. Bobby Kennedy, the president's brother and now attorney general, berated JFK's inner circle: "All you bright fellows have got the President into this, and if you don't do something now, my brother will be regarded as a paper tiger by the Russians."

On April 18, 1961, Khrushchev sent Kennedy a fierce message casting doubt on his professed wish to improve relations and warning that "any so-called 'little war' can touch off a chain reaction in parts of the globe." Kennedy fired back a robust reply about the plight of the Cuban people to seek freedom from "the Castro dictatorship," only to receive a long and rambling lecture dated April 22 about "the very dangerous road" he was treading.

In May 1960 the U-2 fiasco had given Khrushchev justification for sabotaging the Paris summit and the Kennedy administration recognized that this could happen again. In the wake of the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy could not seem too eager for a meeting—that might look like appeasement. But if he backed away from the proposed encounter, he would suggest he was a coward. And if the idea lapsed together, he would lose the chance to convince the Soviet leader that, despite Cuba, he was no soft touch. Whereas initially it was Khrushchev who had wanted a summit more than Kennedy, after the Bay of Pigs the balance was much more equal.

On May 4 Moscow broke silence. Thompson was asked to call in the Soviet foreign minister, Andrei Gromyko, who said he would not like to repeat Khrushchev's comments about the Bay of Pigs. But, Gromyko went on, the recent "discord" over Cuba underlined the fact that "we live on one planet" and "bridges have to be built" to link the two countries. He asked Thompson to ascertain whether Kennedy genuinely wanted a personal meeting, making clear that the Kremlin still thought this would be "useful" for both sides. The White House was quick to respond. "The President remains desirous of meeting Khrushchev," Gromyko was told. "He hopes that it will be possible to adhere to the original schedule of early June in Vienna but is not at the moment in a position to make a firm decision." The Soviets were promised a definite reply within the next two weeks.

Kennedy's message indicated that the prospects for a summit would be helped by progress toward a peaceful settlement of the crisis in Laos. There an American-backed military government was under attack from the communist Pathet Lao, aided by North Vietnam. Laos was poor, tiny and landlocked—hardly a country of
great strategic importance. Nor was it a credible ally. The economist John Kenneth Galbraith, Kennedy’s ambassador to India, scoffed that in military terms “the entire Laos nation is clearly inferior to a battalion of conscientious objectors from World War I.” Seen in a Cold War context, however, Laos took on larger significance because North Vietnam was backed by communist China. To many in Washington, the United States would have to draw a line against Chinese expansion sooner or later. Admiral Arleigh Burke, deputy chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, warned that “each time you give ground it is harder to take a stand next time” and said that abandoning Laos could mean having to fight for South Vietnam or Thailand. But the military’s fevered talk about troops, air strikes and even nuclear war alarmed Kennedy, especially after the Bay of Pigs fiasco had undermined his respect for so-called expert advice. His preferred solution was a genuinely neutral Laos and, to that end, an international conference was convened in Geneva in April. Hence his warning to Gromyko that progress at Geneva would make a Vienna summit “easier from the point of view of public opinion” at home and abroad.

Laos was partly reason, partly pretext for procrastinating about the summit. On May 9, three days after the reply was sent to Gromyko, Bobby Kennedy met secretly in Washington with Georgi Bolshakov from the Soviet embassy. Ostensibly a newsmen, Bolshakov actually worked for Soviet military intelligence and was a close friend of Khrushchev’s son-in-law. Their meeting, arranged through an American journalist, Frank Holeman, took place at 8:30 p.m. at the back entrance to the Justice Department. The two men walked out onto the Mall.

Bobby Kennedy started very firmly, referring to recent events in Cuba and Laos. The Soviets, he said, seemed to be underestimating the capabilities of the United States and the president. If this continued the administration would “have to take corrective action, changing the course of its policies.” Having laid that on the line, Bobby then indicated that his brother held out hopes for real progress at Vienna, above all a treaty banning nuclear tests. Officially this issue was deadlocked because it depended on verification and the Americans demanded twenty on-site inspections a year whereas the Soviets stuck at three. Now, secretly, Bobby said that the administration was willing to compromise on ten inspections, if it were made to seem like a Soviet offer. The United States wanted the details to be fleshed out through diplomatic channels in the next few weeks so the two leaders could sign an agreement in Vienna. He made it clear that the president was “not interested in a summit where leaders just exchange views.”

Bobby Kennedy’s meeting with Bolshakov on May 9 was enormously important. It was the first of a series of regular encounters between the two men, lasting until December 1962, which created a back channel between the White House and the Kremlin. It was also a sign of the president’s growing reliance on his brother as a foreign policy advisor, after the damaging shock of the Bay of Pigs. Bobby said later of the Bolshakov channel that “unfortunately, stupidly . . . I didn’t write many of the things down. I just delivered the messages verbally to my brother and he’d act on them, and I think sometimes he’d tell the State Department, and sometimes, perhaps, he didn’t.” This was disingenuous: the informality was exactly what the Kennedys needed to operate outside the trammels of official diplomacy. The May 9 conversation made clear how far Kennedy’s hopes for Vienna had diverged from those of the State Department. The February 11 seminar at the White House had endorsed a chance of “becoming personally acquainted” but advocated “nothing approaching a summit, in terms of serious negotiations.” Bobby Kennedy, however, was now passing the word to Khrushchev that his brother wanted concrete agreements, not a social chat. The president was raising the stakes.

From then on preparations for Vienna proceeded along two channels: the official diplomatic one managed by Ambassadors Thompson and Menshikov, and the back channel operated by Bolshakov and Bobby. On May 12 Khrushchev sent the president a formal letter, picking up on the Gromyko-Thompson conversation eight days before. Using the same language about the need to build bridges of mutual understanding,” he confirmed his readiness to meet in Vienna on June 3–4; he also highlighted Laos, disarmament
and the German question as key issues for discussion. Menshikov delivered this letter to the White House on May 16. Not surprisingly Kennedy redefined the second topic as nuclear testing, saying that this was an easier area on which to make progress. He was also anxious that “the hopes of the peoples not be disappointed by false expectation of concrete results from a meeting” and therefore proposed that it be publicly presented as merely “an opportunity for a general exchange of views.” Quoting from the end of Khrushchev’s letter, Menshikov said this was also the Soviet position.74

In this meeting Kennedy admitted he was now “doubtful that any agreement on Laos or on nuclear testing would be reached by the time of his visit to Europe.”75 There had been no reply along the back channel and when it came, a few days later, the tone was discouraging. Khrushchev was still out of Moscow, touring Central Asia, so the Foreign and Defense Ministries had prepared Bolshakov’s reply. On the idea of a neutral Laos, Bolshakov was told to make encouraging noises about “the coincidence of the viewpoints of our governments.” But on nuclear testing and on Berlin, he was instructed to reiterate traditional Soviet policies, stressing the obstacles to a test ban agreement and threatening a unilateral Soviet treaty with East Germany. Bolshakov delivered these messages to Bobby Kennedy. 76

Yet the president refused to be deterred. Having campaigned for a test ban treaty long before he entered the White House, he pressed skeptics in the Pentagon and the Atomic Energy Commission to rethink American positions. He especially wanted them to reconsider the number of inspections and the Soviet demand that they be conducted not by a single international administrator but by a “troika” comprising a representative of the communist world, another from the West and a neutral. Whether or not Vienna would yield a firm agreement, Kennedy still intended to make real progress. Indeed he probably felt it vital to achieve some kind of success after the fiasco in Cuba and the fudge over Laos.77

Khrushchev, though equally set on a summit, approached it quite differently. “I don’t understand Kennedy,” he told his son after the Bay of Pigs. “What’s wrong with him? Can he really be that indecisive?” The president’s failure to unleash American power against Castro reinforced the Soviet leader’s belief that now was the time for a meeting; the surprising willingness of the weakened president to go ahead with a summit made him even more confident.78 Like Kennedy, Khrushchev wanted more than a chat at Vienna, but his agenda was quite different. As the instructions to Bolshakov made clear, the Kremlin saw little prospect of a nuclear test ban and this was low on its list of priorities. The top issue for the Soviets was still Berlin. Yet Bobby told Bolshakov on May 21 that the president will discuss this subject with Khrushchev in Vienna, but only to discuss it and not to seek any kind of agreement at this meeting.”79 Both leaders were now marching boldly toward the summit, but following totally different maps.

On May 17 Thomas Finletter, the U.S. ambassador to NATO, briefed Allied envoys about the summit. He stressed that the intention was “solely to have an exchange of views and not to negotiate or reach agreement on major problems, regarding which there would be full consultation with allies.” But the Belgians thought the distinction between exchange of views and full negotiations was “nebulous.” The West Germans and the Dutch wanted to know more about the topics on the agenda. And the French ambassador, recalling original American caution about an early personal meeting, asked slyly what had happened to make the president change his mind. Responding, the State Department threw the onus on the Soviets, stressing Gromyko’s initiative on May 4; they asserted that the administration did not want to be seen to “rebuff this Soviet overture.”80

This account considerably underplayed Kennedy’s own enthusiasm for a meeting but, as Bohlen emphasized to the president, it was important to give the impression that on the American side the idea of a summit was “not a backwash of recent events” and that there was no “anxiety or desperation” in the White House.81 A similar line was struck in the formal press announcement on the morning of May 19:
The President and Chairman Khrushchev understand that this meeting is not for the purpose of negotiating or reaching agreement on the major international problems that involve the interest of many other countries. This meeting will, however, afford a timely and convenient opportunity for the first personal contact between them and [for] a general exchange of views on the major issues which affect the relationships between the two countries.  

Following up with an off-the-record press briefing, Bohlen had to fend off skeptical questions such as, why meet when Khrushchev “has got us over a barrel”? Bohlen insisted the event should be regarded as “a rather normal thing: two guys in this big ring who haven’t met.” It would be “not a summit in the gobbledygook sense that has collected around this word” but a “conference at the summit . . . without trying to reach an agreement.” Wasn’t the latter what Churchill had originally meant, asked one newsman, when he spoke of “a parley at the summit”? Playing at semantics Bohlen insisted that a summit now meant a conference where “you would have specific questions you would try to settle”; he went on to deny the label to Macmillan’s visit to Russia, Khrushchev’s visit to America, and even Paris in May 1960. The official line was that Vienna would be “a size-up” not “a summit.”

Even for this supposedly low-key chat the logistics were immensely complex, yet they had to be arranged in less than three weeks. Although rumors of a meeting in Vienna or Stockholm had been circulating for a month or so, the State Department didn’t approach the Austrian government until May 16, after Ambassador Menshikov’s visit to the White House. A special advance party headed by Kenneth O’Donnell and Pierre Salinger, the president’s appointments and press secretaries, descended on Vienna for reconnaissance and planning meetings on May 23-24. The group numbered thirty-nine, and it flew in Air Force One, the president’s Boeing 707, so that the pilot could practice landings and takeoffs while the discussions took place.

Agreement was quickly reached that Kennedy and Khrushchev would stay at the official residences of their respective ambassadors, both located in the southwest suburbs of Vienna. This reduced the security headache for the Austrians, but they were still asked to find nearly one hundred top-class hotel rooms for the American party in two weeks’ notice during the peak tourist season. Eventually they commandeered the Hotel Bristol for the American official party and the Hotel Imperial for the Soviets, with the American overflow housed in two other hotels. The media were also accommodated, though not in such style. The Fasangarten Barracks, also in the southwestern suburbs, had space for five hundred men and party women in shared rooms. Shuttle buses took them to the press center, established in the Neue Hofburg, the late-nineteenth-century addition to the Imperial Palace where the Congress of Vienna had been held in 1814–15. The Neue Hofburg now housed the International Atomic Energy Commission and therefore had a large auditorium equipped for simultaneous translation, with several radio and TV studios and some 130 phone and telex lines—to which the Austrians added many more.

The American advance party also had intensive discussions about the agenda with their Soviet counterparts, led by General Nikolai Bakharov. On the first day meetings would be held in the U.S. ambassador’s residence, on day two at the Soviet embassy in the center of Vienna. The latter was naturally more spacious and the Soviets would offer several rooms for the American delegation accompanying the president, whereas the Americans could offer only one for the Soviets at their residence. “Will that be adequate?” asked the U.S. ambassador, H. Freeman Matthews. “In the short space of time you cannot build a house” was the reply. “We will be content with whatever you’re able to give.”

On June 1 both sides spent an afternoon checking out the two venues. The Soviets wanted to choreograph everything minutely and expressed “consternation” at the president’s request that the meetings at the U.S. residence be “completely informal,” with no seating plan. There was even more “consternation” at the American desire for photo opportunities inside the Soviet embassy. But both matters were settled to American satisfaction and the discussions, fabricated by various toasts to the success of the conference, re-
While Vienna was caught up in this feverish activity, the two principals tried to prepare for their encounter. Kennedy found it particularly hard to focus amid other distractions. He had privately ruled out American military intervention in Laos, but the Geneva conference was going badly and the prospects for guaranteed neutrality seemed slim. At home he was preoccupied with the racial crisis in Alabama where Freedom Riders, seeking to challenge segregation on public transport, were being beaten up by white thugs. This raised larger issues about the line between federal responsibility and states' rights. And on May 17, during a visit to Ottawa, the president damaged his fragile back while stooping to plant a cere-
monial tree. He was in acute pain and, in private over the next few weeks, resorted to crutches for the first time in years.

Prospects for the summit also looked less rosy than a couple of weeks before. The Soviets had not responded positively to Kennedy's overtures about a nuclear test ban, and now the president was under intense pressure from the military to end the current informal moratorium and resume American testing. Kennedy had also offered to collaborate in space, but again the reaction was cool. On May 21 Bobby Kennedy saw Bolshakov to confirm the president's personal acceptance of the troika proposal for nuclear inspections. He had further meetings on May 23 and 24 to urge progress on testing and space before Vienna, adding that his brother was losing patience with Soviet unresponsiveness. Bobby also expressed the president's concern at Ambassador Thompson's latest conversation with Khrushchev on May 23.

In this the Soviet leader stated categorically that American access to Berlin would be blocked under the proposed treaty with East Germany, telling Thompson that disarmament was “impossible” as long as the problem of Berlin existed. But the effect of this remark may have been blunted by Thompson's supplementary telegram saying that Khrushchev was “deeply troubled” about how to handle the German problem at Vienna; Thompson suggested that Kennedy try to discuss it alone, except for interpreters. The implication conveyed by the ambassador's message was that Khrushchev might be more malleable on Berlin than his hawkish colleagues.

Kennedy had already given the annual State of the Union address on January 30. But in an effort to shore up his prestige after the Bay of Pigs and as a build up to Vienna, he decided to deliver a special message to a joint session of Congress on May 25. He insisted that he was going to Vienna to “make clear America's enduring concern for both peace and freedom,” but his emphasis was predominantly on defending and expanding freedom in what had become a global struggle. Kennedy requested new appropriations for the armed forces and for civil defense—a nationwide program of fallout shelters—and finished by espousing “the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth.” He insisted that this was not simply an adventure story; it was an integral part of “the battle that is now going on around the world between freedom and tyranny” because of the immense psychological impact of being first in space. So vast would be the commitment required, he said, that it would “not be one man going to the moon” but “an entire nation.”

While Kennedy talked tough in public, Khrushchev was even more intransigent in private. In preparation for Vienna, the Foreign Ministry had drawn up position papers. Although correctly identifying American priorities for the meeting, these offered no positive responses; they simply reiterated standard Soviet lines on testing, space and Germany. They were approved with little comment at a meeting of the ruling Presidium on May 26.

“I attach a lot of significance to the meeting with Kennedy,” Khrushchev told his colleagues, “because we are approaching the moment when we must solve the German question.” Feelers via Thompson and Bolshakov had made it clear that Kennedy was no more inclined than Eisenhower to move on Berlin. The Soviet leader said he was ready to sign a treaty with the East German government and then turn over control of all access to the city, including air traffic, the Western lifeline in the blockade of 1948–9. “The risk that we are taking is justified,” Khrushchev assured his colleagues; “there is more than a 95% probability that there will be no war.” Only Anastas Mikoyan argued back. He renewed the criticisms he had made of Khrushchev's saber rattling in 1958, predicting that NATO would not be deterred. And he questioned Khrushchev's whole approach to Vienna: instead of backing Kennedy into a corner, he suggested taking some of the president's proposals more seriously. At this Khrushchev lost his temper, blustering that he would not only close the air corridor but would shoot down any Allied plane that tried to land in West Berlin. Although Gromyko and others may have shared Mikoyan's doubts, all were cowed into silence. At the end of the meeting Khrushchev was asked about the gifts to be given to the president and his wife, including cans of the best caviar and a silver coffee service. The Soviet leader gave his approval: “Presents can be made even before a war.”
Khrushchev portrayed Vienna as a great opportunity to pressure a weak president. Here he was influenced not only by recent American setbacks but also by his reading of the country and its president. According to Georgii Kornienko, a counsellor at the Soviet embassy in Washington in 1961, Ambassador Menshikov (feeding Khrushchev what he thought the Soviet leader wanted to hear) kept telling Moscow that Jack and Bobby Kennedy talked tough, but when pushed would cower and back down. And, following Marxist-Leninist dogma, Khrushchev believed that Kennedy, like Eisenhower, was a puppet of the Pentagon, Wall Street and the American military-industrial complex. The Bay of Pigs debacle underlined for him the lesson of the U-2 affair. He even told the journalist Walter Lippmann in April that the forces behind the government could be summed up in one word: “Rockefeller.” Reporting this in his column Lippmann dryly observed that “the view that he is running the Kennedy administration” would be “news” to Nelson Rockefeller, the Republican governor of New York.

Khrushchev’s contempt for Kennedy had personal as well as ideological roots. Talking to Thompson on May 23 he said he had not met Kennedy before—a revealing lapse of memory considering how much impact their brief meeting in September 1959 had made on the American senator. Thompson also recorded Khrushchev’s remark that Kennedy was “younger than his son would have been had he lived.” This cryptic aside was revealing. Leonid, Khrushchev’s eldest son, was born like John Kennedy in 1917. A daredevil pilot during World War II, he was finally shot down and killed in 1943. His father rarely talked about it, perhaps from grief but more likely because Leonid’s pre-war life had been a decadent chronicle of drink and debauchery. So much so that in 1937 Khrushchev practically evicted him from the household. For the Soviet leader to compare Kennedy to Leonid was therefore hardly a compliment. Not merely was the president his junior by twenty-three years, as Khrushchev must have known from KGB reports, Kennedy was also an inveterate womanizer. If the Soviet leader subconsciously saw his own son across the table in Vienna, it helps explain why he found it hard to take Kennedy seriously.

The CIA’s personality sketch of Khrushchev, part of Kennedy’s background reading for Vienna, made reference to Leonid’s war story but did not mention his date of birth. If Kennedy had seen the year 1917 it might have told him how he was likely to be viewed by the Soviet leader. Even so the briefing papers from the CIA and the State Department left no doubt about Khrushchev’s acumen, quick-mindedness and debating skill—particularly his ability to put others on the defensive by sudden explosions of anger, real or feigned. “He has an uncanny ability of making people depart evaluating their own performance rather than describing his,” noted the CIA. The briefing papers also emphasized Khrushchev’s pride as a self-made man who outwitted better-educated rivals to reach the top, and his sensitivity to any slights on his origin or on the newly attained stature of the Soviet Union. Although a man of action rather than an ideologue, Khrushchev was said to be inspired by his “political faith”; he saw the world “through Marxist-Leninist spectacles” and was probably genuinely convinced, as he often told Westerners, that their grandchildren would live under a communist system.

The president should therefore have been under no illusions; he faced a demanding opponent whose manner could oscillate from the “cherubic” to the “choleric.” The briefing papers also made it clear that Berlin was likely to be Khrushchev’s priority and that the situation there was working up to a crisis. “In order that the possibilities of a disastrous miscalculation be reduced,” the State Department advised, “it is absolutely vital for the USSR to understand that Berlin is of paramount importance to the U.S.” National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy noted that “everyone agrees on this”—from hawks like Dean Acheson to moderates like Walter Lippmann—and now Khrushchev “must have it from you.”

Sounding tough on Berlin was the fundamental message of all the papers about Germany that Kennedy took with him to Vienna. Rather like the Soviet briefings for Khrushchev on nuclear testing, they showed no flexibility on the issue or even willingness to explore the other side’s motivations. Yet Khrushchev was becoming increasingly strident. From Moscow Ambassador Thompson told
Washington on May 25 that, having talked with his British, French and West German colleagues, all four of them were "fully convinced" that Khrushchev would take steps before the end of the year to conclude a separate treaty with East Germany and that this would bring on a "major crisis."102

The crisis for which America and its allies were preparing was essentially a repeat of the 1948 Soviet blockade of the city. But now there was a grim recognition that, in the missile age, attempts to keep open access routes could easily escalate into nuclear war. Khrushchev’s diatribe to the Presidium revolved around the same 1948 scenario, though he believed nuclear weapons meant that this time the Soviets could win. What is striking in view of what actually transpired is the lack of reference in all the American briefing papers to the principal cause of Khrushchev’s urgency: the flood of East German refugees through West Berlin. The State Department stated flatly that there was “nothing in the present situation in Germany and Berlin really intolerable” to either side. “The Soviet Union cannot really believe that the continued existence of West Berlin offers any threat to Soviet security—or indeed to the continued existence of the East German regime.”103

Yet this was exactly the point Walter Ulbricht was pressing on Khrushchev. In the first half of 1961, a hundred thousand East Germans fled west. Khrushchev’s aides joked grimly that soon no one would be left in the country except Ulbricht and his mistress. The Soviet ambassador in Berlin warned Gromyko on May 19 that “our German friends” wanted to close “the door to the West” immediately. They intended to block the sector boundary between East Berlin and the rest of the city, even though this would create a crisis with the Western powers and complicate the real Soviet goal of a German settlement. Khrushchev didn’t want a showdown over Berlin; he hoped to use the city as leverage to force the West into serious negotiations about Germany.104

The only senior U.S. policymaker who apparently sensed Khrushchev’s mind was Ambassador Thompson. Playing a role analogous to that of Mikoyan in Moscow, he had for some months been urging Washington to show some flexibility on Germany, offering Khrushchev the hope of a phased agreement over Berlin. One of his reasons was that the present situation threatened the stability of the East German regime, causing pressure on Moscow from Ulbricht. Thompson used Khrushchev’s edgy conversation on May 23 to again urge Washington to develop “a better position on the German problem.” But even Thompson was not aware of the scale of the exodus; when he asked Khrushchev on May 23 whether the refugee problem was the most important aspect of Berlin, the Soviet leader “brushed this aside.” The hypersensitive Khrushchev was reluctant to reveal his Achilles heel: on another occasion he had sniggered dismissively that the whole population of West Berlin was equivalent to “one night's work” in bed by Soviet couples.105

The U.S. briefing papers were generally upbeat. It was assumed that tough talk from Kennedy would show he couldn’t be pushed around, thus making Khrushchev more tractable. The State Department believed that despite tactical shows of “anger and bluster” Khrushchev would “generally assume an attitude of reasonable firmness,” preferring that “the talks end on a note of accord.” It was expected that if the meeting went well the Soviets would invite Kennedy to visit Moscow, reviving the offer to Eisenhower that had been revoked after the U-2 affair.106

Each leader was going with his own list of priorities and with a confidence that, if he played it tough, the other man would come around. Each had fundamental blind spots about his adversary. The world had moved a long way since the days of Hitler and Chamberlain—communications had been transformed and information was much fuller—yet the psychological barriers to summitry were much the same.

**The Two-Day Summit** was scheduled to start on Saturday, June 3.107 Khrushchev left Moscow the weekend before. He took a break in Kiev, then traveled by train via Lvov and Bratislava, where he talked with Czechoslovak leaders. He arrived in Vienna at 5 p.m. on Friday, June 2. For Kennedy the preceding week was much less leisurely. He spoke at a dinner in New York on Tuesday, May
30, then flew out on Air Force One, arriving in Paris at 10:30 the following morning. This was the start of an intense two-day state visit to President de Gaulle, for which Kennedy had done as much homework as for his meeting with Khrushchev.

On many matters the two allies did not see eye to eye. From bitter French experience, de Gaulle gave Kennedy a particularly stern warning about becoming entangled in Indochina. But there was immense relief in the American camp that the two men clicked. "For the first time," noted the French ambassador to Washington, "de Gaulle found an American he could talk to." Nevertheless the visit was a huge strain for the president: he often felt at sea in a francophone atmosphere, whereas his bilingual wife was in her element. Both de Gaulle and the French public were charmed by Jackie, so much so that Kennedy introduced himself at a press lunch on June 2 as "the man who accompanied Jacqueline Kennedy to Paris."108

Throughout the visit Kennedy was in acute pain from his back. Whenever possible he took long hot baths in his gold bathtub in the Palais d'Orsay. White House physician Dr. Janet Travell administered injections of procaine into his lower back, as well as a range of assorted drugs to control his diarrhea, insomnia, adrenal insufficiency, urinary infections and other ailments. In addition Kennedy had secretly asked Dr. Max Jacobson—a New York physician whom he had used during the election campaign—to fly to Paris and Vienna. Jacobson's speciality was amphetamines, which he injected daily to keep Kennedy off crutches during his European tour. Bobby was skeptical of Jacobson's remedies (his New York nickname was "Doctor Feelgood") but the president breezily declared: "I don't care if it's horse piss. It works."109 He insisted he would not meet de Gaulle or Khrushchev as a cripple. Back in 1949 Kennedy had criticized a "sick" Roosevelt for his conduct at Yalta; he didn't need the same label being stuck on him at Vienna.

In Paris Kennedy was given final advice about his meeting with Khrushchev. Stand firm on Berlin, said de Gaulle. "That is the best service you can make to the entire world, Russia included." Make it clear that "we are not asking for anything. It is he who seeks a change." The French leader was convinced that the on-off Soviet ultimatums showed Khrushchev was bluffing: "If he had wanted a war over Berlin he would have acted already."111 But Averell Harriman, the veteran Soviet watcher, offered different advice about Khrushchev: "Remember that he's just as scared as you are ... His style will be to attack, and then see if he can get away with it. Laugh about it, don't get into a fight. Rise above it. Have some fun." A memo from Kennedy's speechwriter and confidant Ted Sorensen took a position somewhere between de Gaulle and Harriman. "Do not challenge him in public—for this makes him laugh in front of the crowd ... Watch the translation. If your sentence has an unfriendly opening, his mind may close and refuse to hear the rest." And remember, wrote Sorensen, "Khrushchev is above all a counter-puncher, who will be frustrated and angered by a cold, non-committal [sic] and silent approach, or by issues that are not simply black and white."112

With this contradictory advice swirling around in his mind, Kennedy flew on to Vienna on Saturday, June 3—poring over his briefing papers all the way there.113 He landed at 10:45 a.m. and was met by Dr. Adolf Schär, the Austrian president. Despite the strain, Kennedy was greeted by cheering crowds—again as interested in his wife as himself. Like Paris, Vienna had "a new goddess," wrote Time magazine.114 But a group called Young Europe distributed leaflets with a "warning" from history:

Yalta, 1945: Roosevelt sold East Europe to Stalin.
Vienna, 1961: Kennedy will sell Western Europe to Khrushchev.
Mr. Kennedy—Europe does not forget Yalta.115

Schwechat airport lay to the southeast of Vienna. It was well after noon when Kennedy arrived at the U.S. ambassador's residence in Retzling, on the southwest of the city and Khrushchev was due at 2:45. But there was just time for Dr. Jacobson to administer a quick injection. "This could go on for hours. I can't afford any complications with my back," Kennedy told him.116 As soon as the Soviet motorcade drew up outside, Kennedy—tanked up by excitement and no doubt by the drugs—strode down the steps, apparently the...
model of youthful vitality. Shaking hands, the portly Khrushchev—aged sixty-seven to the president’s forty-three—came up to his chin. As they posed for press photographs, the two men joked about the age gap. When Kennedy mentioned their brief meeting in 1959, Khrushchev, whose memory had apparently improved since talking to Ambassador Thompson in April, recalled telling Senator Kennedy that he had heard of him as “a young and promising man in politics.” Yes, said Kennedy, adding that Khrushchev had also said that he was very youthful in appearance.117

The ambassador’s residence was a stucco villa situated in several acres of grounds. The first day of meetings would take place in the music room, whose glass doors overlooked the garden. The two leaders sat on opposite sides of a coffee table, with an interpreters and advisors on either side. The Americans were Dean Rusk, the secretary of state, Ambassador Thompson, Chip Bohlen and Foy Kohler, assistant secretary of state for European affairs. Flanking Khrushchev were Ambassador Menshikov and Anatoly Dobrynin, chief of the Americas division of the Foreign Ministry.118

After initial pleasantries about their mutual desire for peace, Khrushchev seized the initiative.119 The West, and the United States as its leader, must recognize one fact he said: “Communism exists and has won its right to develop.” Kennedy hit back, arguing that the Soviet Union was trying to eliminate free governments allied to the United States and that this was a matter of “very serious concern” to the United States.

And so the two men launched into an ideological argument, conducted through lengthy speeches that became even more ponderous because of the consecutive translation.

Khrushchev hammered on about the Soviet belief that communism would triumph not by force of arms but as a law of historical development. Just as capitalism had challenged feudalism, so communism was now challenging capitalism. We cannot regard all this as historical inevitability, insisted Kennedy, “our position is that people should have free choice.”

Khrushchev suggested the United States “wanted to build a dam preventing the development of the human mind and conscience,” likening this to the philosophy of the Spanish Inquisition. Kennedy tried again to explain the American positions on historical inevitability and political freedom, emphasizing the danger of “miscalculation” on both sides.

This triggered an explosion from Khrushchev about the way the West kept using this term. It looked as if the United States wanted the Soviet Union to do nothing, sitting “like a schoolboy with his hands on his desk.”

Kennedy tried to explain miscalculation as the “failure to foresee with precision what other countries would do.” He mentioned certain misjudgements” by America, such as “the Cuban situation” and, further back, the failure to anticipate Chinese entry into the Korean War. The object of their meeting, he said, was to obtain a clearer understanding of where both sides were going.120

Khrushchev said he could agree with that. It was virtually their only moment of convergence during the whole morning. And so, after seventy-five minutes, they adjourned at 2 p.m. for a late lunch.

“Is it always like this?” Kennedy whispered to Thompson. “Par for the course” was the light-hearted reply, but privately the ambassador was shaken that Kennedy seemed to be taking one hit after another from the Soviet leader.121 In an effort at rational discussion the president had ended up on the defensive in an ideological argument, even conceding that the Bay of Pigs had been a misjudgment.

Over a lunch of Coquilles de Foie Gras and Beef Wellington, washed down with three fine wines, the conversation was lighter in tone. At one point Khrushchev asked: “How do you get on with Gromyko?”

“All right,” replied Kennedy. “My wife thinks he has a nice smile. Why do you ask?”

“Well,” said Khrushchev, “a lot of people think that Gromyko looks like Nixon.”122

During lunch the president scored a few points of his own. After chatting about Gagarin’s space flight, Kennedy asked why the two countries couldn’t collaborate in a moon mission. Taken off guard, the Soviet leader muttered something about space flight being used for military advantage, but then said: “All right, why not?”123
Kennedy also asked him about the array of medals on his jacket. “This one is the Lenin Peace Prize,” replied Khrushchev, touching his chest with his chin. “I hope you get to keep it,” Kennedy shot back—or so his press office quickly told reporters. As one of Kennedy’s biographers observed: “There were two summits, the private and the public: what was happening and what the world saw and was told was happening. The president was winning in public” but in private the story was rather different.124

After lunch and a stroll around the garden the two men returned to the music room, this time alone except for interpreters.125 Possibly Kennedy had in mind Ambassador Thompson’s suggestion that Khrushchev might be more tractable away from his entourage. But instead of moving on to specifics, such as Laos, Germany and nuclear tests, the president said he wanted to “come back to the general thesis” about historical change. He probably wanted to warn Khrushchev, after his January 6 speech, that Soviet support for wars of “national liberation” could easily escalate through miscalculation into a general crisis. When “systems are in transition” he stated, “we should be careful, particularly today when modern weapons are at hand.” Kennedy again admitted he had “made a misjudgement with regard to the Cuban situation” and reiterated his desire to ensure “greater precision” so that both countries “could survive this period of competition without endangering their national security.”

This time Khrushchev did not flare up but turned Kennedy’s points to his advantage. The president, he said, believed that “when people rise against tyrants, that is a result of Moscow’s activities,” but this was not so. In Iran the people were “so poor that the country has become a volcano and changes are bound to occur sooner or later.” By supporting the shah, the United States generated “adverse feelings” toward itself and “favourable feelings” toward the Soviet Union. Likewise in Cuba, U.S. support for the “oppressive” Batista regime created anti-American feeling, and Kennedy’s attempted landing “only strengthened the revolutionary forces and Castro’s own position.”

The president was back on the defensive, saying that the shah needed to reform and that he personally held no brief for Batista. But Khrushchev warmed to his thesis that “the United States supports old, moribund, reactionary regimes.” Kennedy tried to get back to generalities. A basic American interest was that all peoples should enjoy “free choice” through free elections. But forced by Khrushchev to address the case of Franco’s Spain, where America had military bases and there was no prospect of elections, he said that a second interest was strategic: to maintain regional balances of power. This, added Kennedy, was why the United States was concerned about the growth of China.

Khrushchev exploited that as an opening to attack the United States for supporting Taiwan and blocking the People’s Republic’s aim to its seat at the UN. “What kind of United Nations is it when it does not have among its members a nation numbering 600 million people?”

Moving on around the world, Khrushchev kept Kennedy on the back foot: in the Congo, Angola and Algeria the United States was supporting European colonial powers against the people’s struggles for freedom. The only thing on which the two leaders seemed able to agree was the need for a peaceful settlement in Laos.

The afternoon meeting ended after three and a half hours. Meanwhile Rusk, Gromyko and the diplomats had been discussing disarmament, without much sign of movement. All in all it had been a grimly unproductive day.

Bohlen had advised Kennedy that “ideological topics” and the general threat of communism should “not be dealt with per se but a function of and in relation to Soviet state policy.”126 Instead the president not only allowed himself to get into an ideological debate with a diehard Marxist-Leninist, he kept pursuing that general line of argument—in the afternoon as well as the morning—rather than moving on to specifics. When they had finally turned to world affairs, Khrushchev zeroed in on several embarrassing cases where the United States seemed on the side of reactionary forces opposed to “freedom.” In the process Kennedy conceded that “Sino-Soviet forces” and those of the United States and Western Europe were “more or less in balance”—an important goal of Soviet diplo-
Because of their lengthy debate about generalities, nearly all the big issues were left for discussion on the second day.

Thompson admitted later that "there hadn't been worked out any very clear scenario" in advance for the discussions. He regretted that they had got into ideology, on which Khrushchev could not have yielded even if he wanted to: "I don't think that the president quite appreciated the fact." Bohlen felt that Kennedy "got a little bit out of his depth." As for Khrushchev, according to his aide Oleg Troyanovsky, he returned from the first day's meeting asserting that "this man is very inexperienced, even immature." Compared to Kennedy, he added scathingly, Eisenhower was "a man of intelligence and vision."

The discussions finished at 6:45 p.m.—forty-five minutes late. At 8 p.m. the two leaders and their wives were due at the Schönbrunn Palace, as guests of honor at a formal dinner and concert hosted by the Austrian president. Both men must have been tired; Kennedy in particular was surely in acute pain from his back. There was only a short time for a hot bath and, presumably, another dose of speed from Dr. Feelgood, before the car whisked him off to the palace. He arrived five minutes late and at one point nearly sat on Mrs. Khrushchev's lap when she changed seats abruptly.

The Soviet leader stole the limelight by turning up in a business suit rather than black tie (no bourgeois affectations for him and his comrades). And he spent much of the time chatting up Jackie Kennedy, alternating between far-fetched anecdotes and recitations of Soviet achievements. "Oh, Mr. Chairman, don't bore me with statistics," she exclaimed at one point. During a lecture on the Soviet space effort, Khrushchev mentioned that a dog they had used had now given birth to puppies. "Why don't you send me one?" Jackie asked. Two months later Ambassador Menshikov and two aides arrived at the White House with a terrified dog. How come? asked the president. "I'm afraid I asked Khrushchev for it at Vienna," his wife apologized. "I was just running out of things to say."
U.S. commitments and pledges... If we were to leave West Berlin Europe would have to be abandoned as well.” Khrushchev, for his part, said that Hitler had spoken of Germany’s need for Lebensraum to the Urals; he claimed that some of “Hitler’s generals” were now “high commanders in NATO.”

The Soviet leader also kept bringing up in distorted form inconvenient American statements from the past: at Yalta Roosevelt had said that American troops would stay in Europe only a couple of years and at Geneva Eisenhower had admitted that the situation in Berlin was “abnormal.”

The exchanges also exposed raw emotions. Twice Khrushchev mentioned the twenty million Soviet dead from World War II, one of whom, he added cryptically, was his own son. Mikoyan had also lost a son, he said, and Gromyko two brothers. The president responded quietly that he too had lost a brother in the war. Khrushchev acknowledged that “American mothers mourn their sons just as deeply as Soviet mothers” but made a point of noting factually that the American death toll was 350,000.

Tired and frustrated, the two men began to talk about the danger of open conflict. “If the U.S. wants to start war over Germany let it be so,” said Khrushchev. “A peace treaty denying us our contractual rights is a belligerent act,” Kennedy replied. With the Soviet leader adamant that he would sign a peace treaty with East Germany, the two sides moved into their final lunch.

The Soviets laid on an even grander spread than the Americans; it included caviar, fish pie, chicken and ice cream, lubricated by four choice wines. The tone was lighter than during the formal session, with both leaders toasting the benefits of face-to-face meetings even though, as Khrushchev admitted, “no understanding” had been reached between the two sides.

Kennedy, doubtless keen to get something tangible from the meeting, asked again about a cooperative effort in space. But Khrushchev now withdrew the hesitant approval he had given over lunch on Saturday: a flight to the moon was very expensive, he said. America “should go there first because it is rich and then the Soviet Union will follow.” The president ended his remarks with yet another reference to their relative ages. Last night, he said, he had asked the Soviet leader what post he had occupied at age forty-four. Head of the Moscow Planning Commission, Khrushchev told him. Kennedy said that when he was sixty-seven, Khrushchev’s present age, he hoped to be head of the Boston Planning Commission.

Perhaps head of the Planning Commission of the whole world, Khrushchev interjected—jabbing away right up to the end. No, insisted the president, only Boston.

Lunch was scheduled as the last act of the summit. But at 3:15 p.m. when Kennedy was supposed to leave the Soviet embassy, he asked Khrushchev for a few words in private. They went back upstairs with only their interpreters, and the president reverted to din. This session was “the nut-cutter,” Kennedy recalled later, consciously echoing Khrushchev’s comment that Berlin was the “nuts” of the West.

Of course, said the president, decisions about East Germany were Soviet matter. But the issue of Western access to Berlin deeply affected American interests and he reiterated his hope of avoiding confrontation” between the two governments. Again Kennedy tried to sound firm yet reasonable, but Khrushchev flared up that the U.S. wants to humiliate the USSR and this cannot be accepted.” According to the official American record the final moments of the summit went as follows:

The president said he had gained the impression that “the USSR was presenting him with the alternative of accepting the Soviet act in Berlin or having a face to face confrontation.”

“If the U.S. wants war, that is its problem,” Khrushchev shot back. “It is not the USSR that threatens with war, it is the U.S.” Kennedy retorted that it wasn’t he but Khrushchev who wanted a force a change.

“It is up to the U.S. to decide whether there will be war or peace,” replied the Soviet leader. The decision to sign a peace treaty was “irreversible” and he would do so in December if there was no agreement.

As reported in the American record: “The President concluded the conversation by observing that it would be a cold winter.”
Kennedy had granted a special postsummit interview with James Reston of the *New York Times*, one of America's most influential journalists. This took place at the U.S. embassy a few minutes after his farewell to Khrushchev. The blinds were drawn to help keep the meeting secret from the American press corps. The president, unusually, was wearing a hat and he did not take it off. Slumping into a couch, he tipped the hat over his eyes and heaved a deep sigh.

“Pretty rough?” asked Reston.

“Roughest thing in my life,” Kennedy replied. He told Reston how, knowing Khrushchev's contempt at Eisenhower's reliance on Dulles, he had been determined to talk man to man. He had tried to hold out his hand, saying in effect: “I propose to tell you what I can do, and what I can’t do, what my problems and my possibilities are, and then you can do the same.” Instead Khrushchev had launched a series of violent attacks on the United States, on American imperialism and especially on its policy over Berlin.

I think he did it because of the Bay of Pigs. I think he thought that anyone who was so young and inexperienced as to get into that mess could be taken, and anyone who got into it, and didn’t see it through, had no guts. So he just beat hell out of me. So I’ve got a terrible problem. If he thinks I’m inexperienced and have no guts, until we remove those ideas we won’t get anywhere with him. 139

An hour or so later the Austrian chancellor, Bruno Kreisky, saw Kennedy off at the airport. “The President was very gloomy,” he told Khrushchev later. “He seemed upset and his face had changed.” On Air Force One the mood was silent and depressed. One aide said it was like riding with the losing team after the World Series. 140

In London, Kennedy’s first stop, the formal talks were cancelled and the president poured out his experiences to Macmillan, who found Kennedy “much concerned and even surprised by the almost brutal frankness and confidence of the Soviet leader.” Some of this, reflected the prime minister, was “an act—as always with

Khrushchev.” Nevertheless Kennedy was clearly “shocked.” In a letter to the queen Macmillan said it “reminded me in a way of Lord Halifax or Mr. Neville Chamberlain trying to hold a conversation with Herr Hitler.” 141

While the president rushed to Vienna airport that Sunday afternoon, Pierre Salinger and his Kremlin counterpart, Mikhail Kharlamov, gave a joint briefing to more than a thousand newsmen in the Hofburg press center. Their agreed statement said that the talks had been “useful” but the only concrete subject mentioned was the two leaders’ reaffirmed support for “a neutral and independent Austria.” The White House press secretary declined to use the adjective “fruitful” about the talks, and he ducked a question about whether the world could “breathe more freely now.” 142

It soon became clear that the Soviets were putting a distinctly more positive spin on the meeting than the Americans. Khrushchev spoke of “a very good beginning” and Kharlamov claimed the atmosphere was “equally agreeable” on both days. U.S. sources, in contrast, admitted “tension” during the discussions about Berlin, and Reston’s piece in the *New York Times*—clearly well sourced, though naturally not mentioning that it came from the horse’s mouth—said that “the conference, which started well yesterday, ended in hard controversy today.” Over the next week the American press contrasted Kennedy’s somber postsummit mood with Khrushchev’s return to Moscow in “bubbling good spirits.” On the 6 the Soviet leader sang, danced and played a drum at a sixtieth birthday party for President Sukarno of Indonesia, “fresh from what he obviously considered his diplomatic success in Vienna.” One veteran correspondent said that Khrushchev looked “more ebullient and relaxed” than in years. 143

The Central Committee issued a decree praising Comrade Khrushchev for his “fruitful work” in Vienna and for conducting the talks “with great skill and in an aggressive spirit.” This was given wide circulation among communist and leftist leaders around the world. 144

Kennedy’s radio and television report to the American people on the 6 spoke of “a very full and frank exchange of views” on the
major issues that divided the two countries. It was, he said, “a very sober” two days. Khrushchev had made it clear that “the present test ban negotiations appeared futile.” And on Germany and Berlin, “our most somber talks,” both sides simply set out their divergent positions. But Kennedy represented all this as being in line with expectations: “No major decision was either planned or taken; no spectacular progress was either achieved or pretended.” This kind of “informal exchange,” he said, “may not be as exciting as a full­fledged summit meeting with a fixed agenda and a large corps of advisors, where negotiations are attempted and new agreements sought, but this was not intended to be and was not such a meeting, nor did we plan any future summit meetings at Vienna.” Nevertheless, he continued, the meeting had been “extremely useful”; it was of “immense importance” that he now had a firsthand sense of Khrushchev and that the Soviet leader, in turn, understood the “policies” and the “strength” of the United States. 145

Khrushchev’s post-Vienna broadcast on June 15 was much more positive. Top-level meetings were, he said, “indispensable” because “questions which defy solution through conventional diplomatic channels insistently require meetings between heads of government.” He stated that “on the whole” he was “pleased” with Vienna: “Neither side evaded bringing up and discussing the most acute questions.” Each listened attentively to the other and he particularly felt that Kennedy understood “the great responsibility” for peace that lay with “the governments of two such powerful states.” Reviewing the topics discussed, however, the Soviet leader acknowledged that little progress had been made. He was more blantly propagandist than Kennedy about the reasons; for instance, blaming the deadlock over disarmament on “capitalist monopolies” that were making “huge profits” from the arms race. On Germany he made public the memorandum given to Kennedy, insisted that a peace treaty “must be attained this year,” and warned darkly of the indistinct borderline between cold war and hot war. “Surely it is clear that a cold war is a period of preparation, of accumulating forces for war.” 146

Most of those who met with Kennedy in those first days after Vienna found him shaken and worried. Bobby Kennedy thought it was “the first time the President had ever really come across somebody with whom he couldn’t exchange ideas in a meaningful way.” JFK told a friend it was “like dealing with Dad—all give and no take.” The Munich analogy preyed on his mind. 147

The president’s back pain was now so excruciating that he had to take a complete rest in Florida. On June 8 Salinger had to admit to the press that that president was on crutches; as Kennedy had feared, this news added to the general perception of weakness. While he was in Florida publication of the Soviet memorandum left no doubt that the situation in Berlin was building to a crisis. Kennedy reflected that, after botching the Bay of Pigs and backing down over Laos, he couldn’t afford a third defeat. Yet he was appalled at the possible cost of standing firm. Immediately after arriving back in the White House, he had asked for statistics on how many Americans might die in an all-out nuclear exchange with the Soviets. The Pentagon estimated seventy million—about half the population. And what if one missile got through and landed near a city? Six hundred thousand was the answer. Kennedy reflected that this was comparable to total losses in the American Civil War. “And we haven’t gotten over that in a hundred years.” 148

The president’s top priority after Vienna was to review military planning for a crisis in Berlin. It was clear that this would be a moment of truth for his leadership. 149 Hard-liners in the Pentagon had an eloquent spokesman in Dean Acheson, President Truman’s secretary of state and now head of a special task force on Berlin. He insisted that this had become a test of “resolution” between the superpowers, “the outcome of which will go far to determine the confidence of Europe—indeed, of the world—in the United States.” Until “this conflict of wills” was resolved, any attempt to solve the Berlin issue by negotiation was not merely “a waste of time and energy” but was frankly “dangerous”: talking would reinforce Khrushchev’s perception that America and its allies would not do what is necessary to stop him” getting his way. To change that perception, insisted Acheson, required America being ready to undertake nuclear war if necessary. 150
More moderate policymakers, including Rusk and White House staff Sorensen and Schlesinger, had been scarred by the Bay of Pigs and were now, like the president, very wary of military advice. They believed firmness should be balanced by negotiation, to help Khrushchev back down. The gravity of the refugee crisis in East Germany was belatedly becoming clear to the Americans. During June twenty thousand East Germans crossed into West Berlin, in July thirty thousand. Not only was the flood undermining the East German economy—with mounting labor shortages in the food, building and transport industries—it was also posing a huge problem for the authorities in West Berlin. Desperately the East Germans increased their checks on movement between the two halves of the city and on the autobahn going west; they also established a ring of troops around the whole city. 151

The Berlin "escape hatch" was going to be closed, but how was not clear. Most of official Washington still expected a replay of the past. Perhaps the Soviets would try to seal off the whole city (as in 1948), necessitating military action by air or land to keep open access to West Berlin. Another possibility was that the Soviet crackdown would spark a popular uprising (as in 1953), which could inflame the German question to war fever. Only a few officials, mostly in West Berlin, thought the East German target might be the sector boundary between East and West Berlin, and even these predicted tighter frontier controls rather than a physical barrier. Straws in the wind—such as Ulbricht's bluff assertion at a press conference on June 15 that "nobody has the intention of building a wall"—were lost in the background noise. 152

Although Kennedy shared his staffers' unhappiness with Acheson's hard-line proposals, he agreed that he had to win a battle of wills with Khrushchev. That had been his refrain ever since talking with Reston just after the summit. Still on crutches, he hobbled to the Oval Office on the evening of July 25 to speak over radio and television to the American people, his first such address for nearly six weeks. Berlin, he said, had become "the great testing place of Western courage and will" and "we cannot separate its safety from our own." The president dismissed claims that West Berlin was "militarily untenable." So was Bastogne, he said, "and so, in fact, was Stalingrad," making calculated reference to the iconic American and Soviet sieges of the previous world war. "Any dangerous spot is untenable if men—brave men—will make it so." He announced another three billion dollars for the armed forces (the third supplemental appropriation in four months), increased calls for draftees and reservists, and substantial new spending on civil defense. "We seek peace," Kennedy declared, "but we shall not surrender. That is the central meaning of this crisis." 153

The speech was acclaimed at home: after weeks of apparent drift, Kennedy had reasserted American leadership. And his words seem to have rattled Khrushchev. Before Vienna the Soviet leader had told his Presidium and Czech communists that there was only a 5 percent chance of the West going to war over West Berlin. But when Warsaw Pact leaders convened in Moscow on August 3, he admitted that war was "possible," blaming this on American reactionaries gaining the upper hand over their weak president. 154

The Soviet leader was now backing away from the idea of a separate peace treaty with East Germany, against which Kennedy had weighed at Vienna. Instead he concentrated on solving the Berlin crisis by less inflammatory means. During the Moscow meeting Khrushchev gave Ulbricht the go-ahead for plans to seal East Berlin from West Berlin. He warned him to start with barbed wire, monitoring the Western reaction before proceeding to a concrete wall. 155

The barbed wire went up in the early hours of August 13, with Ulbricht presenting it as a necessary measure to block Western "recruiter" and "saboteurs." There was outrage in West Germany but silence from the White House. In part this was because the president, like his advisors, was surprised by the Soviet solution. More important, Kennedy, though officially pledged to a free and united Germany, could see benefits in this outcome. As he remarked privately, it gave Khrushchev a way out of his predicament, which threatened to destabilize the whole of Central Europe. And, he mused, "a wall is a hell of a lot better than a war." His July 25 speech, with its reiterated commitment to West Berlin, may have
been signalling to Khrushchev that he could have a free hand in his part of the city. 156

The Wall became a propaganda triumph for the West. To those around the world who professed not to understand "what is the great issue between the Free World and the Communist world," Kennedy declared in June 1963: "Let them come to Berlin." 157

Yet in August 1961 Kennedy did not feel triumphant. His reinforcement of West Berlin led to some anxious face-offs, notably between U.S. and Soviet tanks across "Checkpoint Charlie" in October. Moreover West Germans felt betrayed and West Berliners were demoralized. Despite official rhetoric, Kennedy had not stood up for the unity of their country and its historic capital. The mayor of West Berlin, Willy Brandt, wrote later that in August 1961 "a curtain was drawn aside to reveal an empty stage." 158

And although Khrushchev had momentarily lost his nerve—rather like Hitler at Munich—he did not change his reading of Kennedy. The fact that the president had accepted the Wall seemed to confirm his susceptibility to pressure. This reading of events inspired the most dangerous gamble of Khrushchev's reckless career: installing nuclear missiles in Cuba. Although what he called the idea of throwing "a hedgehog down Uncle Sam's pants" did not take shape until the spring of 1962 and its denouement came only in October, it was rooted in Khrushchev's conclusions at Vienna in June 1961. Yet, as over Berlin, Kennedy struck a balance between firmness and provocation: he rejected air strikes on Cuba and his blockade of the island gave Khrushchev time and diplomatic room to remove the missiles. The two superpowers had come eyeball to eyeball and Moscow blinked first. Khrushchev's bluff had been called: he knew that his nuclear arsenal was vastly inferior to Kennedy's—220 warheads compared with about 4,000. Only after the Cuban crisis, as Khrushchev's aide Oleg Troyanovsky recalled, did the Soviet leader stop doubting the president's "will and intellect": at last bullying gave way to the kind of negotiation that Kennedy had hoped for at Vienna. By then, however, it was too late. Khrushchev's colleagues knew he had been humiliated in the missile crisis and this was a major reason for his overthrow in October 1964. 159

The missile crisis dramatized Kennedy's warnings at Vienna about miscalculation. It is therefore interesting that the president took no action during the summit about one very practical proposal that could have helped. Both the U.S. embassy in Moscow and the Soviet embassy in Washington communicated with home in coded cables using commercial telegraph companies. Neither government would permit installation of the huge roof aerials necessary for radio communication, fearful that these could be used for military intelligence eavesdropping. Khrushchev had suggested a phone link between the White House and the Kremlin—what he called a "white telephone"—and in May 1961 a high-level American group, headed by Professor Thomas Schelling of Harvard, concurred. It favored a direct phone line from the State Department to the U.S. embassy in Moscow; this could be used for communication between heads of government in an emergency but without being so designated.

On May 25, 1961, Rusk advised Kennedy to discuss this idea at Vienna, as part of his theme about "the risk of war by miscalculation." But nothing was done, presumably because of the lack of constructive dialogue at the summit. In consequence the climax of the Cuban Missile Crisis had to be settled almost farcically via commercial telegram messages delivered by Western Union bicycleboys or even statements transmitted over Radio Moscow. One positive outcome of the crisis was agreement in June 1963 to install a twenty-four-hour telegraph link between the two centers of government, known as the "hot line" to Americans and the "red line" to the Russians. Neglecting this issue at Vienna had fortunately not proved fatal. 160

There was a much more serious miscalculation on the American side, almost on a par with Khrushchev and Cuba. During Kennedy's surreal meeting with James Reston at the U.S. embassy immediately after the summit, the conversation touched on Vietnam—the crucible of the struggle for Indochina now that Laos had
been settled. Reston recalled Kennedy remarking that “we have a problem in trying to make our power credible, and Vietnam looks like the place.” Subsequently Reston modified his account, claiming that this was his own inference, not Kennedy’s exact words. Historians remain divided about how Kennedy would have handled Vietnam had he not been assassinated in November 1963. Some highlight the president’s recurrent wariness about committing U.S. troops to back the shaky South Vietnam government. “It’s like taking a drink,” Arthur Schlesinger recalled him saying in November 1961. “The effect wears off and you have to take another.” Kennedy kept insisting that the war could only be won by the South Vietnamese. On the other hand, there is no evidence that Kennedy was planning to withdraw from Vietnam. On the contrary, he had increased America’s commitments greatly during his presidency, both in economic aid and through sixteen thousand military “advisors.” He also gave the nod to the overthrow of South Vietnam’s problematic leader, Ngo Dinh Diem, just before his own assassination.

The imponderable question is what Kennedy would have done when the South Vietnamese state crumbled in the winter of 1964–5 in the face of Vietcong guerrillas from within and military offensives from communist North Vietnam. Would he have Americanized the war, through bombing the north and the introduction of combat troops, the policy of his successor Lyndon Johnson? Or would he have sought some kind of negotiated withdrawal? After the successful outcome of the Cuban Missile Crisis, of course, Kennedy enjoyed much greater domestic and international clout than in 1961—far more than LBJ. So perhaps he could have backed away without loss of face. Yet throughout his presidency (and even as a senator), Kennedy had constantly put the spotlight on Vietnam as a test case of America’s will and credibility in the Cold War. Even if he did not say those words to Reston, they encapsulated his attitude. However warily, President Kennedy did treat Vietnam as the place to try to make America’s power credible, and this was in large part because of his need after Vienna to prove he could not be pushed around. At the very least JFK made it much harder for either himself or his successor to pull out of Vietnam. The Vienna summit marked a fateful step into America’s quagmire.

At a strategic level both Kennedy and Khrushchev were ready for summitry in 1961. The Soviet leader had an interest in getting Western approval for the Cold War order in Europe, especially Germany, and this could only be secured, if at all, by a meeting at the highest level. The American president shared Churchill’s conviction that containment was not enough in the nuclear age. Hence his aphorism about it being better to meet at the summit than at the brink, and the declaration in his inaugural that America must not negotiate out of fear but, equally, never fear to negotiate. Tactically, however, neither man was properly prepared for their encounter in Vienna. Kennedy persuaded himself that Khrushchev was a rational leader, susceptible to argument and capable of appreciating Kennedy’s priorities and limits. He failed to grasp the rigidity of Khrushchev’s ideology and the extent of the Soviet dilemma over Berlin. Or to appreciate that Khrushchev was likely to perceive him as being on a par with his own son, Leonid. The Soviet leader still believed, after Cuba and Laos, that Kennedy could be bullied and, somewhat inconsistently, that he was simply a pawn of American capitalists. Both leaders ignored minority voices urging the need to come up with serious policies on issues that mattered to the other side—Mikoyan on testing and Thompson on Berlin. And they also closed their eyes to apparently clear evidence from direct and back channel contacts that they were likely to run into a brick wall if they pressed ahead on their chosen issue. Clear, that is, retrospect. But prior to Vienna each probably believed in his persuasive powers, powers that had got him to the top of his own political tree. Or perhaps when the contradictory evidence became apparent it was, as so often with summitry, too late to turn back.

Kennedy’s health probably weakened his performance at the summit. What we know now about the president’s reliance on a cocktail of medicines is alarming. It has been justly observed that Kennedy was even more promiscuous with drugs than he was with
women. Yet there is no evidence that the medicines per se affected his conduct at Vienna: like the dying Roosevelt at Yalta, his line of approach was clear long before. But the problems that the drugs were used to treat, especially his crippled back, surely contributed to his poor performance; for instance, failing to change tack and get out of the ideological argument on that long first afternoon in Vienna. Nor did it help that he had flown in that morning after a gruelling summit in Paris. On health grounds he probably should have called off the whole European trip after damaging his back in Ottawa. But that would have been abhorrent to the Kennedy self-image and a further loss of face after the Bay of Pigs. At the very least the official schedule should have taken account of his physical limitations, with greater time for recuperation, but the cover-up about them lay at the heart of the Camelot myth.

One might also ask with hindsight whether Kennedy was wise to accept Khrushchev's pressure for an early meeting. Of course the official rhetoric was that Vienna was simply a chance for the two leaders to get acquainted: Chip Bohlen had tied himself in semantic knots trying to avoid the word "summit," insisting that this term should be reserved for full-scale negotiations with formal agendas and phalanxes of advisors. Whatever the rhetoric, however, both leaders came for more than a chat. Indeed it would be almost impossible for any such meeting to avoid the substance of policy. Each hoped for a breakthrough in his key area—nuclear testing for Kennedy and Berlin for Khrushchev—only to be gravely disappointed. After Vienna they insisted in public that the meeting had been beneficial, enabling firsthand contact and frank discussion. Kennedy certainly came away with a powerful conviction of the need to show Khrushchev he could not be pushed around. But that was only necessary because the Soviet leader had succeeded in doing so at Vienna.

Yet one can also make this point more positively. If, as Bobby Kennedy had suggested, the meeting made clear Khrushchev's totally alien mentality, then it did serve an essential purpose for the president. In September 1938 Chamberlain encountered a leader who saw the world in totally different ways, but he persuaded him-
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