Western planes would not be permitted to fly directly into it. They would be required to land and take off at a nearby airfield in East Germany to allow the East Germans to process the passengers and to check the plane's cargo. Plaintively Khrushchev wrote, "[This] cannot be considered as [a] worsening of the conditions of access to West Berlin."

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

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 Khrushchev was in no way renewing the threat he had only recently rescinded.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

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

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

Robert McNamara had originally been supposed to officiate at this public burial of the missile gap, but when a scheduling conflict arose, it was his deputy Gilpatric who delivered the speech before a conference of businessmen in Hot Springs, Virginia. "Our confidence in our ability to deter communist action, or resist communist blackmail, is based upon a sober
appreciation of the relative military power of the two sides. The fact is that
this nation has a nuclear retaliatory force of such lethal power that an enemy
move which brought it into play would be an act of self-destruction on his
part. . . . The number of our nuclear delivery vehicles, tactical as well as strat-
egic, is in the tens of thousands, and, of course, we have more than one war-
head per vehicle."

As the first year of the Kennedy administration came to an end, close
observers noticed a more relaxed president. "It's going better," Kennedy told
friendly journalist Hugh Sidey.4 "We're making a little headway here and there." Oth-
ners were not so modest in their assessment of the shift in the president's for-
tunes. The poet Carl Sandburg, whose signature work was a multivolume study
of Lincoln's war presidency, praised Kennedy's handling of this more recent
national peril. "The way he is doing is almost too good to be true."5

Outside the Fall of 1961 seemed to be the apex of Khrushchev's
personal power. On October 30, on his instruction, the body of his predeces-
sor, Joseph Stalin, had been removed from the Lenin-Stalin Mausoleum.
The carved marble plaque above the doorway now was covered by a cloth sign
reading only Lenin. For the first time it could be said that Khrushchev had
indeed eclipsed Stalin in the pantheon of the gods of communism. Also, at
eleven in the morning on that same day, another star burned brightly for
Khrushchev. At his insistence, Soviet nuclear scientists exploded the largest
nuclear device ever constructed, a fifty-megaton bomb, called the Tsar Bomba, in
the atmosphere over the Arctic island Novaya Zemlya.6 After the Vienna sum-
mmit Khrushchev had ordered the creation and detonation of a superbomb—
originally hoped to be the equivalent of a hundred megatons of TNT—with
the intention of using it to increase the pressure on the United States to wilt
before his Berlin ultimatum.

As it turned out, the Berlin ultimatum was already a dead letter by the time
Khrushchev had his superexplosion. Moreover, though it was a dramatic
piece of political theater, the device was not at all usable as a weapon. The only
Soviet aircraft that could carry it was the slow Tu-95 Bear bomber, which
could have been easily shot down by U.S. air defenses, and the bomb's yield
was so great that if dropped on Central Europe, it would have poisoned the
residents of Eastern Europe.

The distance between the image and reality of Khrushchev's power was
even greater behind the walls of the Kremlin, where his decision to back
down in Berlin had eroded some of his prestige. When Khrushchev's

Kremlin colleagues supported giving Kennedy the ultimatum at the summit,
they had not expected a public retreat on the issue as in 1959. There was now
no outward revolt by members of the Presidium, but Khrushchev understood
that he needed to restore coherence to his Berlin policy.

Khrushchev's critics elsewhere in the Soviet bloc were not as restrained as
those in Moscow. The Chinese had also given their support for the Berlin ulti-
matum on the assumption that the Soviet Union would not back down before
Khrushchev achieved what he wanted. After the Twenty-second Party Congress,
Beijing began to treat him as a weak leader. The East German ambassador
in Vienna remarked at the end of 1961 that the Chinese wondered why
Khrushchev had not shown the same courage as he had in 1956. "In the case of
the Suez aggression," the Chinese believed, "the Soviet ultimatum, which was
taken seriously, scared the imperialists and forced them to stop their aggres-
sion." Khrushchev's retreat this time would "only induce the adversary to even
firmer policies, to greater demands, and to stronger provocations."7

Ironically, it was the Chinese who first exploited Khrushchev's retreat for
their own ends when they quickly repudiated the political approach that
Moscow had brokered with the local Communist parties in Southeast Asia. In
November the Chinese interceded with the Pathet Lao and scuttled an agree-
ment to form a coalition government under the neutralist Souvanna
Phouma.8 Then, a month later, Beijing sent a military delegation to Hanoi for
two weeks, apparently to discuss future military operations in Laos in viola-
tion of the Kennedy-Khrushchev cease-fire.9

What the Chinese failed to grasp, whereas Khrushchev did, was that the
abortive showdown with Kennedy over Berlin and the end of the missile gap
fallacy revealed serious flaws in how Moscow had been managing disagree-
ments with the West since 1955. The use of ultimatums backed by a nuclear
bluff had never been a perfect tactic. In practice it had caused an overreaction
in the American press and the U.S. Congress, which created both the impe-
tus for more defense spending and the suspicions that made real disarm-
ament impossible. Still, in a period in which the Americans doubted their own
power, there had been a chance it might force some political compromises.
Now, however, the Americans seemed to understand that at the very least they
were not behind the Soviets and were perhaps ahead of them. What role
could nuclear bluff play in this kind of international environment?

Passivity in the face of this new balance of power would have been out of
character for Khrushchev. A more cautious leader might have responded to
the new power relationship with the United States and the vulnerabilities in
his own backyard by seeking a temporary strategic respite. A lull in the strug-
In his public statements and later in his memoirs, Nikita Khrushchev did not reveal the story of his reaction to these discouraging shifts in the international power balance. Had he done so, much of his subsequent behavior in the dangerous year of 1962 would not have seemed so mysterious. Only with the release four decades later of the transcript of his remarks to his Kremlin colleagues at a rump meeting of the Presidium on January 8 could one see the thinking that lay behind what would be the greatest risks taken by any leader in the Cold War. The immediate cause was Khrushchev’s disappointment at how the Berlin negotiations were turning out. Six days before this session Andrei Gromyko and U.S. Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson had met to discuss Berlin, and the Soviet foreign minister needed new instructions. All fall Khrushchev had expected new proposals from Kennedy, who had launched a policy review and was consulting with his allies. But when the moment arrived, the administration had nothing newer to offer than an interlude in international politics in 1962. Instead he looked to turn the tactic of the occasional bluff to achieve a specific goal into a medium-term strategy of applying continuous political pressure on Washington and its allies. Convinced that despite their strength, Americans and their president continued to fear war, Khrushchev concluded that he might be able to use these fears as the Lilliputians had used cords to restrain the giant Gulliver in Swift’s book.

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"The enemy is strong." Khrushchev admitted. "[He is] not weaker than we are." The Kremlin leadership sometimes used the less threatening term "adversary" to describe the United States, but on this day Khrushchev was in no mood for such niceties. "That is why he could play the same trump card against us that we were trying to use against him—the position of strength.

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Card." Khrushchev’s confident prediction of May 1961 that he could push the Americans farther than they wanted to go had been proved wrong. Through its handling of the Berlin crisis, the White House had demonstrated to Khrushchev that it was prepared to fight to maintain access to West Berlin. "This is why no one can predict whether this game will end in a war or not. [No one can say any longer]," he said, "that war is impossible, that war is out of the question."

Khrushchev confessed to more than just a misjudgment of U.S. resolve. His strategy had also reflected the expectation that an attractive, liberal capitalist like Kennedy would be both wise and powerful enough to accept a minor retreat over Berlin for the sake of a major détente with Moscow. "Who, as a matter of fact, decides a question like that—agreement or no agreement, and whether to go to the brink, the issue of war versus peace?" Khrushchev asked in his monologue. "Kennedy decides." But this too had proved wrong. Kennedy might want better relations, but Khrushchev had no reason to believe he was willing to do what was necessary to bring them about. Kennedy "lacks authority, moral or political," Khrushchev reluctantly concluded. "This is a young and capable man, it is necessary to give him his due," he added, "but he can neither stand up to the American public, nor can he lead it." Khrushchev now believed that the system, which in his mind meant American plutocrats, militarists, and alarmists, was directing U.S. foreign policy. Kennedy, "himself, is a person of little authority in circles that decide and give direction to the policy of the United States of America. He is of no authority to both Rockefeller and du Pont." Khrushchev did not try to hide his disappointment. "[It is impossible] to say who is better, Eisenhower or Kennedy—[they are] the same shit. . . . Both represent the same class with different shades."

Khrushchev’s first two errors—his mistaken assumptions that the United States would accept his terms and that Kennedy would use his authority to contain the militarists in Washington—were compounded by the fact that the Soviet leader had expected that the Europeans would help him overwhelm American intransigence. He had assumed that Western European fears of war would have canceled out whatever interest they might have had in maintaining the status quo in West Berlin. He recalled saying to the Frenchman Reynaud and the Belgian Spaak, "[H]ere, this is the maximum we can agree to." Instead, to his dismay, he found that the West was unified on the Berlin question.

"[T]hey won’t agree," he discovered, "because all of this is based upon the nonrecognition of any of their rights in West Berlin, upon the nonrecognition
of their rights to have an army there, that our interpretation of free access is completely contradictory to the interpretation and understanding of the West. What they consider to be depriving them of their right to free access, we understand as free access.” Khrushchev’s conclusion was gloomy. “Will they agree to it now?” he asked himself. “No, they won’t agree.”

Although there is no record of any dissension in the room during this performance, there must have been some confusion when Khrushchev revealed that in spite of these hard truths, he wished to continue the drive for an agreement with the West on West Berlin. He had no intention of altering his bottom line in the negotiations—no international corridors; no Western troops in West Berlin; East Berlin to remain part of East Germany; West Berlin to be a neutral, international city—and he was not about to stop pushing for a settlement on these terms. “In a word,” he exhorted the officials before him, “it is now too early to say that we will not win. We should still press on. I take the worst case: They won’t agree. But it means agreeing right now that it will bring nothing. It’s too early. So it’s worthwhile playing this game.”

Khrushchev was not sure how long the Soviet Union would have to play the “game” to win, nor could he offer any suggestion on what self-imposed limits Moscow should observe. After all, he now understood that it was possible to push the United States to war, and he admitted that he did not want war. Nevertheless, Khrushchev believed that there was no hope of that he could get his way in the struggle with America without using pressure tactics.

He then introduced the metaphor of the liquid meniscus to explain the condition of permanent international tension that he now believed was necessary both to preserve and to advance Soviet interests in a world of U.S. strategic superiority: “We should increase the pressure, we must not doze off and, while growing, we should let the opponent feel this growth. But don’t pour the last drop to make the cup overflow; be just like a meniscus, which, according to the laws of surface tension in liquid, is generated in order that the liquid doesn’t pour out past the rim.” The pressure, Khrushchev explained, was not designed to force change but simply to deter the Americans from taking advantage of the Soviet bloc while they remained ahead in the superpower rivalry. “If we don’t have a meniscus,” he said, “we let the enemy live peacefully.”

Acknowledging that the earlier ultimatums had been a mistake, Khrushchev refused to set a deadline for resolving the Berlin problem. He was not about to be trapped by his own rhetoric in 1962 as he had been in 1958 and 1959 and in 1961. Those deadlines had deprived him of tactical flexibility. Instead he wanted to employ Soviet foreign policy to keep the West off balance until Moscow was powerful enough to compel the Americans to give him what he wanted. He was still extremely eager to settle the matter; it just did not make sense to rush into another Berlin ultimatum. “[W]ith each year, our material and spiritual wealth grows as well as our armed forces. Therefore, concentrate on it now or never? Really, is such an issue on the agenda now? No, on the contrary. We don’t have this issue at all, because, if not now, then it will be tomorrow.” Behind this optimism, but left unsaid on this day, was Khrushchev’s confidence that the imminent deployment of the next generation of Soviet intercontinental ballistic missiles, the R-9 and R-16, would do a great deal to alter U.S. appreciations of Soviet power and bring Washington’s arrogance to an end.

The Soviet leader stressed the logic of this new approach: “It is necessary to conduct an aggressive policy, but we need to advance rationally, not to resemble a gambler, in this game, who bets whatever is left in his pocket and then grabs a pistol and shoots himself.” But he understood that it would be perceived as weakness by those in the Soviet bloc, especially the Chinese, who insisted on continuing the ultimatums. “So our friends will blame us and will exploit us regarding this issue. . . . Those who will exploit, they know themselves that they are putting shit in their mouths.” It enraged him that Beijing was now assailing him for his prudence over Berlin. During the Iraqi crisis of 1958, he recalled, Mao had asked him, “What, are you willing to fight?” When Khrushchev said, “No way,” Mao had replied, “Correct, it’s not necessary.” Khrushchev believed that it was Sino-Soviet tension that explained Mao’s current behavior. “If we had good relations right now, then Mao Zedong would write us a friendly letter and would say, ‘Do you want to go to war over West Berlin?’ ‘No way, what the hell do we need that for?’ And he would be right.”

Khrushchev wanted Soviet representatives to needle Beijing about its own lapsed ultimatums in the 1950s regarding the offshore islands Quemoy and Matzu, which remained under Chiang Kai-shek’s control. He also suggested a withering attack on China’s toleration of British control in Hong Kong and Portuguese control in Macao. Khrushchev reminded his audience of Soviet diplomats that the Chinese had time and again resisted using force to eliminate their own West Berlins.

He also proposed the explanation that should be given to the East Germans and those who wondered why the Soviets did not just go ahead and sign a separate German peace treaty. He reminded his audience that the goal of the Berlin strategy was to defend East German sovereignty and Soviet prestige. A treaty that did not resolve questions of access and Western military
presence was of no value. In 1958 he had been eager to declare the end of Western rights in Berlin unilaterally, but he had been persuaded by Mikoyan, among others, that the costs were still too high.

Khrushchev revealed to his audience that he believed that a "final fight on the issue of West Berlin" was inevitable. But he did not want to go down that path until he was sure that the Warsaw Pact countries could withstand the Western economic blockade that he expected would be NATO's first response to a Soviet-East German peace treaty. Hopeful that this fight would not be too much delayed, however, Khrushchev added, "[I]t is necessary to speed up the transformation of the GDR's economy, so that it will be reoriented away from West Germany to the Soviet Union, mainly, and other socialist countries. This is the most important thing."

In the meantime, as part of this new policy of continuous pressure, Khrushchev urged his representatives not to allow the East or the West to assume that Moscow had given up on a Berlin settlement: "Your voice must impress people with its certainty... don't be afraid to bring it to a white heat, otherwise we won't get anything... Because if we were now to start retreating in diplomatic relations... then your talks would be of no use. In your talks you must drive it with the same confidence as we have done so far."

This remarkable political sermon ended with an admonition directed as much to himself as to his foreign policy team in the hall. In a telling phrase, he counseled against allowing Berlin to hijack Soviet foreign policy. "For us, West Berlin is in no way like the drunkard's addiction for alcohol. Let it be that way, please."

It is frustrating not to know what is really going on," Kennedy's chief Soviet watcher, Llewellyn Thompson, could have been on the moon for all his ability to peer inside the Kremlin. His first meeting with Gromyko on this new round of Berlin talks had taken place on January 2, and there had been little to show for it other than a restatement of the basic stumbling blocks. Not that the American had much to offer himself. The reassessment that President Kennedy had ordered in mid-September had taken three months to complete. Despite the call for something novel and potentially interesting to Khrushchev, the process had been a personal embarrassment for Kennedy. After three months of exhaustive and exhausting allied politics, there was little in Thompson's instructions in 1962 that he could not have said on behalf of Dwight Eisenhower in 1958.

The president had discovered that his European allies were not interested in seeing any new thinking on the Western side in the negotiations. West Germany's Adenauer had used his visit to Washington in November to upset any plans Kennedy might have had to offer recognition of an independent West Berlin or of East Germany as inducements for Khrushchev finally to accept the sixteen-year-old Western access routes. Meanwhile de Gaulle refused to support negotiations of any kind. The French president was as sure as ever—and he had made this point to the untested Kennedy before the Vienna summit—that since Khrushchev would not go to war, there was no reason to alter the status quo in the two Germanys. De Gaulle's abstention did not stop allied discussions, especially since Macmillan and the British government shared Washington's eagerness to find a formula that would convince Khrushchev to stop making Berlin the source of international tension. But without active French participation the United States could not be sure if it was negotiating a deal that all the Western occupying powers would accept. These unknowns, coupled with Adenauer's steely opposition, had hampered any creative policy making on the U.S. side. The single new idea that had resulted from the entire process involved a suggestion for an international access authority that would supervise the continuation of Western access to West Berlin after a peace treaty.

On its face, this suggestion was not that imaginative. But the fact that Kennedy was thinking about access after a peace treaty was a hint that he might eventually consider West Berlin a separate entity, a major deviation from the current Western support for leaving things as they were in the German city. Not surprisingly the idea of an international access authority was the only thing that Kennedy had not passed around for allied approval before mentioning it to the Soviets. He raised it in a conversation with Nikita Khrushchev's son-in-law, Aleksei Adzhubei, in late November 1961, infuriating Adenauer when he heard about it later.

Had Llewellyn Thompson known what Khrushchev was saying to his colleagues in January 1962, he would not have been surprised that the Soviet leader assumed that he would have to continue playing the Berlin game to get any interesting Western offers. His defensive tone also would not have surprised Thompson, who was one of the keenest observers of Khrushchev's inferiority complex and had divined the Sino-Soviet problem before most other American Kremlinologists. But what the U.S. Ambassador did not see or could not grasp was that there was little about the Soviet leader's approach to Berlin that was negotiable for him. Khrushchev's bottom line...
was not even close to something the United States could accept without seeming to abandon its commitment to the people of West Berlin. Instead the American ambassador tended to blame his own government for missing opportunities to lower the temperature in Central Europe. In particular, Thompson believed that the administration could have maneuvered Khrushchev onto a less confrontational path when the wall in Berlin had gone up. Compromise of some sort was not out of the question, but as he confided to his friend the former U.S. ambassador to Moscow George Kennan in early January, “the difficulty here is that the Soviets will almost never reveal their side of the bargain first.”

The Thompson-Gromyko negotiations resumed on January 11. Gromyko rejected the international access authority as “violating GDR sovereignty and in effect creating a state within a state.” The Soviet foreign minister also stressed that if Western troops remained after West Berlin became a free city, then Soviet troops would also have to be stationed in the city. In addition, the Soviets demanded for the first time in these negotiations that a future agreement include a series of sweeping guarantees. These included a prohibition on nuclear weapons for both Germanys, border guarantees for East Germany, and a NATO-Warsaw Pact nonaggression treaty. After hearing what Gromyko had to say, Thompson pronounced the meeting “a step backward.”

John Kennedy had the same reaction as his ambassador. The Soviets not only were brushing off his efforts but seemed to be upping the ante. Seeing few other options, the president turned again to his brother’s back channel through Georgi Bolshakov. Not since the tense days at Checkpoint Charlie three months earlier had the Kennedy brothers used this method to get Khrushchev’s personal attention.

Bolshakov and the attorney general met twice in mid-January. Hopes that perhaps Khrushchev just needed a prod from an official higher than Ambassador Thompson were soon dashed. On January 18 Khrushchev used Bolshakov as a messenger boy to deliver a tough note to his U.S. counterpart. “[My] proposals do not make harm to anyone,” argued Khrushchev. Instead it was the U.S. side that was to blame for the stalemate. Khrushchev returned to the theme of power to explain this American intransigence. “The President of the United States has himself said and everybody knows it that now the balance of power is equal. How, then, is it possible proceeding from the equal initial conditions to attempt to conduct a policy of encroachment on the interests of the USSR and its allies—socialist countries? But what the U.S. Government is proposing is aimed precisely against our interests.” At the end of his letter, Khrushchev hinted that if Kennedy did not give him what he wanted, he would force a defeat on Washington: “If on its part the United States does not display an understanding of this, some time will pass and the world will witness that this policy is suffering the same and [an] even greater defeat [than] before.”

There was quite a dissonance between how U.S.-Soviet relations were perceived in Moscow and how the Kennedy brothers thought about the problem. Whereas Khrushchev was saying in the Kremlin that Kennedy and Eisenhower were the “same shit” and held out little hope that words alone could change any U.S. president’s mind, Kennedy still believed that by developing a private connection to the Soviet leader he could lower the temperature of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry.

The days spent discussing Berlin in January 1962 had cemented a bond between Robert Kennedy and Georgi Bolshakov. The attorney general admired the rough-hewn physicality of the spry, squarely built Russian. Bolshakov soon found himself a regular guest at the Kennedy house at Hickory Hill. One such evening, which fellow celebrant journalist Theodore White called a “mad night at Bobby’s,” left no doubt that Bolshakov had entered the charmed circle.

The Kennedys assumed that it was still possible to create such a human relationship with Khrushchev himself. The clan had gotten quite fond of Bolshakov, yet had no reason to believe that Bolshakov was close to Khrushchev, and the president wanted a similarly close connection to someone within Khrushchev’s charmed circle. Aleksei Adzhubei, Khrushchev’s son-in-law, was incontestably close to the Soviet leader. The White House had invited Adzhubei for an interview with the president in September 1961, which the Kremlin had refused. Aleksei Adzhubei, Khrushchev’s son-in-law, was incontestably close to the Soviet leader. The White House had invited Adzhubei for an interview with the president in September 1961, which the Kremlin had delayed until late November, around Thanksgiving, before it took place. In early 1962 Adzhubei was on a lengthy tour to Latin America and could come back for a second visit. Kennedy requested that this be arranged.

As Kennedy prepared to meet Adzhubei, he had more than just his brother’s meetings with Bolshakov and the Thanksgiving visit with Adzhubei to draw upon. One of the lessons that Kennedy thought he had learned at Vienna was the importance of putting himself into the mind of his adversary. He had made a fundamental error in launching an ideological debate with an ideologue on that first day. Kennedy was not doctrinaire by nature, and he was too much of a pragmatist—and too ironic—to be wedded to any ideology. With Adzhubei Kennedy decided he had to try to speak in terms Khrushchev would understand; he would talk about power, interests, respect, and peace.
The president and Mrs. Kennedy invited Adzhubei and his wife, Khrushchev’s daughter Rada, to lunch on January 30, 1962, in the White House. Although Rada Khrushcheva was a linguist who could speak English as well as French fluently, her husband had trouble speaking English. So Bolshakov tagged along as the official Soviet translator. After the lunch and a tour of the mansion, Kennedy and Adzhubei repaired to the Oval Room in the family quarters of the White House for a more intimate conversation. There Kennedy attempted to underline his hope for negotiations on a wide range of subjects in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

The trouble began as soon as Kennedy sought to establish the ground rules for that mutual respect. He wanted the Soviets not only to understand U.S. interests but to respect them. He wanted Khrushchev to accept once and for all that the United States was in West Berlin to stay. The president stressed that access was an issue separate from the freedom of West Berlin, which needed to be assured, and that he could never accept any agreement that forced the removal of U.S. troops or required the presence of Soviet troops in West Berlin. As if this were not enough to raise Khrushchev’s temperature, he then suggested a possible agreement that would freeze the status quo in West Berlin for three to five years.

Kennedy also had something to say about another point of friction between the blocs, words that would provoke Khrushchev when he learned of them. In an effort to evoke his sensitivity to events in Cuba, Kennedy likened U.S. interests on the island to those Khrushchev had in Hungary. He then awkwardly told a story of having asked Allen Dulles—Khrushchev’s bête noire—why the Soviet intervention had been so successful in Hungary while the Bay of Pigs had been a fiasco. “You should learn from the Russians,” Kennedy recalled having said to his DCI. “When they had difficulties in Hungary, they liquified the conflict in three days. . . . But you, Dulles, have never been capable of that.” Comparing Cuba with Hungary was about the most provocative way Kennedy could have chosen to underline his determination to remove an unfriendly regime that was within his sphere of influence.

Then Kennedy offered Adzhubei insight into his personal timetable for doing something about this nearby problem. “If I run for reelection and the Cuban issue remains as it is today,” Kennedy said, “then Cuba will be a major issue in the campaign and we will have to undertake something.” Even more than the Hungarian comment, this assertion upset the Soviet. “This is a sad and alarming statement,” replied Adzhubei. When word reached Khrushchev of this conversation, the president’s comments on West Berlin and Cuba suggested to the Soviet leader that Kennedy felt strong enough to challenge Soviet interests in Europe and the Caribbean and was not about to budge in negotiations.

The Adzhubei meeting ended a monthlong period of mixed signals from the Kremlin. Up to this point Soviet foreign actions, toward either Berlin or any other regional concern, had not uniformly reflected the tough language of the secret meniscus speech. Indeed, throughout the month of January the Soviet Defense and foreign ministries had acted as though the Berlin crisis were finally over. On January 10, for example, the Group of Soviet Forces in Germany brought its alert level down from highest to normal and stopped sending Khrushchev daily reports on the status of U.S. forces and the situation in Berlin. The Foreign Affairs Ministry’s handling of some carping from the East Germans also reflected this assumption about a relaxation of tensions. Ordinarily an East German complaint about something—in January the protest was directed at the use of the autobahn by U.S. Army—would be followed up by a “Me, too!” response from the Soviets. In mid-January they had let the issue slide.

With Adzhubei’s report in hand, Khrushchev decided it was time to pour water to the edge of the wineglass. First he would remind the United States of its vulnerabilities in Central Europe, where the idea of waiting another five years for a solution was repugnant to him. Every week there were approximately six hundred flights along the three air corridors to and from West Berlin. Since 1945 the Soviets had never placed any restrictions on Western use of these corridors. There was a quadripartite Berlin Air Security Control that existed to prevent Soviet and Western aircraft from unintentionally bumping into each other, but the Western allies could fly at will. The challenge began with an unexpected Soviet announcement on February 7 that for three hours the next morning the airspace between three and eight thousand feet in the southern air corridor would be closed to all non-Soviet traffic. The Soviets had never blocked Western use of an air corridor before. Meanwhile they refused to file flight plans for their own planes, as was customary, if not required, and would not assure the safety of any Western flights in the southern corridor at the reserved altitudes. This too was unprecedented. On the advice of General Clay, his personal representative in West Berlin, Kennedy ordered two unarmed military aircraft to fly along the southern air corridor at between five and six thousand feet during the time of the attempted Soviet closure.

On February 8 the Soviets flew L-2 military transports along the southern
air corridor as they had previously warned they would do. On February 9, the Soviet Air Force announced it was closing the northern air corridor as well. On the fourteenth and fifteenth the Soviets reverted to closing only the southern corridor for a limited time. Until February 14 there were no incidents between U.S. and Soviet military aircraft. However, on that day and the next, ten Soviet fighters began buzzing the six U.S. aircraft trying to fly in the southern corridor at the time “reserved” by Moscow.

Walter Ulbricht misunderstood Khrushchev’s strategy. The East German leader interpreted the Soviet harassment of Western aircraft as evidence that the Kremlin was gearing up for another Berlin crisis in 1962. This was good news for Ulbricht, who still believed that his economic and political troubles would be solved if only Moscow would sign a peace treaty with his regime. Since this was not the message Khrushchev had wanted to convey, the East German leader was summoned to the Kremlin for a February 26 meeting.

Khrushchev tried to explain his strategy of maintaining pressure on the West without an ultimatum. He said that he feared that if he tried to sign the treaty now, the result would be a Western economic blockade. Since November 1961 the East German economy had gotten weaker, and it was now absolutely certain that Berlin would not be able to meet its economic targets for 1962. Given the weakness of the East German economy and its reliance on West Germany for industrial inputs—metal pipe, specialty steel, etc.—the effect of Western economic warfare would be disastrous. “We must put pressure to get a peace treaty,” said the Soviet leader. “But we must not put the question in these terms: life or death.”

Despite Khrushchev’s efforts to persuade him to be satisfied with the gains that East Germany had already made since the Berlin Wall went up on August 13, Ulbricht pleaded not to let the wall become an excuse for delaying a peace treaty. “A wide swath of our population,” he said, “is starting to think that the USSR and the GDR . . . cannot fulfill [this promise].” He also made it plain that his own patience had worn thin. “We have already carried out this propaganda [in behalf of signing a peace treaty] for many years. But how much longer will it be?”

In the hopes of triggering a new Soviet ultimatum to the West, Ulbricht suggested that there be a foreign ministers’ conference at the end of the summer to draft the peace treaty. “Even if it were a bad treaty,” he said, “the negotiations would settle the questions of the East German border and its capital.”

Khrushchev was no longer as frank with Ulbricht as he had once been. He did not tell the East German about his new grand strategy to seek to build up Soviet power until he could force a Berlin settlement on the West. Instead he patronized the East German leader, advising him not to allow his country to remain as vulnerable to the West Germans. “Adenauer has you by the short hairs, and he is yanking at them,” he said contemptuously. Khrushchev also underplayed his hopes for a future deal with the West: “I believe that all we can expect from West Berlin we received on August 13. Now our task is to work quietly.”

When Ulbricht did not register satisfaction, Khrushchev stressed that going to the brink now would just deepen the Soviet bloc’s economic difficulties. “It wouldn’t bring war, but you would be the first to come to us with a demand for 100 million dollars, and then would come Gomulka and Novotny,” said Khrushchev referring to the Polish and Czech leaders. At the end of the conversation he hinted that a shift in the correlation of forces lay behind his willingness to wait. “Today we have medium range ballistic missiles that can travel 2,000 kilometers and we are not even building any more of them. [Instead we had accelerated the construction of powerful [intercontinental missiles and next year we will have enough.” Cryptically, Khrushchev concluded by saying, “Our tactic must be to press, then to wait.”

March 1962 brought another uncomfortable reminder for Khrushchev of American power. At a secret meeting with Bolshakov arranged by Robert Kennedy, the White House informed the Kremlin on March 2 that President Kennedy would soon announce a resumption of atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons. Since Khrushchev’s decision to test in the atmosphere in the summer of 1961, Kennedy had ordered the resumption of underground testing but, over the objections of his advisers, had held off resuming atmospheric testing. He believed that atmospheric testing introduced harmful airborne radioactive elements and knew that this testing would subject the United States to international criticism.

“The president sincerely wants to avoid conducting these nuclear tests and wants an agreement on this issue with Premier Khrushchev,” explained Robert Kennedy. Privately the White House wanted Khrushchev to know that these tests did not have to happen. The Kennedys offered Moscow a deal through Bolshakov. In a few hours the president would be telling the world that U.S. testing would resume in the atmosphere on April 15. Robert Kennedy explained that the president was ready to meet with Khrushchev “at any time” to conclude an atmospheric test ban. This partial test ban would not require any form of on-site inspection because national air sensors could easily determine cheating. The attorney general explained that his brother was “eager” to reach an agreement.
Once again President Kennedy’s effort at back channel diplomacy made things worse by angering Khrushchev. The Soviet leader considered this attempt at deal making little more than blackmail and not only refused to consider a partial test ban but canceled the one minor concession on disarmament that he had presented to Kennedy at Vienna. The Soviet delegation at Geneva was told to withdraw the standing offer of two to three on-site inspections a year. Khrushchev even added a personal snub. For two months U.S. and Soviet representatives had been negotiating simultaneous television broadcasts by the two leaders in each other’s country. Khrushchev informed Washington that these broadcasts were incompatible with the spirit of Kennedy’s planned announcement of a nuclear test series in April.

In this period Khrushchev received some highly dramatic information from Soviet military intelligence that stirred fears that the Americans were eager to capitalize on their strategic advantage. The GRU, in two reports dated March 9 and March 11, 1962, reported to the Kremlin that days after the Vienna summit in June 1961, the Pentagon had given serious consideration to a nuclear first strike against the Soviet Union. According to the source, who was described as being in the U.S. national security bureaucracy, what had averted disaster was the U.S. appreciation of Soviet power following the resumption of nuclear testing in September. Alone this intelligence would have been taken as highly doubtful, but in the context of Kremlin anxiety and disappointment over the sterility of both the Berlin negotiations and the disarmament talks, such lurid images of U.S. ambition seemed more plausible.

In his last meeting with Khrushchev before leaving in mid-March for Washington as the Soviet Union’s new ambassador to the United States, Anatoly Dobrynin experienced the heat of the Soviet leader’s personal anger toward Kennedy. Speaking “emotionally and at length,” Khrushchev cited Berlin as the major problem dividing the two superpowers. He followed with a diatribe against Kennedy for seeking to use strategic superiority against the Soviet Union, citing some intermediate-range ballistic missiles that NATO had just deployed in nearby Turkey. The Americans are “particularly arrogant,” concluded Khrushchev.

In February Khrushchev had vented his disappointment with American actions by causing trouble in the Berlin air corridors. In March, though his fighters played that game again for a few days in the middle of the month, his primary effort to needle Kennedy occurred in Southeast Asia. For months the Soviets had been trying to encourage the Pathet Lao and their Chinese and North Vietnamese patrons to give the peace process a chance. But the Asian Communists had been eager to wipe out U.S.-backed Phoumi Nosavan’s garri-

son at Nam Tha, the main town in the northernmost province of the same name. Although lightly inhabited, Nam Tha was next to the principal airfield used by U.S. aircraft to supply Phoumi Nosavan’s forces in the north. Moscow had been unhappy with the plan, which it considered the product of Chinese influence on the Pathet Lao and their main patrons, the North Vietnamese. To head this off, Khrushchev had invited Prince Souphanouvong, the leader of the Pathet Lao, to Moscow to meet with him in January. The Soviet Foreign Ministry, in preparing for this visit, had indicated that the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese had just begun “a series of offensive actions of a counterattacking character against the Boun Oum–Nosavan brigands.”

The Pathet Lao and the Vietnamese had told the Soviets that their operations in Nam Tha Province were designed to compel Phoumi Nosavan to the negotiating table. But Moscow had had its doubts. Officials in the Kremlin had feared that the joint Communist offensive would give Phoumi Nosavan a pretext to end all negotiations with Lao’s neutralist leader, Souvanna Phouma, which in turn would allow the Pathet Lao, the Vietnamese, and the Chinese “to use this as justification for their policy of a military resolution of the Laotian question.” The Soviets had intended to use the summit with Souphanouvong to send Mao the message that regardless of Chinese desires and Chinese dogma, “the USA and the USSR did not intend to go to war in Laos in the name of China.”

The January discussions with the Pathet Lao leader seemed to have the desired effect. The Pathet Lao momentarily backed away from intensifying its military campaign in Nam Tha Province. In early February, Souphanouvong assured Ambassador Aleksandr Abramov in Laos that despite the fact that the capture of Nam Tha could be accomplished in “the course of a few hours” and was “a matter of political prestige,” the Pathet Lao would not do it “in order not to give any cause for a provocation.”

By early March, however, Khrushchev had decided to unleash the Pathet Lao as part of the policy of increasing international pressures on the United States. This was not an official reversal of the policy of peaceful coexistence in Laos; Soviet representatives continued to encourage the Pathet Lao to work toward a coalition government headed by Souvanna Phouma. What changed was that the Soviets stopped lecturing Souphanouvong and his Asian allies on the need to avoid a military clash at Nam Tha. At a summit of the four main Communist parties in the region March 7 to 9, the Soviet representative agreed to turn a blind eye to the ongoing military preparations in northern Laos. The Soviets also agreed to continue the secret support to the Pathet Lao outside what flowed to them as part of an agreement with Souvanna Phouma.
In future conversations with Pathet Lao representatives, Ambassador Abramov abstained from making any comments on the spring offensive that the Pathet Lao, the North Vietnamese, and the Chinese were evidently planning. In return, the Laotians promised that this military campaign would be reasonable. On March 20 Souphanouvong reported to the Soviet ambassador that the Pathet Lao intended to pursue a policy of "active defense" that involved attacks on enemy strongholds in the "liberated areas" of Laos. The Pathet Lao wanted Moscow to understand that these operations were conducted "reasonably, so as not to cause a widening of the military conflict." The next day Abramov flew to Hanoi to tell Ho Chi Minh personally that the Soviets would let the North Vietnamese, the Chinese, and the Pathet Lao determine what practical steps were required in the region.

With Khrushchev stepping back to let the Pathet Lao give the Western-backed forces in Laos a bloody nose, the Chinese proceeded with a deployment of 2,149 soldiers of the People's Liberation Army, 1,772 civilian workers, 203 motor vehicles, and 639 horses and mules to carry military supplies to the Pathet Lao. These men and supplies were to come south from the Chinese military command in Kunming into the province of Nam Tha. Phoumi Nosavan's garrison in the provincial capital had grown to 5,000 men, and the Pathet Lao and its North Vietnamese military advisers believed that the reinforcements from China were required to make the future offensive a success.

The region of the world where Khrushchev did not want to test U.S. power in the spring of 1962 was Latin America and the Caribbean. Kennedy's comments to Khrushchev's son-in-law reawakened concerns that the U.S. government might attempt a second invasion of Cuba. Indeed, by the end of 1961 the United States had resumed a program of covert action against the Castro regime. In late November Robert Kennedy and Richard Goodwin, the chief Latin American adviser in the White House, had successfully lobbied the president for a more active policy against Fidel Castro. Called Operation Mongoose, the program included a range of measures—subversion, espionage, and sabotage—designed to raise the political temperature on the island enough to bring about Castro's removal by coup or counterrevolution.

Soviet intelligence did not pick up the exact details of Mongoose planning, but in February Khrushchev received reports of a more active U.S. program of subversion against Castro that reinforced the impression that Adzhubei had received of Kennedy's determination to solve his Castro problem. While ordering the testing of the Western air corridors and giving the green light to his Asian allies to make trouble in Laos, Khrushchev chose to go on the defensive in Cuba. He revived the $133 million military aid package for Havana that had been frozen in October 1961 and placed it on the Presidium's agenda in early February for rapid approval. He also ordered a review of Soviet military assistance to Castro to determine if more was needed.

The Soviet military review came not a moment too soon. While Khrushchev was distracted by the Berlin crisis of 1961, the Soviet-Cuban relationship had cooled. The held-up aid package was not the only source of tension in that relationship. Castro's efforts to consolidate his power by merging the July 26 Movement and the Cuban Communist Party (PSP) into a united revolutionary front had intensified his rivalry with the old-line Cuban Communists. The PSP and the Fidelistas disagreed over revolutionary strategy. Castro and Che Guevara found the PSP leadership staid and politically irrelevant. Most of them had been hard-line Stalinists that believed that third world countries had to pass through a stage of bourgeois capitalism to achieve communism. Castro could not forget that this type of thinking had discouraged the PSP from supporting his own efforts in the Sierra Maestre in the mid-1950s. As he confided to the KGB chief in Havana, Aleksandr Alekseyev, "With regard to the policy of peaceful coexistence, I am generally not against it, as in the cases of those countries, like Italy and France, where the peaceful path to socialism is possible... But in general in Latin America there aren't the necessary conditions for such an approach." No one personified this theoretical disagreement for Castro more than Anibal Escalante, the principal organizer of the PSP. "Escalante," Castro complained to Alekseyev, "was the leader of those who believed in the peaceful coexistence approach for Latin America." He was also a political threat at home. Escalante may not have been an energetic revolutionary abroad, but in Cuba he was a tireless political worker with grand ambitions for himself in the new Cuban revolutionary front, the Integrated Revolutionary Organizations (ORI). Tired of the theoretical disagreements and threatened by Escalante's ambitions, Castro purged him from the ORI and allowed him to flee the country.

Castro turned against Escalante just as the Soviet military was completing its review of its assistance to Cuba. The Kremlin had had a much longer relationship with Escalante than with Castro, and when relations between these men went from bad to worse in early April 1962, the Kremlin worried about the implications. Moscow had two major concerns. The first was that perhaps under the influence of Che Guevara, who seemed to embrace Mao Zedong's theories of permanent revolution, the Cuban regime might side with China in
the struggle to define socialism. The other was that Cuba might adopt a more independent line in dealing with Moscow, much as Yugoslavia had done.

Besides Castro's handling of Communists at home, the Kremlin had other evidence that April that the Cubans were eager to show their independence of Moscow. While on a long-delayed visit to Moscow, Castro's chief of intelligence, Ramiro Valdés, asked the KGB for assistance in setting up a headquarters in Cuba for training Latin American guerrillas for revolutionary activity in the Western Hemisphere. The Cubans had reason to believe that Moscow might be interested. In August 1961 the Presidium had approved a plan for working with the Cubans and the Nicaraguan Sandinistas to support revolutionary movements. Three months later the KGB authorized the formation of a training center in Honduras to prepare a group that could organize a "partisan detachment on Nicaraguan territory."

Despite what it had already done with the Nicaraguans, the KGB disingenuously told the Cubans in April 1962 that it was merely an intelligence-gathering organization. "We do not help national-liberation movements," Valdés was told.

Without knowing it, the Cubans were probing to the outer limits of the risks Khrushchev was prepared to take even with the meniscus strategy. He was not yet ready to challenge the United States in its own backyard. The Nicaraguan operation was very small—the KGB invested only twenty-five thousand dollars into it between 1961 and 1964—and probably stillborn, whereas what the Cubans had in mind would be more expensive and attract a lot of attention. Khrushchev's Southeast Asian allies were allowed to move on a pro-Western stronghold because the balance of forces favored the Soviet bloc in the border region of Laos. Cuban provocations were a different matter altogether. The United States retained an overwhelming superiority in the Caribbean. Castro's commitment to revolutionary activity seemed suicidal in the light of Kennedy's evident preoccupation with the regime.

The strong case for prudence did not reduce the Kremlin's concern that restraining the Cuban secret services might hurt Soviet-Cuban relations and push some of Castro's inner circle closer to Beijing. To reassure the USSR's position as Cuba's chief socialist ally, Khrushchev moved rapidly to eliminate any doubts that Castro might have about his support. Moscow had permitted Aníbal Escalante to enter the country as an exile, but within a week of his arrival he was denounced in Izvestia for his "sectarianism." Castro, as Khrushchev had hoped, read a translation of this article and was pleased. Meanwhile the Soviets indicated to Havana that they would supplement the September 1961 military package to include Soviet troops, one Sopka shore missile launcher, and ten Il-28 Beagle bombers. The bombers could fly as far as Miami. The amounts of the first two items were not as large as Castro had requested, twenty-five hundred troops instead of ten thousand and only one battery instead of three. However, the gesture was designed to ensure that Castro knew that the Soviet Union would not interfere in his internal political affairs. A Soviet general was sent to Havana to discuss the regime's further military needs.

In early May Khrushchev received very discouraging military and economic information that threatened his entire foreign strategy. When he made his secret announcement in the Kremlin in January 1962, he believed that Moscow would not have to wait a long time to be strong enough to force a Berlin settlement on the United States and then agreements banning nuclear tests, achieving disarmament and perhaps a superpower nonaggression pact. Indeed, in February he had hinted to Walter Ulbricht that the corner would be turned in the peace treaty and Berlin campaigns in 1963.

Bad news about the status of work on the R-9 and R-16 long-range nuclear missile programs reached Khrushchev in the late winter. Although flight testing of the R-16 was on schedule, it was a major disappointment. The missile had been designed to provide the Soviet Union with a reliable second-strike capability in the event the United States launched a first strike. But the device turned out to be so primitive that unless the Soviets were planning to be the first to launch nuclear-tipped missiles—and in the Khrushchev period there were never enough missiles to make this feasible—the weapon was useless. In February 1962, Khrushchev had been told that the R-16 was no match for the second-generation U.S. missile system, the Minuteman, the first of which was due to be deployed sometime in 1962. Soviet commanders needed a few hours to prepare a missile for launch, whereas the U.S. rocket could be prepared for launch in a few minutes. "Before we managed to move the R-16 and lift it into place, nothing would be left of us," Khrushchev was told by the chief of his rocket forces.

The R-16's main weakness was the volatility of its fuel. Khrushchev's protégé Marshal Mitrofan Nedelin, the first chief of the new Soviet strategic rocket forces, was one of a hundred technicians and observers who had died in October 1960, when an R-16 caught fire and exploded during a prelaunch sequence. The fuel in the R-16 was also highly corrosive. Once a missile was fueled it had to be either used immediately or drained of its contents within a
few days and sent back to the factory for cleaning and recalibration. The U.S. Minuteman, however, was powered by solid fuels that allowed the missile to be deployed in a ready position for years. The progress reports on the R-9, the R-16’s competition to be the next generation of Soviet ICBM, were even worse. Flight tests of this rocket were turning up a series of flaws.57

Quantitative comparisons were no kinder to the Soviets. The first of a few dozen R-16s were deployed in early 1962. The R-9 was not yet near deployment. In 1962, however, the U.S. ICBM deployments began to reflect the earlier overreaction to the missile gap scare. Between the fall of 1961 and the spring of 1962 the number of U.S. ICBMs more than doubled, from thirty to seventy-five. From published reports the Soviets could know that by the end of the year the U.S. arsenal, with the addition of the first Minuteman missiles, would grow to more than two hundred ICBMs. Deployment of the Minuteman system, the greatest strategic threat to Soviets, was due to begin in the fall. There was talk of eventually deploying a thousand of these solid-fuel monsters.

Meanwhile Khrushchev was also given disappointing economic news. The spring of each year brought the start of the Soviet government’s budgetary cycle. Between March and the summer government planners would work with members of the Presidium to come up with the actual production numbers that would be presented to the entire Central Committee at the fall plenum as the basis for future planned production. Record keeping was never very good in the Soviet Union, but in 1962 the figures Khrushchev received indicated agricultural and industrial shortfalls. The statistics were so bad that the Kremlin had to consider raising consumer prices on domestic staples, a move never before attempted in the Khrushchev era. As if this were not enough, recent wage increases were also proving difficult to sustain.

In light of this economic shortfall, Khrushchev ordered his three top economic advisers—Frol Kozlov, Aleksei Kosygin, and Anastas Mikoyan—to review the figures for defense spending for the coming year to see if they could cut more than three billion rubles—roughly three billion U.S. dollars from defense appropriations.58 Despite Khrushchev’s belief in the nuclear missile as an equalizer of international relations, he had never agreed with those who just wanted more of them. In 1959 he had scaled down requests for launchpads because of the cost of each one, and he was prepared to make the same call again in 1962 if necessary to protect his domestic economic agenda.

The tension with the United States in Laos, Berlin, and Cuba was placing an even greater burden on the Soviet economy. This was preventing Khrushchev from reducing the workweek as he had hoped to and from increasing capital investments in agriculture and industry. His instinct was to do all he could to assist his socialist allies, but he could no longer escape the costs of these efforts.59

Evidently amid this torrent of domestic disappointments Khrushchev asked Malinovsky in April if there was a cheaper shortcut to becoming competitive with the Americans in ICBMs. Khrushchev was convinced that there was enormous waste in the Soviet missile program, and he could no longer predict when Soviet industry and science would produce the nuclear deterrent he craved.60 The timing of this discussion remains vague. But it may have been prompted by news about changes in the U.S. nuclear forces. Khrushchev received weekly surveys from Malinovsky of the status of deployed U.S. forces. On April 20, 1962, the first eighteen of fifty-four U.S. Titan missiles, a first-generation ICBM, were being deployed in Colorado. Meanwhile the United States was continuing its deployment, begun in 1961, of intermediate-range Jupiter missiles pointed at Moscow, thirty in Italy and fifteen in Turkey.61

“What about putting one of our hedgehogs down the Americans’ trousers?” Khrushchev reportedly asked Malinovsky.62 The hedgehog was a Soviet nuclear missile, and by “down the Americans’ trousers,” Khrushchev meant in the Caribbean. At some point in the winter of 1962 the ever-creative Khrushchev connected the two ideas of Soviet military assistance for Cuban defense and the strategic advantages for the Soviet Union of Cuba’s location. Why could it not become Moscow’s Italy or Turkey? Malinovsky responded that though it was a sound idea from the military point of view, a significant political decision would be required to put a nuclear hedgehog off the coast of Florida. Khrushchev asked that for the time being Malinovsky gather a small group to consider how one might implement this idea.63 Khrushchev had not yet made up his mind whether to take the huge risk of putting missiles in Cuba, though the idea did appeal to his love of bold improvisation.

The Pathet Lao, the Chinese, and the Vietnamese launched their much-anticipated spring offensive on May 6. As the Kremlin had hoped, it was a rout. Within a matter of days General Phoumi Nosavan’s garrison in Nam Tha collapsed. Phoumi had inadvisedly deployed six thousand men inside a natural basin formed by a mountain range, a perfect setting for an ambush. Once the combined Vietnamese and Pathet Lao force surrounded the position, Phoumi and his generals fled, causing their American advisers to rate their military effectiveness as “nil.” Ultimately the entire garrison retreated as
far away as it could get from the battlefield. In the polite words of American observers, it was a retreat that could be characterized as “far outdistancing any pursuit.”

As Prince Souphanouvong had predicted in trying to sell the operation to the Soviets, the seizure of Nam Tha completely altered the balance of power in the field. The Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese now controlled all of eastern Laos from north to south. The CIA estimated that the Pathet Lao had the strength to launch Nam Tha–like offensives to capture the remaining major centers in the interior. In fact U.S. intelligence believed that though Phoumi Nosavan’s forces outnumbered the Pathet Lao and Souvanna’s forces two to one, they were still no match for them, and the whole of Laos could come under Pathet Lao control within two weeks. The presence of North Vietnamese forces made the difference. In the words of the CIA, the North Vietnamese were “superior” fighters who “press home coordinated attacks with great skill and disregard for losses.” All that was holding them back was uncertainty over the possible U.S. reaction.

No one in the Kennedy White House advocated a wait and see attitude. From the sidelines former President Eisenhower still believed that control of Laos was the key to saving South Vietnam and Thailand from Communist domination. But he did not want any U.S. troops to be sent to Laos and promised his successor not to make any such public appeal. Instead he counseled Kennedy to put more troops into Thailand and South Vietnam to stiffen backs in Bangkok and Saigon and to free up the Thais and the South Vietnamese to engage in operational activity in Laos.

It was a relief for Kennedy to hear that Eisenhower would not publicly or privately advocate putting U.S. troops into Laos. He did not want to do it either. However, like his predecessor, Kennedy believed that a show of strength was necessary to have any chance of deterring the Communists from continuing their offensive. On May 14 he ordered eighteen hundred marines plus two air squadrons, one marine and one air force, to land in Thailand the next morning. Within two weeks there would be between five and six thousand U.S. troops in Thailand. Kennedy hoped that these troops would lead the Kremlin and its Asian allies to seek a cease-fire.

Khrushchev received news of the U.S. move into Thailand just after arriving in Bulgaria for a routine visit to a socialist ally. The Soviet military reported that eighteen hundred U.S. marines, supported by twenty attack planes and twenty helicopters, had landed in Thailand May 16 and 17. Besides this contingent, which was between thirty-five and fifty miles from the Laotian border, the Soviets reported on another group of twelve hundred U.S. troops that had stayed on in Thailand after recent maneuvers and was about thirty-five miles from the border. Just south of the Thai capital of Bangkok, Soviet intelligence detected a U.S. air group consisting of twenty-five fighters, some transports, and a refueling plane.

The arrival of more U.S. soldiers in Southeast Asia was exactly what Khrushchev had hoped to avoid. That he had turned a blind eye to the Nam Tha operation did not mean he had forgotten his long-standing assessment of the dangers in the region. He had consistently disagreed with the Chinese over the balance of power there. While Chinese representatives, seconding the public fears of capitalist enemies, spoke of a series of dominoes that would fall from Laos to Malaysia if the senior Communist parties gave a hard enough push, Khrushchev believed that U.S. military power, if allowed to operate unchecked in Southeast Asia, would carry the day. Given that the Pathet Lao and its allies were already outnumbered by Phoumi Nosavan’s forces, this American force could easily tip the balance in favor of the rightists.

Khrushchev sent word to Moscow on May 17 to arrange contact with the Kennedy brothers. Concerned that the U.S. deployment to Thailand was just the beginning, he reverted to the Bolshakov back channel to explain to President Kennedy that he was not behind the assault on Nam Tha. “The trouble in Nam Tha,” Bolshakov was to explain to Robert Kennedy, “was really isolated and brought about by people in the area who got fed up with Phoumi’s troops. This is as far as it is going.” Bolshakov was to convey the personal message from Khrushchev that he still stood by their Vienna agreement to achieve a peaceful, neutral Laos.

The need for this urgent message to prevent a larger U.S. intervention was deeply humiliating to Khrushchev. Kennedy’s rapid projection of additional military might into Southeast Asia in May 1962, however minor, was one reminder too many of the unfavorable balance of power and its consequences for Soviet policy. Never a patient man, Khrushchev found his frustration at these international realities nearing a breaking point. Already in March, while complaining about U.S. power to Anatoly Dobrynin, Khrushchev had vowed, “It’s high time their long arms were cut shorter.”

The day he found out about the U.S. move into Thailand, Khrushchev spoke publicly about the role of force in U.S. foreign policy, “What logic can imperialism call upon? Only the logic of strength; and with that logic as their guide, they are trying to pursue the position-of-strength policy. The late Dulles was very frank about this.”

At his last Presidium meeting before leaving for Bulgaria Khrushchev had participated in yet another discussion of the lack of progress of Soviet strategic
The issue was still on his mind. So too was the idea he had kicked around with Malinovsky in April about perhaps using Cuba as a shortcut to a stronger strategic position in the superpower arms race. Just before Khrushchev flew to Bulgaria, he had signed a letter to Castro laying out the panoply of Soviet military assistance that would be coming to the island over the next year or two. Moscow, which did not anticipate a U.S. attack in 1962, sought to prepare Castro for any U.S. provocations in the runup to Kennedy’s expected reelection campaign in 1964.

When he received the news about Laos, Khrushchev began rethinking his entire approach for 1962. Perhaps it was the time to act. Perhaps he should not wait until 1963 to press for a settlement that would solve the German tangle, relieve his domestic economic pressures, and eliminate his military vulnerabilities in the third world, especially in Cuba. “I paced back and forth,” he later recalled, “brooding over what to do.” Khrushchev, who kept this “private agony” to himself, was tired of leading a second-ranked power, always concerned that its initiatives would be thwarted by the stronger superpower. Cuba became the funnel through which Khrushchev’s various frustrations flowed. In Bulgaria the idea for using Cuba as a nuclear ballistic missile base, as a strategic stopgap, ripened. “The Americans had surrounded our country with military bases and threatened us with nuclear weapons,” Khrushchev later said in explaining his thinking at the time, “and now they would learn just what it feels like to have enemy missiles pointing at you; we’d be doing nothing more than giving them a little of their own medicine.”

Had Kennedy not sent troops to Southeast Asia in response to the capture of Nam Tha, would Khrushchev have still decided to take the risky step of sending missiles to Cuba? It is impossible to know with certainty, but it is likely that the Cuban solution was too good an idea for the impatient and disappointment-averse Khrushchev to resist for long. By 1962 Khrushchev was in a strategic bind largely of his own creation. He had based Soviet military strategy since 1959 on the acquisition of nuclear weapons. The program for developing those weapons had been slower and more costly than expected, and he refused to pour even more money down what looked to be a black hole. At the same time, he had opted to flex what muscle he had to achieve changes in the status quo in Central Europe. The fact that the United States called his bluff in 1958 and again in 1961 made him appear vulnerable to his Communist allies, especially East Germany and China. In 1962 his lingering vulnerability after the Berlin crisis of the previous year, coupled with his inherent impatience and the ambitions of his chief foreign rivals for international influence, Kennedy and Mao, emboldened him to take additional risks.

Khrushchev worked quickly once he returned home on May 20. He shared his Cuban missile idea with Gromyko on the flight back and had instructions sent to Malinovsky so that he would be ready to support the idea at a formal Presidium meeting the next day. He also conferred with Mikoyan, who was characteristically unhappy with this latest Khrushchevian scheme. Mikoyan assured Khrushchev that the Americans would never accept Soviet missiles in Cuba. Mikoyan, who had been to the island, was very fond of the young Cuban revolutionaries, but Khrushchev’s idea was potentially self-defeating. “We have to defend Cuba,” Mikoyan told the Soviet leader, “but with this approach we risk provoking an attack on them and losing everything.”

Less than twenty-four hours after his return, Khrushchev formally presented his scheme to the Presidium for approval. He had a full house. In addition to the twelve members of the Presidium, Malinovsky, Gromyko, some Central Committee secretaries, and the chief of Soviet strategic rocket forces, Marshal Sergei Biryuzov, all were in attendance. The release of additional Presidium materials in 2003 revealed for the first time how Khrushchev formally explained his idea that day. To second-tier officials, Khrushchev later emphasized the altruism of this scheme. He claimed to be purely motivated by the defense needs of Cuba. But in front of his colleagues, he said, “This will be an offensive policy.” Although hinged on Castro’s need to deter U.S. aggression, it was designed to do much more for the Soviet Union. Khrushchev in January he had spoken confidently of the growth in Soviet power that by 1963 would force the United States to accommodate Moscow’s perceived needs in Central Europe and elsewhere. The Cuba ploy would ensure that this necessary change in the balance of power occurred.

Khrushchev, who explained that the missiles would have to be delivered secretly, assumed that the United States would not willingly accept this change in the balance of power. Although it is not known when he originally expected to reveal this change to the world, in outlining his idea, he explained that he would reveal the presence of the missiles in Cuba only after their deployment. He left the timetable of deployment to Malinovsky and Biryuzov, and assured Khrushchev that the Americans would never accept Soviet missiles in Cuba. Mikoyan, who had been to the island, was very fond of the young Cuban revolutionaries, but Khrushchev’s idea was potentially self-defeating. “We have to defend Cuba,” Mikoyan told the Soviet leader, “but with this approach we risk provoking an attack on them and losing everything.”

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believed that the scheme was dangerous. It is unclear how many shared this view, though Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko later said that he harbored similar concerns. Khrushchev’s principal sparring partner opposed sending not only the missiles but also Soviet troops to Cuba. Seeing that his proposal was in trouble, Khrushchev halted the meeting and asked for a recess. 83

Three days later they gathered again in formal session to consider the proposal. Khrushchev had used the intervening days to rally support. Malinovsky had also used the time to generate a plan of action to show the Presidium how the operation might work. Eleven members of the Presidium, Malinovsky, and Gromyko spoke at this meeting. Whatever misgivings there might have been were not in evidence on May 24. The vote was unanimous. Even Mikoyan was recorded as speaking in favor of the plan. 83

The only realistic obstacle to the missile plan that remained was Fidel Castro. The Cubans, who assumed that conventional weapons and a solemn defense commitment from Moscow would be enough to hold off the United States, had not asked for any nuclear weapons.

When Aleksandr Alekseyev, the KGB resident who was to become Moscow’s new ambassador to Havana, was told about the plan, he warned Khrushchev that Castro “[would] be scared” and doubted the Cuban leader would take the missiles. 84 Alekseyev’s pessimism annoyed the Soviet defense minister, who had been mulling over the idea for nearly two months. “How could your celebrated socialist Cuba not take the missiles?” screamed Malinovsky, “I fought in bourgeois-democratic Spain, and they openly took our weapons, but Cuba, socialist Cuba, which has an even greater need to take them ... how could they not?” 85 Despite Malinovsky’s passion, Alekseyev, who understood the Castro regime better than any other Soviet official, was listened to. The Presidium decided not to implement its approved plan before receiving Castro’s agreement.

Khrushchev also explained that if the Cubans accepted his offer, he intended to keep the operation a secret until after the November 6 congressional elections in the United States. The American people were hawkish, and he would not want to give Kennedy an excuse to respond aggressively to the missiles. Once the missiles were in place and the elections were over, he intended to travel to the United States to reveal the existence of the missiles and to talk to Kennedy. Then he would visit Cuba to sign a defense agreement with Fidel Castro. This was his plan. But first he needed to know if Castro would accept the nuclear weapons.