

Deterrence in American
Foreign Policy:
Theory and Practice

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For my daughter Mary
—A.L.G.

To the memory of my father
— R . S .

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Chapter 13

The Berlin Deadline Crisis, 1958-1959

Resume of the Crisis

FOR ALMOST TEN YEARS following the lifting of the Berlin blockade in the spring of 1949 there was no major Berlin crisis. But the city remained the symbol of, and a main crucible for, the ongoing Cold War: a topic of frequent abortive negotiations with the Soviets, the scene of recurrent Soviet harassment of Western access rights, and the starting point of all the most plausible scenarios of how a major war could begin.

In the summer and fall of 1957, the USSR demonstrated new missile and rocket capabilities, one reply to which was a NATO plan, adopted in December 1957, for stationing intermediate range strategic missiles in Europe, with nuclear warheads under American control. The Middle Eastern and Quemoy crises postponed an effective Soviet response, but in the autumn of 1958 the Kremlin's attention returned to its western front, where nuclear-armed missiles were soon to be installed on German territory for the first time.

On November 10, Khrushchev made a speech in Moscow denouncing the "remilitarization" of West Germany. Possibly

on the spur of the moment but more probably by plan, he added that "the time had obviously arrived" for East Germany to take over control of access to Berlin. An apparently clear implication was the threat of a new blockade.

Neither the United States nor the other NATO powers took any public notice of this initiative for two weeks, and on November 27 the USSR sent identical notes to the three Western occupying powers of Berlin and to Bonn proposing "negotiations" to convert West Berlin into a "free city" under terms that would put it substantially under East German control. If "half a year" passed without reaching "an adequate agreement," then the Soviet Union would turn over to East Germany control of access to the city. The note thus contained all three elements of the classical ultimatum: a demand upon the recipient powers, a time limit for the fulfillment of the demand, and a threat of sanctions in the event of nonfulfillment.

However the note was also somewhat ambiguous, seeming to imply at another point that the six-month deadline might refer to the *start* of negotiations; and the same interpretation was given privately by Khrushchev two days later and publicly by Deputy Premier Mikoyan in January. Subsequently, the Soviets backed further and further away from any attempt to execute an ultimatum.

Despite the receipt of considerable warning, the United States took no steps prior to receiving the deadline note to reinforce its deterrent posture in Berlin. Secretary of State Dulles chose to react flexibly and in a somewhat conciliatory manner both to the warning and to the note itself. Later, the Soviet challenge became diluted in a maze of diplomatic messages, public declarations, and private discussions throughout the winter and spring; and, ultimately, the Kremlin agreed to postpone discussing the central Berlin issues until a Summit Conference scheduled for 1960. When this conference collapsed, however, the Soviets made it clear that they awaited only the election of a new American president before reopening the crisis.

The General Structure of the Deterrent Situation

The Berlin blockade of 1948-1949 had served to create a firm U.S. commitment to the security of West Berlin, which commitment the intervening ten years, with their occasional Soviet probes, had only strengthened. In this period NATO was created and formidable forces gathered under an American general; NATO, too, had a commitment to West Berlin.¹ Within the city itself, French, British, and American garrisons not only remained but were if anything somewhat stronger than before.

From a strictly military viewpoint, of course, West Berlin represented a liability rather than an asset, and presented no advantages for the defense of the NATO powers. But from a wider diplomatic and political viewpoint, the defense of Berlin was perceived in Washington and in other NATO capitals as critical to the alliance and to the general position of the West. With the successful Berlin blockade, the city had become the symbol of the Cold War, and its citizens the symbol of the determination of the Western democracies to resist and contain encroachments by the Soviet Union and by communism generally. It was assumed in Washington and other Western capitals that to withdraw, particularly under Soviet pressure, would have an enormously demoralizing effect upon NATO and upon the West as a whole, would suggest the prospect of further withdrawals, and might positively encourage Soviet aggression. It would also have generated a major political crisis within West Germany. Accordingly, the United States and its NATO allies were highly motivated to defend their position and rights in Berlin and to deter any Soviet assault upon them.

In placing such a high valuation upon this object of policy, the decision-makers of the United States, in particular, perceived somewhat fewer constraints on the exercise of deterrence than had pertained elsewhere. Domestic opinion firmly

¹ Stanley, *NATO in Transition*, p. 301.

supported a defense of West Berlin, and on this issue the United States' Atlantic allies could be counted upon. While there were some differences in viewpoint among various members of NATO, it was clear that in this case their interests were strongly engaged (unlike some Far Eastern cases) and were fundamentally in parallel (unlike some Middle Eastern cases). Aside from manageable "alliance politics" constraints, therefore, the principal limits to U.S. policy for Berlin seemed to be those arising from its awkward geography and the ambiguity of the Western position in World War II documents.

A policy seemed required because U.S. decision-makers perceived a real and potentially serious threat to the Western position. For it was clear from their past behavior there, from their declaratory policies, and from their foreign policy in general that the Soviets were highly motivated to gain complete control of Berlin. (Therefore, the general deterrent situation surrounding Berlin, at least in the period of 1958-1962, was the by no means common one of a highly motivated defending power attempting a deterrence policy vis-a-vis a highly motivated initiating power.) A variety of options seemed available to the Soviets, ranging from small "salami" tactics to a large-scale military *coup de main*. Geography gave the Soviets a number of situational advantages, and they maintained quite overwhelming forces in the vicinity of the city.

The perception in Washington of the specific policy problem, therefore, was that deterrence would be difficult but not impossible. Certainly it would be impossible to defend West Berlin using purely local, conventional forces, and hence pointless to rest any deterrence attempt on the threat to do so. (The West Berlin garrisons were intended to be just large enough to force the Soviets to resort to large-scale military action, and hence a completely unambiguous action, to take over the city quickly. Later this would be termed the "trip-wire" or "plate glass" function of the garrisons.) Washington policy-makers instead relied for deterrence on a very strong declaratory policy that consistently emphasized the unwavering U.S. commitment to West Berlin, backed in a general way by the power of NATO

and the U.S. strategic arsenal. Under its general doctrine of Massive Retaliation, the United States systematically threatened to launch strategic warfare if the USSR aggressed against the containment line, which most definitely ran through West Berlin. Whether or not this was fully credible, the Soviet Union at least had to consider the probability of a major NATO ground thrust to Berlin from West Germany in the event the city was seized. Such action would lead either to an ignominious Soviet backdown or to a major European conflict, one that could not reliably be prevented from escalating to attacks upon the USSR itself.

The consequences of a clear and distinct violation of the manifest deterrence commitment were sufficiently obvious and sufficiently grave that U.S. decision-makers felt reasonably confident that the Soviets would not make such a major miscalculation. What concerned them more were the possible, less clear violations: lower-level Soviet options, exploiting by a new blockade or other coercive action the asymmetries inherent in the geographical situation to block or seriously impair Western access rights to Berlin. Throughout the 1950s there were "innumerable meetings" in Washington, often attended by the President, where decision-makers "examined against the possibility of future emergency, methods of support" for the city.²

Western policy-makers were proven correct in their estimate that the Soviets might be highly motivated to find a challenge to the West in Berlin. In 1948-1949 the USSR had been prevented by the United States' quite unexpected airlift capabilities from forcing the West to choose between remaining in Berlin and going ahead with plans for the creation of an independent West Germany. The intervening years had seen not only the consolidation of the Federal Republic but also its rearmament and its inclusion in NATO. Simultaneously, West Berlin itself was increasingly a "bone in the throat," as Khrushchev termed it. The city was a haven, and as it prospered more than East Berlin, a magnet, for East Germans fleeing to the West. By the fall of

² Eisenhower, *The White House Years*, p. 336.

1958 some ten thousand arrived in West Berlin every month. In the Soviet view the city was a center for Western espionage and "subversive activities." The maintenance of Western troops—and institutions and media—over a hundred miles within Warsaw Pact borders was a continuing obstacle to the consolidation of Soviet control over Eastern Europe.

Accordingly, throughout this period Soviet foreign policy held as a maximum objective the detachment of West Germany from the Western camp—a novel version of this was proposed again later in the "deadline crisis"—and as a minimal, highly valued objective the removal of the West from all Berlin. But a policy reaching toward these objectives was stymied for some eight years by the firm American commitment to its position in Berlin, backed by clear U.S. strategic superiority.

During 1957, however, there was a development in the overall strategic balance which both gave the USSR an opportunity to activate its Berlin policy and heightened its motivation to do so. The Soviet demonstration of long-range missile and space-satellite capabilities during the latter half of that year gave Khrushchev the opportunity for publicly claiming, as he was to do consistently for the next four years, that the balance in strategic weapons had shifted sharply, even decisively, toward the Soviet Union. In Soviet declaratory policy—and also in Soviet strategic doctrine—such a shift logically implied and required a shift in the general politico-diplomatic balance of power, and the place where the Soviet Union proposed to collect its due was Berlin.

This Soviet declaratory position (and to some degree genuine belief) was to be the vehicle for a determined Soviet diplomatic offensive against West Berlin, which waxed and waned but did not stop for over four years. Indeed the deadline crisis of 1958-1959 and the crisis of 1961 can usefully be seen as all a single tapestry, a long duel over Berlin which did not fade away until, during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, the United States again asserted its superiority in strategic weapons.

Khrushchev declared throughout this period that the alleged shift toward the USSR of the strategic armaments balance

meant that the ultimate American sanction behind its deterrence policy in Berlin, the threat of a strategic strike, was effectively voided. If he could convince Washington and/or its allies that the Massive Retaliation threat was no longer credible, they should then conclude that nothing prevented the Soviets from employing their overwhelming superiority in local conventional forces in any Berlin crisis. In effect the Premier presented the West with this as the scenario of any clash around Berlin: the USSR could allow East Germany to close the access routes to the city at any time. If it did so, the Western powers would then have to choose between accepting this loss and initiating violence in an attempt to reopen the routes with conventional forces. Such forces, however, could be defeated by the superior local Soviet conventional forces. With such a defeat imminent, the West would again have to choose between accepting a loss and escalating to the use of nuclear weapons. The latter option would soon spiral into a general nuclear war, which the West could not win since it no longer—Khrushchev claimed—possessed strategic superiority. In this scenario, it was clearly pointless for the NATO allies to employ force, and hence not credible for them to threaten to do so. Accordingly, Khrushchev concluded, the Western strategic position in Berlin had become untenable, and the "free city" plan the Soviets offered late in 1958 provided the Allies a face-saving means of withdrawing.

The Kremlin's motivation to push this line was heightened, if any heightening was necessary, by a decision at the December 1957 NATO Foreign Ministers Conference to station intermediate range ballistic missiles (IRBMs), armed with nuclear warheads under American control, in Europe, including the Federal Republic. While the decision was not implemented for a considerable period, this response to Soviet strategic advances (and to Soviet missile-rattling during the Suez Crisis of the fall of 1956) meant that for the first time West Germany would have within its grasp, if not under its direct control, nuclear weapons with sufficient range to reach the USSR itself. In proportions that may never be known, this genuinely added to the Soviets perceived security problem and provided a convenient symbol

for the Soviets' well-advertised alarm over "revanchist German militarism."³

The immediate Soviet reaction to the NATO decision was intense, including a call for a new Summit Conference. The Western reply was negative; counterproposals and alternatives generated a diplomatic exchange lasting through the spring of 1958. Crises in the Near East and in the Taiwan Strait then diverted attention elsewhere, but thereafter Khrushchev returned promptly to the Berlin question with his November 10 speech.

The Initiator's Motivation and Calculations

There is some evidence to suggest that Khrushchev had not intended to include the statement that it was time for the West to leave Berlin in his address of November 10 but was carried away by his own emotional diatribe against "German militarism."⁴ However, the Kremlin was clearly in process of launching a Berlin campaign, some opening guns of which (as will be discussed later) had already been fired in September and October; it seems more likely, therefore, that Khrushchev's passion was planned, as it was on other occasions. However this may be, there was no significant Western response, and the Soviet deadline note arrived seventeen days later with its threat to turn over control of the Berlin access routes to East Germany in six months.

The challenge evidently was a carefully selected one. In

³ Schick, *The Berlin Crisis*, pp. 7-10. Adam Ulam asserts that "To us now it is clear that the main Soviet objective was to secure an agreement that would make it impossible for West Germany to obtain nuclear weapons. . . . One suspects that for the moment they would have settled for a firm pledge that West Germany would be barred from being a nuclear force." *Expansion and Coexistence*, p. 620.

⁴ Barker, "The Berlin Crisis," pp. 60-61; E. L. Dulles, "Berlin—Barometer of Tension."

resuming pressure on West Berlin in 1958, Soviet leaders were even more cautious than they had been in 1948. There was no actual blockade this time, only the *threat* (and a somewhat ambiguous one) of a probable blockade at some point in the future. In a real sense, therefore, U.S. deterrence was successful, and remained so until the crisis temporarily subsided. Options at Khrushchev's disposal for challenging deterrence in ways that would have created an acute crisis were threatened but never actually carried out. Whatever the Kremlin's real beliefs may have been about the strategic balance and the credibility of the American nuclear arsenal, throughout it carefully avoided any serious risk of a military conflagration around Berlin.

While successful in this sense, United States deterrence policy proved unable to forestall a Berlin crisis which seriously challenged her and her allies' unity and determination, and which at one point saw the West offering the Soviets a significant package of concessions in Berlin. In this sense, U.S. deterrence was incomplete. It succeeded in preventing the *actuality* of a physical, coercive Soviet move in Berlin but failed to prevent the *threat* thereof. And the threat itself represented a politico-diplomatic actuality, one which nearly gained the Soviets a significant payoff, and which might have gained them a very much greater one had the West been less unified and less skillful in the management of the crisis after deterrence failed.

Indeed, it is not easy to imagine, even with benefit of long hindsight, how U.S. deterrence might have been modified to forestall *both* the military actuality and the politico-diplomatic threat. The deadline crisis case thus illustrates some of the built-in limitations of deterrence as a policy, even in the service of the basic objective of containment (quite apart from its limitations in the service of wider foreign policy objectives). Khrushchev was able to calculate only too shrewdly that however firm and consistent the American deterrence commitment might be in principle, it would prove difficult for the U.S. to fully implement the commitment in practice, within the particular circumstances of Berlin.

In effect, the Kremlin by launching the deadline crisis was

attempting to heighten and to capitalize upon the important latent asymmetries of that situation which had not yet fully come into play—military, diplomatic, and psychological advantages to the Soviets related to Berlin's peculiar geography and history and by 1958 quite imbedded in the structure of the situation. Employing these advantages they were able to "design around" the U.S. deterrence posture, to make gains along a front which that posture did not, and could not easily, face.

Many of the Kremlin's other options were risky ones. Another blockade might accomplish no more than the first (and no less: the unifying and galvanizing of the West). A military seizure, either straightforward or disguised as a political coup against the West Berlin city government, was another option that must have appeared highly risky. Options of these kinds and variations upon them were what U.S. deterrence policy had been designed to forestall. The Kremlin clearly perceived and respected U.S. deterrence, and despite its rhetoric evidently found that deterrence credible—or at least credible enough vis-a-vis the more overt options. Furthermore, the danger of an irrational American overreaction to any overt move was one which the Soviet leaders could not have dismissed, and this worked to strengthen deterrence (as it usually does). But the Kremlin was able to find another option which promised a reasonably high probability of eventually achieving the objective of removing the West from Berlin, at reasonably low risk, and in particular at very low risk of any irrational Western overreaction. Let us glance in slightly greater detail at these two major aspects of the option the Soviets discovered for designing around U.S. deterrence.

The "deadline note" option offered a reasonable probability of eventually achieving a Western withdrawal, principally through the effects it could be expected to have on Western determination and unity. (In the same manner it offered some probability of setting into motion developments that might result in at least a partial detachment of West Germany from the Western camp.) The somewhat ambiguous threat seemed to imply a potential new blockade, with the possibility of armed

clashes between Western and East German troops and the dangers of escalation which that possibility suggested. Through Soviet declaratory policy accompanying and following the note, and in various other ways, Kremlin leaders sought to make this threat and its risks as alarming and vivid as possible (which attempt may have been assisted by its calculated ambiguity). On the basis of past experience, they had reason to hope that vicarious experiencing of a really intense military crisis in Central Europe would have a splintering effect upon the Western position. Important segments of the public would become alarmed at the risk of a major war and would appeal to their governments to avoid it by meeting the Soviet demand, which, after all, was only to "negotiate." The several NATO governments would each have their own perception of the nature of the crisis and the proper policy with which to meet it. The diversity of positions would shatter allied unity and sap the allies' determination. Through the mechanism of "alliance politics," the policy that was the lowest common denominator would emerge, in this instance probably the least resolute one.

Thus the Soviets could hope that an ambiguous *threat* of a new blockade (or worse) would have just the opposite effect of the *actuality* of one: it would tend to divide the Western allies in internecine bickering, whereas an immediate and real military crisis would unite them. While the specific pattern of events that would gradually emerge could not be predicted exactly in advance, the Kremlin could believe that as an essentially monolithic entity facing a plurality of divided opponents, it could cause its own will to gradually prevail in a complex and shifting situation. The Western position would gradually erode, and in time little of it would be left.

By presenting the West with a challenge containing aspects both of clarity—in the vividness of possible dangerous outcomes—and of ambiguity—in the circumstances under which these outcomes might be triggered—the Soviet Union challenged deterrence in a complex and sophisticated way. The publicly available evidence suggests that the U.S. and its allies were not adequately prepared for this kind of challenge. As remarked earlier, contingency planning for Berlin crises ap-

parently presumed that the USSR would not miscalculate the deterrent situation so badly as to launch a full-scale military attack on the city, and therefore concentrated on less violent coercive options, such as a new blockade. But there is little evidence of contingency planning for still lower-level Soviet options like the *threat* of East German control of access. Indeed, there are good administrative reasons why such planning in advance of the contingency would seem unproductive and even counterproductive. All the problems of alliance politics that the Soviets expected to arise after November 27 would have arisen in advance. The United States' allies would quite reasonably have resisted attempts to define alliance policy in advance on purely hypothetical (and complex) contingencies, and any U.S. attempt to bring pressure to bear to do so might have made agreement even more difficult. (Precisely these problems were encountered in 1961, when the U.S. did seek interallied contingency planning.)⁵ The Soviet challenge to U.S. deterrence thus struck it on a flank where it both was not and could not be adequately prepared.

This sophisticated Soviet option, however, had its own uncertainties. The promise of a reasonable probability of a significant payoff rested upon the Kremlin's convincing the Western powers, or many of them, of two things: first, that they had lost strategic superiority, and hence that any escalation to violence around Berlin would follow essentially the scenario sketched above, by which the West could only lose; and second, that the Kremlin, by virtue of its newly acquired strength, as well as for other reasons, was more highly motivated to bring about its desired changes in Berlin than the West was, or ought to be, to resist them. Thus in a deterrence situation characterized, as noted earlier, by high motivation on the part of both initiator and defender, the Soviets needed to convince the West that there was an *imbalance of motivation* in their own favor.⁶ In ac-

⁵ Schick, *Berlin Crisis*, pp. 157-58.

⁶ Khrushchev was adopting a variant of the strategy elsewhere termed "coercive diplomacy". For such a strategy to succeed, an ingredient that is usually indispensable is a demonstrable asymmetry of motivation in favor of the coercing power. George, Hall, and Simons, *Limits of Coercive Diplomacy*, chap. 5.

tuality, the NATO allies partially (but only partially) accepted the notion that their opponent had achieved at least strategic parity; but they largely rejected the Soviet scenario of what an armed clash around Berlin would have to be like. However, in the end the Soviets failed to make any major gains from the deadline crisis principally because they failed to establish among critical Western decision-makers the belief that the Kremlin was more highly motivated than the West was.⁷ (They failed also because the West remained more confident in its strategic power than the Kremlin had intended, and because the NATO Allies displayed unexpectedly great skill in achieving the necessary degree of unity within the alliance.)

We remarked that the other important aspect of the option of "designing around" U.S. deterrence the Soviets implemented in the "deadline note" was its promise of relatively low risk. Clearly no very violent response would come because of the note itself, and the deadline was sufficiently distant for many indications to appear of likely Western responses to a positive Soviet action before any action needed to be taken. The more violent of Khrushchev's threats and scenarios were remote in time; his immediate action was altogether nonviolent.

In addition, the Soviets structured this crisis, like other ones, so as to maintain *control over* their own risks. (In Soviet doctrine, risks are acceptable not necessarily when they are low, but when they are controllable—i.e., when they can be unilaterally reduced at any time they may seem to grow too large.) What precisely would happen at the end of six months if the

⁷ Implicitly, the Soviets were attempting to convince the West of a particular doctrine of escalation—that one's acceptance of risk should be proportional to one's expectation of a favorable outcome. That is, one might run comparatively high risks if one confidently expected a highly favorable outcome, lower risks if one was uncertain or expected a rough stalemate, and still lower risks (or in principle, none) for an expected loss.

This theory was implicitly rejected in the Berlin deadline case, but it was only afterward that an explicit countertheory was developed, especially by Thomas Schelling in the early 1960s. Schelling demonstrated with force and lucidity that "risk-acceptance" is a manipulable factor of many attributes, including one's ability to construct a set of opponent's objectives and expectations and one's effort to change or reinforce a prevailing bargaining system.

West did not cooperate was left sufficiently unclear in the deadline note as to be open to any interpretation. In other respects, too, the note of November 27, evidently carefully drafted, contained calculated ambiguities. The suggestion that after six months negotiations need only to have *begun* gave the Kremlin a built-in device for terminating the crisis (if this seemed prudent) in almost any eventuality, since any plausible Western responses over six months could be called "negotiations." Finally, Khrushchev's private remark two days later, and subsequent private and public communications from Soviet leaders, reinforced this "escape clause."

These calculated ambiguities had a double payoff, in controlling the USSR's risks and also in tending to confuse the West as to the hardness of the Soviet position, reducing the influence of those who wanted to react firmly to the Soviet challenge and encouraging those who thought the Soviets were or might become "reasonable" and that a compromise should be sought. By diluting its ultimatum, however, Moscow also lowered the pressure. As the months passed it became increasingly clear that the Soviets were attaching less and less significance to their own deadline, until in the end May 27 passed with hardly a ripple.

The Defenders Response to Warning

Both strategic and tactical warning were available to U.S. decision-makers prior to the onset of the deadline crisis, apparently with only marginal benefit for U.S. and Western responses. Strategic warning came from the intense Soviet reaction to the NATO plan of stationing long-range nuclear weapons on German soil, which response included an insistent call for a new Summit Conference, a step-up in Soviet harassment of West Berlin in January 1958, and in February the Rapacki Plan for a "neutralized zone" in Central Europe. The diplomatic exchanges over these developments provided clear indications

that the Soviets considered technological developments to be shifting the balance of power in their favor, and that they might be considering a major new initiative on Berlin.⁸ The interruption of events generated by the Near East and Taiwan Strait crises presumably could and should have been interpreted as representing only a postponement, not a cancellation, of a European crisis.

In addition to this strategic warning, tactical warning was provided by what one analyst has termed "a diplomatic fusillade" in the immediately preceding period.⁹ In September 1958 the Soviets announced that they had received an urgent message from the East German regime requesting four-power negotiations to prepare a draft peace treaty for the two German states, and a commission composed of representatives of Bonn and Pankow to discuss reunification. The Soviets endorsed this proposal and called upon the Western powers to correct the "abnormal situation" existing in Germany in the absence of a peace treaty. Bonn, supported by Washington, responded with a counterproposal for a four-power commission to reunite Germany. Rebuffed by this, East German Premier Ulbricht escalated by publicly laying claim to West Berlin on October 27 and implying that his regime would exercise sovereignty over the access routes. While he had made similar remarks on previous occasions (including at the Party Congress in July), this time he also referred to West Berlin as having originally been "part of the Soviet zone of occupation," an assertion similar to that which the Soviet military governor had made prior to the Berlin blockade in 1948.¹⁰ Also during the autumn, the Soviet Ambassador to Bonn had remarked that the USSR hoped to have the Berlin "problem" solved by Christmas.¹¹

⁸ Smith, *Defense of Berlin*, pp. 15-19; Richardson, *Germany and the Atlantic Alliance*, p. 264; Ulam, *Expansion and Coexistence*, pp. 619-28; Schick, *Berlin Crisis*, pp. 6-10.

⁹ Smith, *Defense of Berlin*, pp. 157-62.

¹⁰ Schick, *Berlin Crisis*, p. 5; Windsor, *City on Leave*, p. 199.

¹¹ Schick, *Berlin Crisis*, p. 12n.

These and other lesser warnings of the shape of things to come did not go completely unnoticed in the West. The U.S. National Security Council held a meeting devoted to Berlin policy in the fall; and more significantly, a special four-power working group, composed of representatives from the U.S., the Federal Republic, France, and Britain, was established in September to give "constant attention" to Berlin. As noted, however, the available evidence suggests that these responses to available warning consisted of another reanalysis and rehearsal of plans in the event of another blockade or more violent contingency. There is no indication that they included an examination of the kind of strictly politico-diplomatic initiative the Soviets put forth in November. Indeed, not only the form of the Soviet move but also its *timing* apparently came somewhat as a surprise. No nonroutine declarations of policy regarding Berlin were being delivered by Western leaders in this period. What impact a vigorous declaratory reaction to available warning might have had on Soviet action can only be speculated about.

If the Soviet deadline note of November 27 is regarded as the beginning of the crisis (as it usually is), then Khrushchev's speech of November 10 is the clearest tactical warning of all, though warning "of what" exactly remained unclear. Nonetheless, the demand to leave Berlin had come from the highest policy-making level of the Soviet Union, and a period of over two weeks followed during which the West had an opportunity to respond. If Khrushchev had indeed been carried away by emotion in that speech and had interjected an unintended demand, the importance of a prompt Western response would have been even greater, since presumably an appropriate one could have forestalled the formalization of the demand in a Soviet diplomatic note. The same is true if the November 10 speech was an experiment by the Soviet leadership to test the Western response.

If United States policy-makers at all recognized Khrushchev's statement as a possible warning, however ambiguous, that American deterrence policy in Berlin might be about to fail, it is difficult to understand why they did not make an im-

mediate effort to reinforce deterrence. A vigorous declaratory reaffirmation of the very serious American commitment to the city, and of the U.S. leaders' *present* determination to maintain that commitment, would have had a positive impact (to an admittedly unknowable degree) at virtually no cost whatsoever.

But in fact Washington elected to maintain official silence for nearly two weeks. Eisenhower writes in his memoirs that he "at once recognized the dangerous potential" of Khrushchev's statement. He chose not to respond because it might suggest that American leaders were "edgy"—an impression he apparently felt would damage the image he wanted to maintain with the Kremlin.¹² Apparently no leading administration official recognized that it might be important for Moscow to know that the United States *was* "edgy" about Berlin, and that at the minimum, private channels might be utilized to express Washington's concern over Khrushchev's threat and intention to maintain its commitment fully. Of course, there can be no assurance that such a step would have altered the development of the crisis, but its potential payoff surely outweighed any plausible costs. The administration apparently did not recognize that the *absence* of an American reaction to the November 10 speech was more likely to have a negative effect on the Kremlin's image of the U.S. than the presence of an appropriate and expectable reaction.

Meanwhile the warnings did not cease. On November 14, four days after the verbal threat, Soviet personnel held three U.S. Army trucks for eight and a half hours on the Autobahn just outside of Berlin. With hindsight it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Soviet leaders, possibly surprised at the lack of an initial Western reaction, were dipping a second toe in the water. At the time General Norstad, the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, was evidently of the opinion that the Russians were indeed probing to test Allied reactions. He told Washington that in the absence of other instructions he would dispatch a test convoy to Berlin. If the Soviets detained it and if a protest did not extricate it within a few hours, he would res-

¹² Eisenhower, *White House Years*, pp. 330, 331.

cue it "by minimum force necessary." The Joint Chiefs of Staff wanted to put Norstad's plan into effect at once, but the President, despite his "sympathetic" view of the plan, believed that the Allies should be consulted first. To give time for consultation he suspended all convoys to Berlin. Eisenhower gives no indication whether he or his advisers were concerned lest the suspension of convoys encourage the Soviets to conclude that efforts to intimidate would meet with success. (The ban on convoys was later lifted by the President before November 27, and they passed without incident.)

After mid-month and the convoy incident, U.S. policy-makers took warning seriously, expecting an important Soviet move and a new Berlin crisis. On November 19 the *New York Times* reported that the Secretary of State considered it a "foregone conclusion" that the Soviets would accept the risks entailed in transferring the access control rights to East Germany. On the 20th the National Security Council met to discuss Berlin, and Dulles told the President that Khrushchev would "probably move soon to carry out his threat" to make this transfer, which would "create the most complicated situation in Berlin since . . . the 1949 blockade."¹³ Nonetheless, the administration evidently still did not communicate to the Kremlin, publicly or privately, its concern over any threat to its rights or its determination to maintain its Berlin commitment. The next day, November 21, the White House Press Secretary replied in the most general way to questions on Berlin. British Prime Minister MacMillan, however, did send a message to Khrushchev reaffirming the British commitment to Berlin. One can only speculate on what conclusions the Kremlin may have drawn from the fact that the British, but not the American, leader should react to the threat with a reaffirmation of his rights and commitment.¹⁴

U.S. decision-makers decided to respond to the (now clear) warning with another strategy, which in fact would have been consistent with a reaffirmation of the commitment but which

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 331.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 331-32.

was apparently seen as competing with, and preferable to, any public or private declaratory effort to reinforce deterrence. Secretary Dulles held an image of the opponent different from that held by some other high-level U.S. governmental figures. He believed that on matters touching Berlin and Germany, the USSR was acting defensively, out of concern for its own security. Accordingly, he believed that the most appropriate American response to Khrushchev's November 10 speech was a signal of willingness to negotiate. A danger of war would arise, he felt, only if the U.S. failed to indicate this and instead reinforced its military forces in Germany—precisely the opposite estimate from that of the JCS and other officials.¹⁵

Evidently winning the internal policy debate, Secretary Dulles launched his policy of flexibility on some aspects of the Berlin question at a press conference on November 26, at which time he startled some listeners by indicating that he was "not surprised" at Khrushchev's threat, and that he could accept East German officials at the traffic control points as "agents" of the Soviet Union. This could be done, he added, without relieving the Soviets of their responsibility to insure unimpeded Western access. He asserted that nothing to date had indicated any Soviet intention to deny access. Rather, he suggested, the Soviet purpose was "to try to compel an increased recognition and the according of increased stature" to East Germany.¹⁶ Clearly he was signaling to Moscow his sensitivity to and willingness to accommodate to legitimate Russian security needs, which he considered included a valid concern for East German security. Since he apparently expected the Soviets actually to turn over the access control to the East Germans, virtually at any moment, he may also have been attempting to forestall any drastic crisis by indicating that this could be acceptable if done in a certain way. (Whether similar signals had previously been sent Moscow via private channels is not known. There would have been precedent in the reassurances the U.S. privately sent the USSR during the Hungarian Revolution the previous year.)

¹⁵ Schick, *Berlin Crisis*, pp. 29-35. This disagreement within the administration foreshadowed the sharper one of 1961. See below, pp. 433-37.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-34.

We see, therefore, that Dulles' response to warning that deterrence might be about to fail was not an attempt to reinforce deterrence by threats or military deployments or alerts, but rather an indication of limited, defined flexibility on the matter at issue. Dulles evidently had concluded that in any case the United States could not prevent the Soviets from transferring traffic management to the East Germans, and hence a signal of flexibility on this issue would, if this were all the Soviets intended, forestall any crisis, and if it were not, at least clarify and emphasize the essential issue in the Western viewpoint, namely, the rights of access to Berlin. He perceived that many possible techniques for reinforcing deterrence on receipt of warning would be at best irrelevant to a low-level politico-diplomatic challenge, and at worst provocative to the opponent, possibly obliging him to take similar measures and thus escalating the crisis. Dulles should therefore be credited with a real sophistication in grasping the limits of deterrence policies and looking for alternatives to threats in trying to ward off a crisis. He also avoided the ever-present temptation to signal one's commitment to oppose *any* change in the status quo; and he substituted instead a differentiated analysis of the national interest, distinguishing which interests could not be compromised in any way and which could be accommodated to the opponent's objectives when his motivation was high, in the interests of peace. Dulles apparently did not, however, recognize that fully consistent with this, and an important supplement to it, could be signals reaffirming one's full commitment to the protection of those interests which *were* deemed vital, thus nonprovocatively but credibly reinforcing deterrence.

The Crisis Trails Off

Dulles' public signals could hardly have reached the Kremlin in time to affect the "deadline note" sent on November 27. The text of the note effectively ruled out the Secretary's "agent theory" by insisting on more than "a shift of re-

sponsibility and authority" from Soviet to East German police. (The fact that this was done carefully strongly suggests that the Soviets may indeed have received messages from Dulles privately before his public statement.) Nevertheless, on receiving the note the State Department was relieved, both because the Kremlin had sent a piece of paper rather than taking physical action and because the initial interpretation placed on the "six months" clause was that it represented the postponement of all action for that time. A similar construction was deduced in the British Foreign Ministry and elsewhere.¹⁷ The West thus found itself in the somewhat unusual position of feeling relief at the receipt of an ultimatum.

In the months that followed, Dulles and other U.S. leaders concentrated on two objectives: assuring the Soviet Union of a general American readiness to negotiate, although certain rights would not be given up; and attaining unity within the Western camp. In pursuit of the former, lengthy informal discussions, as well as more formal messages, were exchanged with the Soviets, in the course of which Dulles put together a package of minor concessions. (The Kremlin, however, declined this package, apparently in the expectation of being able to do better later.) In pursuit of allied unity, lengthy and complex negotiations were held among the principal Western powers, arriving first at an agreed position and later at agreed modifications to it for bargaining with the Soviets.

Neither of these somewhat winding trails is relevant to the present analysis of deterrence. Eventually the Soviets agreed to a foreign ministers' meeting in May in return for U.S. agreement to a new Summit Conference the following year. The six-month deadline was allowed to pass uncelebrated, and the Kremlin allowed the Berlin question to simmer pending the Summit.

Through the winter and spring of 1959 it became increasingly clear that, while anxious to be rid of the Western presence in Berlin and eager to badger the West into a greater recogni-

tion of the East German regime, Moscow was not willing to risk a major confrontation. And the plan of signing a separate peace treaty and turning over control of access to Berlin to East Germany was not executed because in the last analysis it remained more useful to Moscow as a threat than as an actuality. The Soviet deadline note thus failed to achieve the goals for which it was intended. Yet it was not without payoffs for the Kremlin. It succeeded in its tactical objective of pressuring the reluctant Western powers into negotiations over Berlin; it obtained an invitation to the United States for Khrushchev; and it secured Eisenhower's agreement to another Summit meeting, which the President had consistently opposed since the Soviets first called for it in 1957.

Moreover, when the Paris Summit of 1960 collapsed, Khrushchev made it clear that he would reopen the Berlin question as soon as the new American president was elected. The Berlin crisis had not been terminated, only suspended.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 12 and 34.