



AP PHOTO/PAUL WHITE FILE
President John F. Kennedy and former President Dwight D. Eisenhower discussing the Bay of Pigs invasion

The Coldest Days of the Cold War

Lessons from Two American Presidents

John Gans, Rudy deLeon, and Winny Chen September 2008

Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

On the morning of August 8, the world awoke to news that Russia had invaded the neighboring democracy of Georgia. The transgression continues to pose a number of difficult questions for policymakers in the United States. What to make of Russia's boldness? More importantly, how should the United States—with its ground forces tied down in Iraq and in Afghanistan and preoccupied with its own presidential election—respond to a resurgent Russia?

Tensions between the United States and Russia are not new, but the invasion of Georgia and the U.S. response once again stirred the argument over engagement versus isolation. Conservatives have resorted to the Myth of Munich—the belief that the use of diplomacy and negotiations are ineffective and fail to stop aggression—and charges of appeasement in arguing for forceful intervention in the Caucasus.¹ This debate, as before, plays out not against facts, strategic options, and consequences, but rather in political commentary and op-ed pages, surrounded by analogy and conjecture, and in an atmosphere of tough posturing and accusations of weakness.

Newsweek recently examined the Myth of Munich and found that, “In modern American history, no metaphor has been more used—or abused—than ‘Munich.’ The lesson of appeasement—that giving in to aggression just invites more aggression—has calcified into dogma.”² Examples abound: U.S. President George W. Bush has accused those who want to speak with adversaries of falling victim to “the false comfort of appeasement.”³ And recently the Munich card was played over the U.S. response to the Russian action in Georgia. A conservative commentator wrote, “If the United States appeases Russia now, it will pay the same price British Prime Minister Neville (sic) Chamberlain paid in the 1930s.”⁴

For four dangerous years nearly a half century ago, from 1959 to 1963, the United States faced mounting challenges not unlike those today: an unpredictable Soviet Union, limited American leverage, questions of strategy among allies, rising new powers, and shrinking old ones. Those four years were every bit as complicated and daunting as the global security situation awaiting the new American president in 2009. Pursuit of mutually beneficial security agreements were often thwarted by mistake, error, or miscalculation. Reputations were challenged.

Recall that in 1960 a summit in Paris was dashed by a May Day downing of the U-2. A Vienna exchange in 1961 was made more difficult by a failed Bay of Pigs. Troubles in Berlin, Cuba, and Laos commanded the front page. Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev took to reminding countries of the number of hydrogen bombs it would require to destroy them. In the face of these tensions, two successive U.S. presidents, Dwight David Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy, acted to protect America, often made decisions against apparent self-interest, and managed to protect freedom and avoid war. Lessons from those four dangerous years, the coldest of the Cold War, are valuable for today's America and its leaders.

Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy were willing to take risks. At home, both leaders faced critics who, not unlike those in current American politics, argued that talking with enemies would be a grave mistake and, worse, a sign of appeasement and weakness. In spite of these criticisms and a number of partisan attacks, Eisenhower and Kennedy each chose to hold summits with Chairman Khrushchev. Those conversations gave them the perspective and relationship to defuse ongoing dangerous crises like the U-2, the Berlin Crisis, and the Cuban Missile Crisis. The conversations were not always easy, but the efforts of Eisenhower and Kennedy to speak, communicate, and relate with Khrushchev prepared them to deal with the most dangerous days of the long conflict. The two presidents relied on the wisdom from their experience and responded in tempered ways to limit the overheating of events.

Today, the next U.S. president can learn much from looking at that time and the approaches of Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy. Their pragmatism and willingness to talk not only allowed them to manage those crises-riddled years, but demonstrate to today's leaders the value of diplomacy and provide the lessons needed to overcome today's challenges.

Rejecting the Munich Myth

The coldest days of the Cold War demonstrate that at certain times, especially those replete with crises, threats, and uncertainty, it takes strength to talk. U.S.-Soviet relations between 1959 and 1963 were far more provocative and challenging than today. Fortunately for the United States and the world, Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy were willing to take risks for peace despite eliciting questions of their wisdom. President Eisenhower, at a press conference discussing the September 1959 U.S. visit of Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, offered his own perspective:

I invited Mr. Khrushchev, as you know, to come here so that we might have a chance to discuss some of the obvious reasons for tensions in the world, and particularly between our two countries, because of the outstanding unsettled matters. I did not ask him here for substantive negotiations, because those are impossible without the presence of our associates. But I thought that, through this visit of his and through these conversations, possibly I think as I have said to you before, some of the ice might be melted. ...

With respect to one other point, I think this: I think the American people have proved that they have an enlightened outlook toward these international problems; that they have got the strength in their own beliefs and convictions to listen to the other man politely, attentively, although reserving to themselves a right to oppose bitterly any imposition upon themselves of some of the practices, the beliefs, and convictions that are proposed and supported by another ideology; that they came through this with a very much better understanding, and proving that they themselves are very sophisticated, and if not sophisticated, let us say enlightened and understanding in these matters.⁵

For his part, John F. Kennedy, during one of his presidential campaign debates with Vice President Richard Nixon, vowed not to sit with Khrushchev without agreed upon preconditions. But several months into his presidency, when the stakes became clear, Kennedy ceased that posturing and rejected the false binary choice of the Munich Myth. In a speech to the University of Washington in November 1961, Kennedy advised:

On the one hand are those who urge upon us what I regard to be the pathway of surrender—appeasing our enemies, compromising our commitments, purchasing peace at any price, disavowing our arms, our friends, our obligations. ... On the other hand are those who urge upon us what I regard to be the pathway of war: equating negotiations with appeasement and substituting rigidity for firmness. ...

It is a curious fact that each of these extreme opposites resembles the other. Each believes that we have only two choices: appeasement or war, suicide or surrender, humiliation or holocaust. ... Each believes that any departure from its own course inevitably leads to the other: one group believes that any peaceful solution means appeasement; the other believes that any arms build-up means war. ... Neither side admits that its path will lead to disaster—but neither can tell us how or where to draw the line once we descend the slippery slopes of appeasement or constant intervention. ... The essential fact that both of these groups fail to grasp is that diplomacy and defense are not substitutes for one another. Either alone would fail. A willingness to resist force, unaccompanied by a willingness to talk, could provoke belligerence—while a willingness to talk, unaccompanied by a willingness to resist force, could invite disaster. ...⁶

Lessons for today

Eisenhower and Kennedy's respective decisions to engage with Khrushchev led to improvements in the U.S.-Soviet relationship because increased transparency decreased the chances for miscalculation and presented an additional tool for pursuing American interests. The result of those presidencies and engagement with the Soviet Union was a more cautious U.S.-Soviet relationship. The Cold War would endure until 1990 but in the years that followed those coldest days, American leaders sobered by crises and educated by experience

completed a Limited Test Ban Treaty, worked toward more effective arms control, and limited nuclear saber rattling. While the threat would remain, the dialogue between both sides was much more cautious and measured as both sides acknowledged a nuclear war could not be won.

Eisenhower and Kennedy proved that talking with adversaries on a regular basis can present the opportunity and tools needed to manage crises and provide a necessary change in tone. These types of conversations will be more effective if informed by four important lessons from the years 1959 to 1963 and the interactions between Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Khrushchev:

First, **continuous engagement is critical**. Even during the coldest days of the Cold War, Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy and senior American diplomatic officials maintained regular public and private dialogue with Chairman Khrushchev and others. Engagement is not easy. Nor does it have to be a presidential summit. Engagement, at any level, brings value. For instance, the close, honest relationship U.S. Ambassador to the USSR Llewellyn Thompson developed with Khrushchev paid dividends for both administrations and helped the countries work through crises.

Both Eisenhower and Kennedy heard whispers of appeasement for their meetings with Khrushchev. But in the most difficult of times, when communication was needed most, they chose to meet. It is notable that both Eisenhower at Camp David and Kennedy in Vienna asked for a few more minutes of time without staff to talk with Khrushchev and attempt to focus on key priorities. But this engagement must not be limited to summitry. Eisenhower encouraged the ongoing Geneva negotiations for arms control, while Kennedy supported the establishment of a direct communications link between Moscow and Washington and the test ban negotiations.

Effective diplomacy cannot be labeled strong or weak or rule out potential tactics to further relations. A balance is necessary. As Eisenhower said, “There is, in world affairs, a steady course to be followed between an assertion of strength that is truculent and a confession of helplessness that is cowardly.”⁷ Kennedy would learn the same lesson of diplomacy and report, “No one should be under the illusion that negotiations for the sake of negotiations always advance the cause of peace. If for lack of preparation they break up in bitterness, the prospects of peace have been endangered. If they are made a forum for propaganda or a cover for aggression, the processes of peace have been abused.”⁸



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○ **October 31, 1958**
Test ban negotiations begin in Geneva

◀ ○ **September 25–27, 1959**
Eisenhower and Khrushchev meet at Camp David

○ **December 1959**
Eisenhower, Macmillan, and De Gaulle invite Khrushchev to Paris summit



▲ U-2 wreckage captured in the Soviet Union

○ **April 1960**
Eisenhower approves additional U-2 flights

○ **May 1, 1960**
American U-2 crashes on May Day

○ **May 8, 1960**
U.S.S.R establishes formal diplomatic relations with Cuba

○ **May 9, 1960**
Eisenhower takes responsibility for the U-2

○ **May 16, 1960**
Paris summit opens

○ **May 17, 1960**
Paris summit collapses

○ **June 6, 1960**
Khrushchev promises nuclear protection of Cuba



▲ A Kennedy political rally, November 5, 1960

○ **November 8, 1960**
Kennedy elected as 35th U.S. president

The second lesson: **see through provocation, work through the bluster, and distinguish between public and private interests.** In the heat of international affairs, temperatures, tensions and tempers will rise and threats will be made. Khrushchev regularly threatened the West in speech and provocation. Throughout their coldest years, Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy would respond to Chairman Khrushchev's bluster with finesse and conviction, but also with reserve and caution. Where necessary, they would improve U.S. military capabilities. But where Khrushchev would take a provocative step forward, Eisenhower and Kennedy would hold their ground, seek continued engagement, and keep cool. As Eisenhower and Kennedy proved, not every crisis is worth fighting over. Sometimes taking no action is more of a profile in courage than rattling of sabers.

The third lesson: **risk partial or complete failure.** "It is a test of our national maturity to accept the fact that negotiations are not a contest spelling victory or defeat," said President Kennedy in late 1961. "They may succeed. They may fail. They are likely to be successful only if both sides reach an agreement which both regard as preferable to the status quo—an agreement in which each side can consider its own situation to be improved. And this is most difficult to obtain."⁹ This timeless lesson clearly affected the last two years of Kennedy's life as he worked directly with the Soviet Union to avoid catastrophe in Cuba and take advantage of opportunity in the test ban treaty. The only time talks are certain to offer no progress is when they are not held.

Finally, **credibility matters**, especially in a crisis. Eisenhower knew the risks of continued U-2 flights and worried the discovery of their intention would "ruin [his] effectiveness."¹⁰ Eisenhower was right. Even though the U-2 crisis was arguably less threatening because of Eisenhower's existing relationship and credibility with Khrushchev, the progress and possibility lost as a result of his risky decision to send the U-2 back over Soviet territory just before the Paris summit make the U-2 incident a tragedy. The U-2 scuttled the progress made on the test ban negotiations, and the world had to wait nearly four years for the valuable treaty and the start of effective arms control.

The Paris summit, with its promise of real disarmament talks, was ruined, and it would take years, and additional crises, before real progress was made in achieving limits to nuclear testing. Though the Bay of Pigs fiasco would hurt his reputation in the eyes of the Soviets, Kennedy carefully managed his communications with the Soviets to avoid miscalculations and further loss of credibility. Eisenhower and Kennedy knew a loss of credibility leads to lost progress.



▲ Fidel Castro at the front during the Bay of Pigs invasion

Kennedy and Khrushchev meet at the Vienna summit



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

National Security Council meeting during the Cuban Missile Crisis



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- **January 3, 1961**
U.S. breaks off diplomatic relations with Cuba
- **January 20, 1961**
Kennedy inauguration
- **April 12, 1961**
Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin becomes the first human in space
- **April 15, 1961**
Failed Bay of Pigs invasion
- **June 4–5, 1961**
Vienna summit
- **August 13, 1961**
Khrushchev builds Berlin Wall
- **October 21, 1961**
Kennedy administration resolves missile gap claim
- **February 1962**
Khrushchev decides to deploy missiles to Cuba
- **October 1962**
Cuban Missile Crisis
- **June 10, 1963**
Kennedy speech on peace at American University
- **June 20, 1963**
Special communications link established between Moscow and Washington
- **July 15, 1963**
Limited Test Ban negotiations begin
- **Fall 1963**
Limited Test Ban Treaty approved, ratified, entered into force

The coldest days of the Cold War can teach us much in how to deal with crises of our own. Historical comparisons have limits, yet many of today's challenges are more complicated than those of 1959–1963 because of the lack of bipolarity in the international system. There is no cold war. It is also clear, given recent events, that talking itself, without substantive exchange, cannot solve problems.

But the similarities between those cold days and today are striking. Assertive, rising powers such as Russia and China threaten U.S. economic and military preponderance. The U.S. military is deployed and engaged around the world, and U.S. leverage is consequently weakened. The major powers are waging political battles in the developing world, and races for resources and technological innovation fuel that contest. Finally, a lack of understanding between the major players increases the risk of miscalculation as alliances wrestle with differences over strategic direction. Those similarities, the prevalence of the Munich Myth, and the increasing relevance of American diplomacy with Russia make a look at the years 1959–1963 valuable.

April 1958, an exchange of letters and a summit is announced

Five years after the death of Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin and five months after the Soviet Union's successful orbit of the space satellite Sputnik, President Dwight D. Eisenhower and USSR Chairman Nikita Khrushchev exchanged letters discussing a possible suspension of nuclear testing. The exchanges on this topic had become routine, each side raising the merits of its own position while dismissing the objections of the other side.

Responding to Khrushchev, President Eisenhower on April 8, 1958 would declare, "The position of the United States on this matter of testing is well known. For several years we have been seeking a dependable ending to the accumulation of nuclear weapons stockpiles and a dependable beginning of the steady reduction of existing weapons stockpiles ... Surely, the heart of the nuclear problem is not the mere testing of weapons, but the weapons themselves."¹¹

In addition to his measured response, President Eisenhower reminded the Soviet leader of two other important disarmament initiatives. The first, "Open Skies," would allow for technical collection by unarmed observation flights of military and other activities. Additionally, an initiative for the international use of outer space for peaceful purposes was presented to the Soviets.

From this exchange of letters, formal talks on nuclear testing between the United States, the Soviet Union, and other nations would commence in Geneva. The diplomatic discussions did not produce enormous results but they were a start of a conversation that would last for four decades. The next summer, in August 1959, President Eisenhower announced, "The President of the United States has invited Mr. Nikita Khrushchev... to pay an official visit to the United States in September. Mr. Khrushchev has accepted with pleasure."¹²

Prelude to Paris

In September 1959, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev arrived for a 10-day tour of the United States that took him to Iowa farms, a Hollywood sound stage, and the cabins of Camp David. The trip, a first by a Soviet Premier, had its share of tension, but in the end it was a convivial affair that gave Khrushchev an understanding of the West, gave Eisenhower hope for progress on disarmament, and encouraged the world with signs of a thaw in relations between the two powers.

From the start, the meeting and its participants faced a number of challenges. Eisenhower came under attack for welcoming Khrushchev. Conservative William F. Buckley said at the time that Khrushchev's visit "profanes the nation."¹³ Khrushchev, too, faced significant domestic opposition to his visit. As U.S. Ambassador to the USSR Llewellyn Thompson advised Eisenhower, Khrushchev was willing to go beyond where "many of his people [were] on this issue... He will have great opposition from some of his colleagues, and it is by no means sure that he can carry this out."¹⁴ The opposition was domestic, but also international. Inter-communist tensions threatened Khrushchev's efforts as Mao considered détente a threat to China's interests and their shared principles.¹⁵

Despite these pressures, Eisenhower and Khrushchev each appeared willing to take the risk of meeting and beginning negotiations on a nuclear test ban with inspection. But that was not the only accomplishment. At Camp David, Eisenhower also managed to convince Khrushchev to drop his Berlin ultimatum. The ultimatum, issued by Khrushchev in late 1958 to get the West to sign a peace treaty and leave Berlin or face a separate Soviet–East German peace agreement, had upset Eisenhower and threatened Khrushchev's dream of a "Big Four" summit meeting with the heads of the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France. Eisenhower said he would not bargain or hold the summit under the threat. But with the meeting at Camp David, Eisenhower was able to use the promise of a summit to entice Khrushchev to drop the ultimatum.

Through flattery—Eisenhower told Khrushchev during one session that Khrushchev could "become the greatest political figure in history" if he used his power "to secure peace in the world"—and tough negotiations—Eisenhower convinced Khrushchev to delay proposed aggressive moves on the German situation—Eisenhower tried to open Khrushchev to the West and to policy change on nuclear testing.¹⁶ The meetings at Camp David were tense with Khrushchev and Eisenhower both frustrated by the lack of progress. Eisenhower, disappointed the Berlin ultimatum still stood hours before Khrushchev was to leave Camp David, decided to ask for one more walk in the woods to talk privately and directly with Khrushchev. Alone, as Eisenhower had assumed, Khrushchev was more willing to deal. They two returned from the walk with a Khrushchev having promised to lift the ultimatum and Eisenhower committed to a summit.

With the Camp David progress, Eisenhower pushed for a summit of world powers and hoped that a potential test ban treaty would be "a ray of light in a world that is bound to be weary of the tensions brought about by mutual suspicion, distrust and arms races."¹⁷ Khrushchev would call the trip a "colossal moral victory," marvel at Eisenhower's willingness to call Khrushchev "my friend," and, at a rally marking his return to the Soviet Union, assure 17,000 attendees at the Lenin Sports Palace, "I got the impression that the President sincerely wanted to liquidate the Cold War and improve relations between our two countries."¹⁸ As Khrushchev returned to Moscow, singing the praise of Eisenhower and pushing for the conference as soon as possible, planning began on a Big Four summit.

In Geneva, preliminary talks would continue. *Time* magazine, in its reporting of April 1960, would question Soviet intentions, talk about the noble dream of disarmament, and remind those of “negotiating disarmament with the U.S.S.R.” of the “appeasement and the debacle of Munich” and Philosopher George Santayana’s advice: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”¹⁹ Yet the magazine would report that Russian delegate Semyon K. Tsarapkin offered “a significant concession toward a U.S. proposal banning tests above the threshold of detection, combined with a voluntary moratorium on sub threshold tests while experts work out better detection techniques.”²⁰ Eisenhower’s willingness to talk and deft handling of Khrushchev in Camp David and this small breakthrough in Geneva prepared the way for the summit.

The U-2 Incident

The Paris summit, scheduled to also include French President Charles de Gaulle and British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan, took on significant importance in the eyes of the world and its key participants. Eisenhower saw it—and possible progress on arms reduction—as a ratification of the progress made at Camp David and as a potential legacy defining event. Eisenhower had told French President Charles de Gaulle, “What a splendid exit it would be for me to end up... with an agreement between East and West!”²¹ Khrushchev saw it in much the same way and also as a key to domestic political tranquility by showing results on his opening to the West. British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan saw the summit as a true step toward reduced tensions.

Yet as negotiators in Geneva continued to work and diplomats in Washington and Moscow prepared for the summit, an American pilot on a classified reconnaissance mission over the Soviet Union would change everything. On May 1, 1960, U.S. Air Force Captain Francis Gary Powers was flying at 70,000 feet in a U-2 on his mission to photograph Soviet missile sites in Sverdlovsk and Plesetsk when his plane was rocked by an explosion. Struggling to eject, Powers did not enact the plane’s self-destruct mechanism. After surviving the crash, Powers was arrested and interrogated. He admitted he worked for the Central Intelligence Agency. Khrushchev, attending a May Day parade in Moscow, congratulated his military privately for shooting down the U-2 after years of struggling to take down the American planes and developed a plan to utilize the incident for Soviet gain.

The development of the U-2 and the secrecy surrounding its missions were a remarkable feat. The Soviets knew the flights were occurring and had tried in vain to stop them. Eisenhower’s decision to continue the CIA’s U-2 reconnaissance flights over the Soviet Union in the lead up to the summit was not made without concern for the impact of an incident involving a U-2 on the summit or U.S.-Soviet relations. Eisenhower knew the stakes, telling aides, “If one of these planes is shot down, this thing is going to be on my head. I’m going to catch hell. The world will be in a mess.”²²

But continued frustrations and concerns over Soviet technological achievement—exacerbated by the success of the Soviet space program and manifested in the perceived missile gap that energized administration critics—trumped Eisenhower’s worries that U-2 flights were a “provocative pin-pricking” that “may give [the USSR] the idea that we are seriously preparing plans to knock out their installations.”²³ As close aide General Andrew Goodpaster said, “It always distressed Eisenhower that he was doing this, and it was only out of necessity... an ugly necessity.”²⁴ With the first space reconnaissance satellite not scheduled to go online until 1960, the CIA pressed Eisenhower to approve the first flights since Camp David to fly deep into Soviet territory to investigate ICBM launch sites in the Urals and near the White Sea.²⁵

The Eisenhower administration struggled with a response to the incident, wrestling with assumptions and grasping at the available information. At first, believing the U-2 pilot was dead and much of the evidence destroyed, the administration allowed the National Aeronautics and Space Administration to claim the flight as their own weather mission. But these statements began to be contradicted, and the Soviets proved the NASA statement false through the revelation that Powers had indeed survived and confessed. Eisenhower was forced to make a difficult decision between disavowing any knowledge of the mission (implying that Eisenhower was not in control of the CIA) and admitting to the U-2 mission and its reconnaissance nature. To the shock of many, including American allies and Khrushchev, Eisenhower took responsibility for sending Powers into Soviet airspace and assured he was in control of the CIA. Eisenhower would joke that he “would like to resign” but he told congressional leadership, “We will now just have to endure the storm.”²⁶

Publicly, Khrushchev escalated his rhetoric over the incident saying, “Only countries which are at war with each other can act this way.”²⁷ He threatened those nations (Turkey and Iran) believed to be complicit in supporting the flights. And he arranged a display of the U-2’s wreckage in Gorky Park to stoke the story further. But it was the behind-the-scenes implications of the U-2 flight that had the biggest effect on Khrushchev and U.S.-Soviet relations. Khrushchev had extended himself to Eisenhower over the past two years and expended his political capital on the relationship, the idea of détente, and the promise of Paris. He would say, “My visit to the United States... had seemed to herald a promising shift in U.S. policy toward our country. But now, thanks to the U-2, the honeymoon was over.”²⁸

Having based much of his credibility on his relationship with Eisenhower, the U-2’s discovery put Khrushchev’s on shaky ground. As Ambassador Thompson cabled to Washington, “I also cannot help but think, although evidence is very slight, that Khrushchev is having some internal difficulties.”²⁹ Khrushchev would say to Ambassador Thompson at an early May diplomatic celebration in Moscow, “This U-2 thing has put me in a terrible spot. You have to get me off it.”³⁰

With the news of the capture, Khrushchev assured, “I am quite willing to grant that the President knew nothing about the fact that such a plane was sent into the Soviet Union. ... But this should put us even more on guard.”³¹ This assurance could be seen as demonstra-

tion of Khrushchev's personal, hurt feelings, his effort to give Eisenhower an opportunity to renounce responsibility for the flight, a mercurial rhetoric of a mercurial statesman, or even an effort to lower expectations for the summit.

It could also have been his realization and strategic concern that the earlier U-2 flights had allowed Washington to know the limitations of Khrushchev's claims of missile superiority.³² But the most convincing explanation for Khrushchev's approach to the incident was his effort to protect the summit and preserve his domestic political support. Thompson would even ask whether, in an effort to help Khrushchev and salvage the summit, the United States should "deny that the President himself had actual knowledge of this action?"³³

Denial was impossible in Eisenhower's mind. The president could not appear inert. And Eisenhower knew the stakes. He said in February 1960, "If one of these aircraft were lost when we were engaged in apparently sincere deliberations, it could be put on display in Moscow and ruin my effectiveness."³⁴ In accepting responsibility for the U-2 mission, Eisenhower put the interests of the presidency and his personal integrity above his hopes for a successful Paris summit, an agreement with Khrushchev, and his own legacy-defining progress toward détente.

Paris

Despite this situation and the new tension in the relationship, the plan for the summit proceeded and the powers gathered in Paris. Eisenhower and Khrushchev arrived in Paris constrained by domestic exigencies, powerless in their need for apology and straight talk, unable to overcome the obstacle created by the U-2 wreckage, but still hopeful.³⁵ A frustrated Eisenhower would say of the summit, "It might prove unpleasant, but I had no intention of evading it."³⁶ Khrushchev would demand an apology required by "our internal politics," and Eisenhower and the other Western leaders would weather his tantrums.³⁷

The summit became a propaganda stand-off, with neither side wanting to offer any additional fodder for the opposing side's rhetorical complaints. The Soviet Presidium had given Khrushchev permission to go to Paris but refused to allow him to negotiate unless Eisenhower apologized for the U-2.³⁸ Ambassador Thompson sensed these developments when he cabled, "All signs now appear to point to Khrushchev's intention of trying to extort maximum propaganda advantage from the Summit rather than attempt a serious negotiation."³⁹

The *New York Times*' James Reston called Paris the "conference that everyone lost... Everyone was trying to be very considerate and hopeful about the mess, but all had to admit it was a mess, brought on by the unplanned blunders of Washington and the savage planned reaction of Moscow. ... The nub of the whole thing seemed to be that both President Eisenhower and Premier Khrushchev, for different reasons, had lost control over the direction of the immense power they are supposed to govern."⁴⁰

Of the collapse, a Soviet diplomat said, “Now everything has changed.”⁴¹ When Gallup asked citizens of cities across the globe in July 1960 if they believed U.S. prestige had increased or decreased over the past year, 45 percent said it decreased while 22 percent believe it had increased.⁴²

Wider effects

The U-2 incident and the Paris collapse affected more than just the leaders and U.S.-Soviet relations. The impact spread through global and domestic politics. From Moscow to Washington, D.C. to Havana, the heightened tensions resulting from the situation would have a lasting impact.

The world was less safe. Most directly, the U-2 incident destroyed the progress made toward limits on nuclear testing that had brought the leaders to Paris. MacMillan called the halt in the progress and the collapse of the talks “the worst crisis my country has experienced since the war.”⁴³ The spirit of Camp David, the progress in Geneva, and the promise of Paris collapsed with the U-2 crash. It would take years before the United States and the Soviet Union would enter talks over nuclear testing with the potential for progress that existed before the U-2.

In addition, the U-2 directly contributed to speeding up the arms race. One reason Eisenhower had kept the missions secret was because as long as there was a perception of a missile gap and Soviets superiority in missile technology, the Soviets would not go about investing in creating such an advantage. The U-2 incident would alert the Soviets that the United States had learned much about their nuclear capabilities, especially their deficiency of ICBMs. As a reaction, the Soviets relied on the medium- and intermediate-range missiles for their defense, which would play a role in the lead-up to the Cuban Missile Crisis and increased production of other capabilities.

The U-2 incident and the collapse of the Paris summit had the most impact on Khrushchev’s authority and influence. A Russian with close ties to the Kremlin warned of the situation in fall 1959: “If [the West] is too slow about [rewarding Khrushchev’s outreach], Khrushchev may throw up the sponge and perhaps adopt a different policy. He may seem to be the supreme, unchallenged boss now, but conditions may change. If his Western policy is sabotaged by the West, he may—or somebody else may—switch over to a different policy.”⁴⁴

In his autobiography, Khrushchev would write that the downing of U-2 in 1960 was “a landmark event in the history of our struggle against the American imperialists who were waging the Cold War.”⁴⁵ The U-2 exacerbated for Khrushchev the domestic political pressures he was already facing; political allies and enemies were upset by his decision to reduce the size of the armed forces, his failed domestic reforms, his failure to produce

more ICBM's, his perceived mismanagement of Soviet satellite countries, his toleration of previous U-2 flyovers, and his perceived fraternization with the "capitalist enemy."⁴⁶ Khrushchev needed to show he was tough and capable. Thus he looked to Cuba, to Berlin, to the Third World for opportunities to stand up to the West.⁴⁷

Khrushchev saw the event as personal and it forced him to "throw up the sponge," as the warning in 1959 suggested.⁴⁸ His son would later admit the U-2 missions were a "betrayal by General Eisenhower, a man who had referred to him as a friend, a man with whom he had only recently sat at the same table... a betrayal that struck him in his very heart. He would never forgive Eisenhower for the U-2."⁴⁹ The Soviets had to respond. In Khrushchev's own words, Eisenhower had, "so to speak, offered us his back end, and we obliged him by kicking it as hard as we could."⁵⁰

The U-2 incident also started a period of decline in Khrushchev's career, and more functionally, his ability to decide and act with the full authority. Khrushchev would admit in 1969, "Things were going well until one thing happened. ... From the time Gary Powers was shot down in a U-2 over the Soviet Union, I was no longer in full control."⁵¹ He would add, "Those who felt that America had imperialist intentions and that military strength was the most important thing had the evidence they needed, and when the U-2 incident occurred, I no longer had the ability to overcome that feeling."⁵²

After the U-2, Khrushchev faced more effective internal political opposition—especially from the military—spurred by competing ambitions and disdain for Khrushchev's style—his out-of-the-box ideas, his perceived lack of ideological purity, and his focus on an intercontinental ballistic capability.⁵³ During the early 1960s, Khrushchev's position would further weaken his economic reforms, including a failed reduction in the military and other domestic programs.

As American diplomat George Kennan would write of the U-2 incident, it shattered "the political career of the only Soviet statesman of the post-Stalin period with whom we might conceivably have worked out a firmer sort of coexistence."⁵⁴ While it would be years before the West would understand it, the U-2 incident weakened the Soviet Premier significantly, leaving the leader less confident than the man who had debated Nixon and who pounded his shoe at the UN and took the political risk of agreeing with Eisenhower at Camp David.

Geopolitically, the U-2 crisis would sow the seeds for the next significant crisis in U.S.-Soviet relations by pushing the Soviet Union closer to Cuba and revolutionary Fidel Castro. The Eisenhower administration's policies toward Cuba and its revolution did little to enamor Castro with the United States. The decision to recognize and support the regime of Fulgencio Batista in the early 1950s and the later efforts to shun and plot against Castro had certainly set the course for Cuban relations with the United States, but as of 1960 the course to Communism and Soviet client status was not yet set on the island.



Cuban Prime Minister Fidel Castro, left, is embraced by Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in the United Nations General Assembly on Sept. 20, 1960.

As a result of the U-2 incident, Cuba and the Soviet Union became closer. On May 8, 1960—just seven days after the reconnaissance plane was taken down—Cuba and the Soviet Union established formal diplomatic relations and issued a joint communiqué that explained how relations had been set with the 1959 Soviet recognition of the Castro’s government.⁵⁵ In early 1961—17 days before Kennedy would take office and while planning for the Bay of Pigs efforts were well underway—the United States broke off diplomatic relations with Cuba.⁵⁶

On the heels of the reconnaissance plane incident, this Cuban–Soviet relationship quickly became more substantial and more complicated for the United States. After the collapse of the Paris summit, Khrushchev, while still in Paris, extolled the Cuban revolution and struggle against the United States and encouraged Latin American countries to follow Cuba’s lead.⁵⁷ While, in a June 3, 1960 interview Khrushchev disputed the need for the Soviet Union to base missiles in Cuba because “it is enough to press a button here to launch a missile to any part of the world,” it was reported in the July 9 Cuban *Revolución* that Khrushchev had told a group of Cubans during a private interview that the USSR would defend the Cuban revolution.⁵⁸

On June 9, 1960, Khrushchev told a group of Soviet school teachers of his commitment to protect Cuba with nuclear weapons. He said, “If need be, Soviet artillerymen can support

the Cuban people with their rocket fire, should the aggressive forces of the Pentagon dare to start an intervention against Cuba.”⁵⁹ The U.S.-Soviet-Cuban boil was worsened by the U-2 incident and would eventually come to a head with the Cuban Missile Crisis during the Kennedy administration.

But Kennedy would first need to be elected. As the U-2 and Paris drama ran its course, the presidential campaign was playing out in primaries and conventions with U.S. Senator John F. Kennedy triumphing in the Democratic primary to take on Vice President Richard Nixon in the general election. The rhetoric and the positioning the candidates utilized during the time of the U-2 incident would offer clues to their strategies for the fall.

After initially chastising the Eisenhower administration’s response over the U-2 incident, Kennedy’s line on U.S.-Soviet relations became harder and more effective after the crisis. Kennedy said Eisenhower should have “expressed regret” for having allowed the “risk of war to hang on the possibility of an engine failure.”⁶⁰ After being called “naïve” by Nixon, Kennedy responded, “If Vice President Nixon feels the conduct of this administration at the time the U-2 flights were discovered was commendable, that is his prerogative.”⁶¹ For the rest of the campaign, Kennedy would question Eisenhower and Nixon’s competence in standing up to the Soviets and Communism.

This approach helped with both the general public and opinion elite. A July 1960 poll by Gallup found “the overwhelming majority of those interviewed regard relations with Russia and the rest of the world as being the primary problem facing the nation today.”⁶² Henry Luce let the candidate’s father, Joseph Kennedy, know that if candidate Kennedy showed any weakness in standing up to the communists, “We’ll have to tear him apart.”⁶³

Kennedy used his critical rhetoric on the perceived missile gap (Eisenhower refused to divulge intelligence from U-2 flights dispelling the myth), the U-2 incident, the successful Soviet space program, and other global developments to assure voters he was as resolute as Nixon.⁶⁴ The positioning apparently helped Kennedy to win the close contest. But he would soon be forced to reconcile his campaign rhetoric with an approach to governing and dealing with the Soviet Union.

Kennedy takes command

It was in this tense, complicated, and dangerous environment that John F. Kennedy took the oath of office on January 20, 1961. Kennedy was inheriting a U.S.-Soviet relationship severely damaged and a counterpart in Khrushchev—because of personal hurt, political pressures, or both—deeply frustrated with the West.

Kennedy was preoccupied with a speech given by Khrushchev in early 1961, in which the Soviet premier gave voice to Russian elation at the lack of “any force in the world capable of barring the road to socialism.”⁶⁵ Khrushchev continued, “The Communists support just [wars of liberation or popular uprisings] wholeheartedly and without reservation and they march in the van of the peoples fighting for liberation.”⁶⁶ Khrushchev said “peaceful coexistence” would be “a form of intense economic, political and ideological struggle between the proletariat and the aggressive forces of imperialism in the world arena.”⁶⁷

Kennedy was alarmed at the confidence and bellicosity of the speech and the trust Khrushchev placed in a destined Socialist victory through revolution and subversion.⁶⁸ Speaking in “an hour of national peril” as “each day the crises multiply,” Kennedy framed part of his inaugural address and his first State of the Union address as responses to Khrushchev’s remarks.⁶⁹ He said in his January 30, 1961 State of the Union, “We must never be lulled into believing that either power has yielded its ambitions for world domination—ambitions which they forcefully restated only a time ago. On the contrary, our task is to convince them that aggression and subversion will not be profitable routes to pursue these ends. ... For if Freedom and Communism were to compete for man’s allegiance in a world at peace, I would look to the future with ever increasing confidence... to help bring things into proportion.”⁷⁰

Kennedy would reiterate a line from his inaugural in outlining the first step in ensuring victory in this competition: “Only when our arms are sufficient beyond doubt can we be certain beyond doubt that they will never be employed.”⁷¹ This rhetorical challenge was common early in the Kennedy administration. Kennedy’s early presidential rhetoric was that of a president trying to appear more aggressive than Eisenhower.⁷² Despite Soviet objections, despite the resolution of the missile gap, and despite Eisenhower’s warning of the power of the military-industrial complex, Kennedy followed up his words with action by beginning a swift and massive military buildup.⁷³

In late February 1960, Kennedy had called together a group of moderate foreign policy thinkers for a conversation about U.S.-Soviet relations. The group included Kennan, Thompson, former New York Governor, longtime presidential advisor and diplomat Averell Harriman, and longtime diplomat Charles Bohlen.⁷⁴ Inspired partly by the feelers coming from Khrushchev, Kennedy asked whether he should meet with Khrushchev. The gathered wise men agreed a face-to-face conversation might be useful.

Thompson believed that Kennedy could not fully appreciate what he faced in Khrushchev only through second hand accounts.⁷⁵ Bohlen, who had worked for Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Eisenhower before Kennedy, saw a similar trend in presidential interest in meeting with Soviet leaders: “The issues and consequences of mistakes of a serious nature in dealing with the Soviet Union are so great that no man of any character or intelligence will really wholeheartedly accept the view of anybody else.”⁷⁶ Thompson returned to Moscow with a letter to Khrushchev that proposed a meeting in the spring.

In addition to heightened rhetoric and military buildup, Kennedy also focused on Cuba and Laos in the first months of the administration. The failed Bay of Pigs invasion of April 1961, in which vastly outnumbered, CIA-trained and armed Cuban exiles attempted to take over the island, was the first significant foreign policy setback of the Kennedy administration. The failure, similar in its CIA origin, aggressive nature, and poor contingency planning to Eisenhower’s U-2 fiasco, helped shape Kennedy’s opinion of aggressive action and following of perceived experts and hawks for the remainder of his time as president.

Kennedy’s Laos policy was informed by Eisenhower’s warning before the inauguration that, “You might have to go in there and fight it out.”⁷⁷ Kennedy fearing the Laotian domino would fall under his watch, arranged a special Laos task force, initially increased U.S. support in the form of more visible military advisers to the nation’s government, and threatened direct military intervention. Eventually, however, Kennedy came to see neutralization as the only option. Despite having supported different sides, Kennedy and Khrushchev would support the neutralization brought about by a cease fire.

June 1961: Vienna

The failed Bay of Pigs invasion and setback in Laos put Kennedy on the defensive, sent shock waves of concern among our European allies, and offered opportunity to Moscow. The summit with Khrushchev—scheduled for Vienna in early June 1961—lay ahead. French Foreign Minister Couve de Murville said of Kennedy’s meeting with Khrushchev after the difficulties in Laos and Bay of Pigs, “It’s rather like fighting a championship bout after your last two sparring partners have knocked you out.”⁷⁸

Kennedy knew the score. He said, “There are limits to the number of defeats I can defend in one twelve-month period. I’ve had the Bay of Pigs, and pulling out of Laos, and I

can't accept a third.⁷⁹ While events were frustrating Kennedy, Khrushchev was enjoying the success of the Soviet space program, which was impressing domestic and international audiences. Less than four years after the surprise, successful launch of Sputnik, Cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first human to go into space on April 12, 1961.

Before Kennedy went to Vienna he stopped in Paris for a visit with French President Charles de Gaulle. Presidential aide Theodore Sorensen explained de Gaulle's aims in the meetings: "The General wants to be sure that we are determined as he on this one. ... Are we determined to maintain the nuclear strength on the continent and use it? Are you personally the man to deal with Khrushchev?"⁸⁰ De Gaulle would tell Kennedy, "Your job, Mr. President, is to make sure Khrushchev believes you are a man who will fight."⁸¹

Khrushchev was heading to Vienna charged by the disappointments and frustrations of the U-2 and the Bay of Pigs, put on edge by his political problems at home, and practiced from years of experience in debate and diplomacy with the West. Khrushchev's attitude was amplified by his need to appear tough on the "capitalist enemy" to assuage doubts at the Kremlin.⁸² Khrushchev was in the habit of earthy, illogical, even brutish rhetoric and non sequiturs in diplomatic conversations—he once told a group in India, "You cannot force the buffalo to eat meat; the tiger cannot be made to eat grass."⁸³

This conflict in approach—Khrushchev's hot to Kennedy's cool—was aggravated by the lack of a formal agenda and subject for the summit. It was to be a two day conversation. The Soviets had denied the request for specific deliverables; in a meeting with Kennedy, Soviet Ambassador to the U.S. Mikhail Menshikov reiterated Khrushchev's position that the summit should be a "general exchange of views."⁸⁴ Despite concerns about the lack of agenda, Kennedy proceeded believing—and hoping—for a reduction in tensions that would help avoid war.⁸⁵

There was little discussion of the U-2 incident in the briefing documents for Vienna, but the incident still stung Khrushchev and the damage done by the event would cloud the summit. Only Ambassador Thompson wrote in a briefing of the possibility Khrushchev might "rake up" the incident or potentially release captured U-2 pilot Powers.⁸⁶ Khrushchev, whose domestic political pressures were causing him to need to capitalize on events like the Bay of Pigs to score a victory over the United States, "believed that if he bested JFK at the Vienna summit, it would undermine U.S. political standing."⁸⁷ Khrushchev did not intend to negotiate; rather, he wanted to compete with Kennedy and score points at home.⁸⁸

The summit was a contentious affair. Over two days of meetings Kennedy and Khrushchev talked, argued, and disagreed over the course of history, the meaning of the word "miscalculation," and the fundamental differences between communism and capitalism. Khrushchev was relentless, wagging his finger, threatening, and snapping at Kennedy.

After the first day, Khrushchev thought Kennedy was “very young...not strong enough. Too intelligent and too weak.”⁸⁹ Ambassador Bohlen said Kennedy had gotten “a little bit out of his depth” in the debate.⁹⁰ Kennan thought “Khrushchev had tied the president in knots and that Kennedy appeared hesitant and overwhelmed.”⁹¹ Kennedy himself thought Khrushchev “savaged me.”⁹²

Kennedy was bothered by his own performance, especially on the heels of the Bay of Pigs fiasco. He was “shaken” and “angry.”⁹³ Attorney General Robert Kennedy would later say, “I think it was a shock to [President Kennedy] that somebody would be as harsh and definitive” as Khrushchev.⁹⁴ As British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan would write of the summit, “For the first time in his life Kennedy met a man who was impervious to his charm.”⁹⁵

Despite the near complete absence of the U-2 incident in official briefing papers produced by the State Department for the summit, Khrushchev brought up the affair twice, once on both days and both days forcefully. On the first, Khrushchev expressed regret over the unhappy development in his relations with Eisenhower. He called the U-2 flight “the main cause” for the development and suggested the flight was a successful effort on the part of people who wanted to worsen relations between the two countries.⁹⁶ The second day, Khrushchev discussed the situation in Berlin and blamed the U-2 incident for the lack of progress on the matter.⁹⁷

The Vienna summit broke down over the same Berlin challenge Khrushchev had presented to Eisenhower and the West in 1959. Berlin was Khrushchev’s frequent and valuable pressure point or “the corn on which he trod.”⁹⁸ Eisenhower had talked Khrushchev out of the ultimatum on their private walk at Camp David in 1959. The Berlin question was to be discussed in Paris, but the U-2 incident had eliminated past progress, wasted a year, allowed the issue to fester, and now vex, in a similar manner, the Vienna summit and the new relationship between Kennedy and Khrushchev.

With the official meeting over and the U.S.-Soviet relationship on the brink, Kennedy said to an aide, “I can’t leave here without giving it one more try. ... I am not going to leave until I know more.”⁹⁹ The extra conversation, however, would not prove fruitful. With a stand off over the future of Berlin, Khrushchev said he “wanted peace and that if the U.S. wanted war, that was its problem. It is not the USSR that threatens with war, it is the U.S.”¹⁰⁰ Kennedy responded that “it would be a cold winter.”¹⁰¹

Vienna impact on U.S.-Soviet relations

More than the winter, the cold extended for two years. Those days would see the Berlin Crisis, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and U.S. advisors being sent to Southeast Asia.

The reviews of the meeting were bad. The two days were called a “disaster,” Kennedy was viewed as “not sure of himself,” and Khrushchev was described as having overwhelmed Kennedy with his “ruthlessness and barbarity.”¹⁰² Kennedy himself would call the meetings the “worst thing in my life.”¹⁰³ Still worse, Chamberlain’s performance in Munich resurfaced when British Prime Minister MacMillan wrote to the Queen that the Kennedy performance in Vienna “reminded me in a way of... Neville Chamberlain trying to hold a conversation” with the Nazis in Munich.¹⁰⁴ As *Time* magazine would write after Vienna, “There were fears that the President on occasion relied too strongly on advisers who would rather lose the cold war step by step than risk the nuclear consequences of standing fast.”¹⁰⁵

The negative could obscure the modest benefits of the summit. As columnist Walter Lippmann wrote after the summit, Vienna was “significant and important because it marked the re-establishment of full diplomatic intercourse.”¹⁰⁶ Kennedy’s efforts were a “very considerable achievement” because “as a result of the U-2 and the breakup of the summit conference in Paris, there was in fact, although not in form, a rupture of diplomatic relations between Moscow and Washington.”¹⁰⁷ The established connection between the leaders of the two nations, even if difficult, would offer more promise than it would provide immediate frustrations.

The potential of the relationship, his impressions of Kennedy, and his ability to appear tough in the face of the charismatic new president helped Khrushchev overcome his hurt feelings and attempt to contain his political challenges. He would write years after the summit, “Even though we came to no concrete agreement [in Vienna], I could tell that [Kennedy] was interested in finding a peaceful solution to world problems and in avoiding conflict with the Soviet Union. He was a reasonable man, and I think he knew that he wouldn’t be justified in starting a war over Berlin.”¹⁰⁸ Despite Khrushchev’s reaction to the first day in Vienna, he would write, “I had met Kennedy in Vienna. He impressed me as a better statesman than Eisenhower.”¹⁰⁹

And despite the description of the somber tone in Vienna, the press noticed Kennedy’s growth. The conservative *Chicago Tribune* had ridiculed Kennedy as “Little Mr. Merit Badge” heading into the summit, but said of the summit, “If Mr. Kennedy went abroad as an innocent, he comes home with some knowledge. Chiefly it is that Communism is predatory, that he and Khrushchev can use the same words without any approach to a common meaning.”¹¹⁰

These changes showed in Kennedy’s approach to the Soviet Union. After the summit, with the frustrations and fears it produced still echoing through the White House, Kennedy took a harder line that put the hard-line anti-Soviet wing of his advisors and political party in the ascendancy—both rhetorically and in the budget. In a speech on July 25, Kennedy said, “We do not want to fight—but we have fought before. And others in earlier times have made the same dangerous mistake of assuming that the West was too selfish and too soft and too divided to resist invasions of freedom in other lands.”¹¹¹ Kennedy also called up the reserves and requested additional military spending.¹¹²

The tougher talk and higher spending were important changes, but what may have been the most important result of the encounter with Khrushchev was the transformation it caused in Kennedy's view of summitry and diplomacy. Kennedy, who had vowed as a candidate that he "would not meet with Mr. Khrushchev unless there were some agreement at the secondary level which would indicate that the meeting had some hope of success, or useful exchange of ideas," found himself agreeing to meet face-to-face with Khrushchev just months into his presidency.¹¹³

The Kennedy conversion to an advocate for talking with the Soviet Union left him a different man in the months after Vienna, during the Berlin Crisis, throughout the Cuban Missile Crisis, and in negotiating the Limited Test Ban Treaty before his assassination. In a speech at the University of Washington in November 1961, Kennedy said, "Diplomacy and defense are not substitutes for one another. Either alone would fail. A willingness to resist force, unaccompanied by a willingness to talk, could provoke belligerence—while a willingness to talk, unaccompanied by a willingness to resist force, could invite disaster."¹¹⁴

The threat of real military or nuclear confrontation over Berlin existed when Khrushchev reissued his ultimatum that Eisenhower had worked to overcome at Camp David nearly two years before. As the Western allies balked at a unilateral peace treaty and chose to advocate for maintaining the existing situation, Khrushchev chose to seal the border to West Berlin and erect the Berlin Wall in August 1961. The crisis that ensued never reached the heated levels that accompanied the later Cuban Missile Crisis because of the focus on national interests and the approaches taken by Kennedy and Khrushchev, who relied on back channel and official communications to keep the situation from boiling over. Arguably a more patient, realistic, and less-belligerent Kennedy, after the Bay of Pigs and Vienna, would demonstrate his perspective on the situation when he would tell an aide, "A wall is a hell of a lot better than a war."¹¹⁵

The Cuban boil grows

This new willingness to talk would be required because, while Vienna had relieved pressure created by the U-2, the situation in Cuba continued to fester with the Soviets growing closer to Castro. In the fall of 1961, while U.S. Jupiter medium-range ballistic nuclear missiles sat on bases in Turkey and Italy, then Deputy Secretary of Defense Roswell Gilpatric admitted the missile gap did not exist. Gilpatric said the United States had a "second strike capability which is at least as extensive as the Soviets can deliver by striking first." That spelled out the U.S. strategic advantage and finally resolved the missile gap and called the Soviet bluff.¹¹⁶

This admission, the knowledge that the U-2 program had given the United States detailed information about the location and capabilities of the Soviet ICBM program, and the failure of the Soviet efforts to make intercontinental progress left Khrushchev, who had pushed for and extended political capital on the development of the Soviet intercontinen-

tal capability, in a politically precarious spot once again. He needed a way to mollify the military, calm the political waters at home, and demonstrate power abroad.¹¹⁷

Despite their ICBM deficit, the Soviets still possessed a large stock of medium- and intermediate-range missiles. They looked to use them creatively to level the playing field. Khrushchev would write in his memoir, “In addition to protecting Cuba, our missiles would have equalized what the West likes to call ‘the balance of power’... and now [the Americans] would learn just what it feels like to have enemy missiles pointing at [them]; we’d be doing nothing more than giving them a little of their own medicine.”¹¹⁸ Khrushchev, who two close aides would describe as a “reckless” gambler and “hothead,” would look to Cuba for a Hail Mary pass.¹¹⁹ He thought the missiles in Cuba could “restore, at least partially, their lost deterrent strength” and protect a Soviet “protégé” from invasion.¹²⁰ Instead, they would result in crisis, danger, and further weakening of Khrushchev.

The personal changes in Kennedy and Khrushchev would be necessary in order for the two to resolve the resulting nuclear crises and the Cuban Missile Crisis, but also to take advantage of the biggest opportunity toward limitations on nuclear weapons—the Limited Test Ban Treaty.

If, the day after Vienna, a war game were simulated to mirror the parameters of the Cuban Missile Crisis—Soviet missiles illicitly installed in Cuba 90 miles from the United States—no one would have believed it would result in a peaceful resolution developed personally and directly by Kennedy and Khrushchev. But 16 months after Vienna, that is what occurred.

As Khrushchev would write, the Cuban Missile Crisis was “to say the least, an interesting and challenging situation. The two most powerful nations of the world had been squared off against each other, each with its finger on the button. You’d have thought that war was inevitable. But both sides showed that if the desire to avoid war is strong enough, even the most pressing dispute can be solved by compromise. ... The episode ended in a triumph of common sense.”¹²¹

Test Ban Treaty

In the same vein, no one would have predicted that so soon after the onset of Kennedy’s “cold winter” that the two countries would agree to negotiate limitations on nuclear testing. But Kennedy and Khrushchev again pushed their nations to the negotiating table against popular and political opinion. As it had been in 1960 with Eisenhower pushing for a treaty, the two countries stood on the edge of real progress in slowing the arms race.

Hints for progress could be seen in a letter sent to Kennedy from Khrushchev during the Cuban Missile Crisis. In it Khrushchev wrote:

We and you ought not now to pull on the ends of the rope in which you have tied the knot of war, because the more the two of us pull, the tighter that knot will be tied. And a moment may come when that knot will be tied so tight that even he who tied it will not have the strength to untie it, and then it will be necessary to cut that knot, and what that would mean is not for me to explain to you, because you yourself understand perfectly of what terrible forces our countries dispose. "Consequently, if there is no intention to tighten that knot and thereby to doom the world to the catastrophe of thermonuclear war, then let us not only relax the forces pulling on the ends of the rope, let us take measures to untie that knot. We are ready for this."¹²²

It was not just personal motives loosening the “knot of war” and driving the test ban cause. Expediency mattered as well. Kennedy wanted a test ban because it would limit the defense spending burden which would help offset the effect of unfavorable U.S. balance of payments on the dollar and it would limit proliferation of nuclear weapons by stopping the testing that could lead to less expensive and easier to produce nuclear weapons. Khrushchev desired a limit because the Soviet Union faced such a disparity in strategic ballistic nuclear missiles, especially after the removal of the Cuban base weapons, and because the test ban might prevent or slow the possession of nuclear weapons by China, an increasingly difficult inter-family competitor for Khrushchev. Working against the deal were misunderstandings, Khrushchev’s concerns over the prospect of on-site inspections, and Khrushchev’s political pressures, which included China lobbying against a deal and his countrymen’s opposition to limitations.¹²³

In the spring of 1963 after the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy met with journalist and activist Norman Cousins who told him of his recent meeting with Khrushchev in Moscow. Cousins suggested Kennedy try a new effort to break the impasse on testing by delivering “the most important speech of your presidency [including] breathtaking proposals for genuine peace... [a] tone of friendliness for the Soviet people and... [an] understanding of their ordeal during the last war.”¹²⁴ While Kennedy saw risk in the approach, he also recognized an opportunity and believed a plea was the right thing to do.

The speech Kennedy would give at American University was one of the most ambitious of his time in the White House. On June 10, Kennedy said:

Our interests converge... not only in defending the frontiers of freedom, but in pursuing the paths of peace... The one major area of these negotiations where the end is in sight, yet where a fresh start is badly needed, is in a treaty to outlaw nuclear tests. The conclusion of such a treaty, so near and yet so far, would check the spiraling arms race in one of its most dangerous areas. It would place the nuclear powers in a position to deal more effectively with one of the greatest hazards which man faces in 1963, the further spread of nuclear arms. It would increase our security—it would decrease the prospects of war. Surely this goal is sufficiently important to require our steady pursuit, yielding neither to the temptation to give up the whole effort nor the temptation to give up our insistence on vital and responsible safeguards.¹²⁵

While the speech did not stir the U.S. public much—in the 17 days after the speech, Kennedy received 1,677 letters (30 negative) about his remarks at American University but almost 52,000 letters about a freight rate bill—Congressional Republicans called it a “a soft line that can accomplish nothing ... a shot from the hip ... a dreadful mistake.”¹²⁶ The Soviets and Khrushchev, however, were more positive. The Soviet press published an uncensored transcript, Voice of America was permitted to broadcast nearly the entire speech in Russian, and Khrushchev called it the “greatest statement by any American President since Roosevelt.”¹²⁷

Sensing an opportunity, both leaders moved quickly. On June 20, the Americans and Soviets established a direct communications link between the two governments, a long sought after development. Negotiations began in Moscow toward a test ban treaty. Former Ambassador to the USSR Harriman and British Lord Hailsham represented the Western allies at the talks and they saw instant interest from the Soviets because, as a low-level Soviet representative explained, the sides had experienced “the breath of death” during the past year.¹²⁸

As on-site inspections remained unacceptable to Khrushchev, Kennedy pushed for a ban on tests in atmosphere, outer space, and underwater. The Limited Test Ban Treaty was concluded in 10 days. It outlawed atmospheric but not underground testing of nuclear weapons. On September 24, the U.S. Senate approved the treaty 80 to 19.

It may have taken a brutal summit and crises to change the two leaders, but when the evolution occurred, the tone and reality had changed as well. In March 1963, 60 percent of Americans believed the Soviet Union would drop a hydrogen bomb on the United States. In June 1963, before the start of test ban treaty negotiations, 37 percent of Americans believed it “impossible to reach a peaceful settlement of differences with Russia.”¹²⁹ But in September 1963, after the agreement to a limited test ban, only 25 percent believed the threat of war was the greatest problem facing the country.¹³⁰

This shift was not an easy one. It would not have been easily predicted. It was not simply the result of a few key, simple shifts. The meetings in Vienna, however contentious, bookended by the U-2 incident and the Cuban Missile Crisis, were necessary elements in changing the tone, demeanor, and attitude of Kennedy and Khrushchev. Without the Vienna summit, it is possible neither party would have seen the opportunities that existed in the Missile Crisis and the test ban or possessed the intelligence, foresight, and empathy required to work toward those successful resolutions.

Final thoughts

Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy were two leaders dealing with the international and political pressures of the coldest days of the Cold War. Their inclinations to step toward the negotiating table, while somewhat contrary to their default tendencies as politicians, became the primary method for dealing with their Soviet adversary and the crises of those years. Even Khrushchev would demonstrate with the majority of his actions over those years and his knot analogy that he saw more value in talking than bombing.

Eisenhower and Kennedy's efforts helped the United States get beyond the standoffs and stop the nuclear threats. They should also help our current discourse to evolve beyond the Myth of Munich. For too long, the prospect of being called an appeaser has limited diplomatic engagement. Both Eisenhower and Kennedy heard the whispers but followed their instincts. A review of the years 1959 to 1963 demonstrates the value and rewards of diplomacy: While there were bumps in the road, the world survived the coldest days of the Cold War and developed the blueprint for thaw because leaders on both sides never feared to negotiate.

The lessons provided by the events of those years include the need for engagement, the ability to work through provocation and bluster, the willingness to risk failure, and the maintenance of credibility. Eisenhower and Kennedy's decisions to engage led to improvements in the U.S.-Soviet relationship. Engagement increased the potential for transparency and decreased the chances for miscalculation between two adversaries. Kennedy's communications with Khrushchev allowed him to air his concern about miscalculation and helped the two leaders avoid errors during times of crisis. This inclination eventually led to the installation of a direct line between Moscow and Washington.

Diplomacy, when integrated with other policy tools, also gave both presidents a powerful force multiplier for advancing U.S. interests. Eisenhower's efforts to speak with Khrushchev were paired with his domestic investment programs and use of the U-2 and other surveillance tools. Kennedy's tough summit with Khrushchev occurred three months after he authorized the Peace Corps by Executive Order and at the same time he was increasing defense spending. Diplomacy was just one tool in their presidential repertoires, but for Eisenhower and Kennedy it presented and preserved useful options.

From the crises to the stakes, the years 1959 to 1963 were comparable to our own tumultuous times. But those were not the only similarities: Eisenhower and Kennedy heard whispered allegations of “appeasement” and reminders of Munich as they dealt with the Soviet Union. But the possibility of being labeled a “Chamberlain” or an “appeaser” deterred neither man. Both Eisenhower and Kennedy were willing to risk their reputations, their legacies, and their popularity for one more walk, “one more try” with Khrushchev in the hopes it could stave off disaster. In those moments, Eisenhower and Kennedy were worried more about national interests than the Munich Myth. As the United States confronts the Russia over Georgia, our leaders should take the same approach.

Endnotes

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