

How did the Doctrine of Flexible Response Contribute to the Resolution of the Berlin Crisis of 1961?

The expansion of conventional forces, hardline rhetoric and propaganda initiatives, in anticipation of a crisis affecting US access to West Berlin, served to convince Nikita Khrushchev of the Kennedy administration's willingness to use military force to protect their position in Berlin. These tactics demonstrated "flexible response" in action and ensured a temporary and peaceful resolution to the Berlin question. John F. Kennedy's use of political and military pressure resulted in a softening of Khrushchev's stance on Berlin and the construction of the Berlin Wall; an action which posed a far less significant threat to the US than a Soviet Union (USSR) - East German (GDR) peace treaty which Khrushchev had previously threatened. The actions of the Kennedy administration at the Vienna Summit, actions taken in the lead up to the wall's construction, and Kennedy's response thereafter, demonstrated adherence to the key tenets of flexible response: moderation, proportionality and the exploration of diplomacy. Reflecting on the events of 1961 at a North Atlantic Council Ministerial meeting in April 1962, Robert McNamara stated "that it is not unlikely that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) non-nuclear buildup conveyed to the Soviets the right message about Berlin. Greater manpower in Berlin gave the Soviets second thoughts."¹

This essay will argue that the Kennedy administration's application of the doctrine of flexible response heavily contributed to a peaceful outcome to the Berlin Crisis by ensuring proportional U.S. reactions to Soviet provocations, while convincing Premier Khrushchev of American determination to defend their access rights in West Berlin. Although historians such as Stephen Rabe and David Reynolds have highlighted how the Kennedy administration improved contingency planning and expanded American capabilities to confront tension in Berlin, current historiography has not provided a full analysis of the role of flexible response in driving U.S. decision-making during the Berlin Crisis. This neglect is exemplified by Erin Mahan, who maintains that "flexible response remained in the theoretical realm rather than actual adopted strategy" and by Thomas Paterson who contends that under the Kennedy administration "non-military solutions to problems

¹ Address by McNamara to the North Atlantic Council Ministerial Meeting, 5 May 1962, *Foreign Relations of the United States: 1961-1963*, Vol. VIII, document 82.

were excluded.”² This work will expand upon Lawrence Freedman’s analysis of the ways in which flexible response inspired the expansion of conventional military forces in Europe, by examining how the doctrine encouraged Kennedy’s exploration of diplomacy, propaganda initiatives and political and economic sanctions in an attempt to solve the Berlin question.³ Furthermore, I will also highlight the president’s preference for graduated responses to Soviet provocations over Berlin, disproving Thomas Paterson’s assertion that Kennedy was “belligerent” leader. Flexible response strategy ultimately departed from Eisenhower’s reliance on nuclear deterrent, providing, what Kennedy described as, “a wider choice than humiliation or all-out nuclear action.”⁴

The positions of the US and USSR, with regard to West Berlin and the German question in 1961 are well known. Nikita Khrushchev ultimately sought to “normalize” the situation in Berlin, ending allied occupation rights and giving East Germany jurisdiction over the city. By signing a peace treaty with the GDR, Khrushchev aimed to hand over access rights to Berlin to the East Germans and recognize the division of Germany by formalizing the boundaries between the FRG and GDR, resolving the “German question” and the “Berlin question” to the USSR’s advantage. The USSR also hoped that formalized boundaries would scupper the efforts of German “revanchists.” The US hoped for the eventual reunification of Germany through self-determination for the German people. The US affirmed that their position in West Berlin was guaranteed through both the treaty signed with the USSR in 1944, which gave them the right of conquest and “contractual rights”, and through the overwhelming support of West Berliners. The US maintained that they would oppose any treaty or force which denied them these rights. The Kennedy administration believed that US recognition of East Germany through a peace treaty, advocated by Khrushchev, would gradually erode US access rights to West Berlin and undermine US prestige by renegeing on commitments made to protect West Berliners. Furthermore, recognition of the GDR and a weakened position in Berlin could also have the undesired consequence of pushing West Germany closer into the Soviet camp and isolating the US. To add to this undesirable possibility, recognition would also perpetuate the division of Germany, making reunification unlikely. Therefore, the US sought to maintain the

² Erin R. Mahan, *Kennedy, De Gaulle and Western Europe*. (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), p. 51.; Thomas G. Paterson, “Bearing the Burden: A Critical Look At JFK’s Foreign Policy.” *The Virginia Quarterly Review* (1978): 193-212.

³ Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos and Vietnam*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 92-111.

⁴ Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Berlin Crisis, July 25, 1961, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=8259&st=&st1=#axzz1MhFUoGIS> (accessed October 5 2011.)

status quo, ensuring their commitments were fulfilled, while enabling a possible future resolution to the German question via German self-determination.⁵

In a telegram sent on February the 4th 1961, the US Embassy in Moscow highlighted that the Soviets believed US occupation of West Berlin threatened “the stability of the East German regime” and suggested that a USSR-GDR peace treaty was still favored by Khrushchev. In the 1950s over two million East Germans had fled to West Germany, many through Berlin, and the exodus of talented doctors, engineers, students and skilled workers continued to be an embarrassment for the Soviet Union. The future of West Berlin dominated Kennedy’s thoughts in the early months of his presidency. Stephen Rabe notes that Kennedy believed the US had a “moral obligation” to stand by West Berlin, while US public opinion in 1961 highlighted that Americans expected Kennedy to defend the city.⁶

Addressing Congress on March 28th 1961, John F. Kennedy declared that “our military posture must be sufficiently flexible and under control to be consistent with our efforts to explore all possibilities and to take every step to lessen tensions.”⁷ Kennedy stressed the importance of increasing the United States’ ability to use nonnuclear deterrence as a means of displaying US resolve to protect its interests abroad, while also acting in a proportional manner in times of crisis. It is this commitment to moderacy that leads John Gaddis to affirm that Kennedy aimed to “strike a balance” in his foreign policy, rather than risk “excessive restraint, [which] could leave the way open for adversaries to exploit opportunities,” or risk nuclear war by not having “the means” for nonnuclear deterrent.⁸ It is this lack of “proportional” means in Europe, and more importantly for confronting tension in Berlin, which the Kennedy administration sought to address. Robert McNamara highlighted to Kennedy on May 5th 1961, in a memo concerning preparations for a possible Berlin Crisis, that NSC 5803, written in 1958, was “not consistent with current US strategic thinking.” The position of the Dwight Eisenhower administration toward West Berlin implied that in the event of a GDR blockade of the city, the US “will be prepared to go immediately

⁵ For a full and frank discussion of the US and USSR positions on the “Berlin question” see: Memo of Conversation between Kennedy and Khrushchev, June 4 1961, *FRUS*, Vol. XIV, document 32.

⁶ Stephen G. Rabe, *John F. Kennedy: World Leader*. (Washington D.C.: Potomac Books, 2010), p. 44.

⁷ Special Message to Congress on the Defense Budget, March 28 1961, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=8554&st=&st1=#axzz1MhFUoGIS> (accessed October 7 2011.)

⁸ John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 201. For a deeper discussion of “Flexible Response” see Gaddis’ chapter on “Kennedy, Johnson, and Flexible Response”, pp. 197-234.

to general nuclear war after using only limited military force to attempt to reopen access to Berlin.” McNamara highlighted that this was inconsistent with the tenets of flexible response, which advocated a series of preliminary measures including economic and political pressure, airlifts and limited force to reopen access; only when the use of substantial conventional force had failed would nuclear force be considered.⁹

As early as February 28th 1961, the Department of State had informed the Embassy in the Soviet Union that the US “could not approve or underwrite a treaty confirming the division of Germany and would have to oppose it publicly.”¹⁰ Due to US determination that a GDR-Russian peace treaty would not be signed, planning began as to what the US response would be. This consequently included the reaction to a declaration of West Berlin as part of East German territory and a resultant GDR occupation of West Berlin or blockade. In a meeting with the British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan on April 5th 1961, Kennedy remarked that Eisenhower’s state of planning to address a “substantial interference with the traffic to Berlin, civilian or military” was “not serious enough.”¹¹ Kennedy requested that the plans for addressing a possible peace treaty and restriction of tripartite access rights to West Berlin be turned into commitments. Furthermore, rather than accept MacMillan’s argument that allied conquest rights to West Berlin were “wearing thin,” Kennedy stressed that he wished to maintain the status quo. Kennedy further affirmed that due to the US having no bargaining position there was a vital need to convince Khrushchev of the strength of US deterrent and willingness to use it.¹²

The stance of the Kennedy administration remained that if the US had the capabilities to confront a GDR blockade of West Berlin then the USSR may be deterred from carrying out this threat. As a result of Kennedy’s request, on May 5th McNamara advised the president of steps to resolve a possible blockade, including training for tripartite forces, a plan for a tripartite reinforced division to restore access to Berlin, and West German participation in Berlin contingency planning. The Joint Chiefs of Staff further suggested that any attempt by the Soviet Union “to deny the free world access to Berlin must include Free World military, diplomatic, and economic countermeasures.”¹³

⁹ McNamara Memo for Kennedy, May 5 1961, *FRUS*, Vol. XIV, document 22.

¹⁰ Telegram from State Dept. to Moscow, Feb. 28 1961, *FRUS*, Vol. XIV, document 7.

¹¹ Memo of Conversation, Apr. 5 1961, *FRUS*, Vol. XIV, document 14.

¹² Memo of Conversation, Apr. 6 1961, *FRUS*, Vol. XIV, document 15.

¹³ Memo from McNamara to Kennedy, *FRUS*, doc. 22.

The JCS' approach was therefore consistent with Kennedy's "flexible response" doctrine which Dean Rusk described as "a mobile, substantial, and flexible US capability for operations short of general war to meet the threat of limited aggression."¹⁴

Prior to the Vienna Summit of 1961, the Kennedy administration reaffirmed their stance that "there will be no real solution to the German problem or any real tranquility in Central Europe until the Germans are reunified...we are not disposed to take any legal or other definitive steps which would appear to perpetuate or legalize this division."¹⁵ The Vienna Summit of 1961 presented an opportunity for Kennedy to reaffirm US commitments to protecting West Berlin and attempt to argue for a resolution to the Berlin and German questions through diplomacy. Michael Beschloss contends that "the Berlin Crisis provided both reason and a pretext for the president to promote his doctrine of "flexible response."¹⁶ Indeed, the Vienna Summit demonstrates attempts by Kennedy and Khrushchev to address the situation in Germany through diplomacy. Applying flexible response, the president attempted negotiations as a first means of taking appropriate action. Kennedy believed he could make Khrushchev back down on a peace treaty and the summit provided this opportunity.

Thomas Paterson maintains that John F. Kennedy pursued a "vigorous, even belligerent foreign policy" and within his administration "the policy of toughness became dogma to such an extent that non-military solutions to political problems were excluded."¹⁷ However, Paterson's argument glaringly looks over attempts made by Kennedy to seek a peaceful resolution to the Berlin Crisis during the Vienna Summit. A position paper prepared by the Department of State prior to the summit declared that the US "remained unshaken in their conviction that outstanding international questions should be settled not by the use of threat or force but by peaceful means through negotiation," while maintaining that the "US has no intention of being forced out of Berlin." The paper further stated that Kennedy should convince Khrushchev that the situation in Germany and Berlin "is tolerable and of no great strain" and should be left alone.¹⁸ However, Khrushchev went

¹⁴ Rusk to McNamara with enclosed memo, Feb. 4 1961, *FRUS*, Vol. VIII, document 10.

¹⁵ State Dept. Position Paper, May 25 1961, *FRUS*, Vol. XIV, document 26.

¹⁶ Michael R. Beschloss, *The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960-1963*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), p. 257.

¹⁷ Paterson, "Bearing the Burden," pp. 193-212.

¹⁸ State Dept. Position Paper, *FRUS*, document 26.

into the summit placing the abnormal situation in Berlin as his top priority. Khrushchev had been warned by his aides prior to the summit of the embarrassing mass exodus of East Germans through West Berlin, one joking that “soon there would be no one left in East Germany except Ulbricht and his mistresses.” David Reynolds highlights that Khrushchev saw Vienna as a “great opportunity to pressurize a weak president” into accepting a treaty with East Germany which would turn over control of access to Berlin to the GDR and end allied access rights.¹⁹

Despite the attempt at diplomacy, the Vienna Summit heralded no breakthrough on Berlin which would resolve the ever deepening tension. Nikita Khrushchev declared on June 4th that if the United States did not sign a peace treaty with the Russians and the GDR formalizing borders he would sign one with the GDR by the end of the year, the state of war would end and the terms of Germany’s surrender would expire. Khrushchev also argued that the position of the GDR needed to be “normalized” and to do this it was necessary “to eliminate the occupation rights in West Berlin.” Kennedy held a firm line, asserting that the US wished to maintain the status quo and would only negotiate if the US maintained its rights in the city. Kennedy highlighted that if the US accepted the loss of its rights then “no one would have confidence in US commitments and pledges,” resulting in US isolation. Rather than empathize with the US predicament, Khrushchev would not accept Kennedy’s argument and quipped “if the US wants to start a war let it be so.” Kennedy responded by highlighting that the USSR wanted to force a change in Berlin, not the US, and it was Khrushchev who was precipitating a confrontation, further contending that “a peace treaty denying us our contractual rights is a belligerent act.”²⁰

Although both leaders maintained firm stances, their willingness to place Berlin as one of the main three topics of the summit, demonstrates that Kennedy and Khrushchev attempted diplomacy as a means to resolve tension. Kennedy did not merely exclude non-military solutions as Paterson has claimed, but sought to convince Khrushchev to refrain from challenging the peaceful situation in Berlin. Attempts to reach an agreement that was permissible to both leaders failed as both attempted to protect their own country’s interests. Following the summit the stakes had shifted as a result of Khrushchev’s declaration that if the US did not accept a neutral city with no US military presence a bilateral peace treaty would be signed by the end of the 1961. Erin Mahan highlights that “upon

¹⁹ David Reynolds, *Summits: Six Meetings that Shaped the Twentieth Century*. (Philadelphia: Basic Books, 2007), pp. 181-182.

²⁰ See Ibid, pp. 192-194; Memo of Conversation between Kennedy and Khrushchev, *FRUS*, document 32.

returning from Vienna the president was now personally involved in the Berlin crisis in a way which made it the single most important item on his plate.”²¹ Furthermore, following the publication of a Soviet memorandum reaffirming Khrushchev’s threat, Kennedy made military planning for a possible challenge to US access to West Berlin his “top priority.”²²

Aono Toshishiko emphasizes that following Vienna “the Kennedy administration pursued a new NATO strategy, flexible response, criticizing its predecessor’s military doctrine of massive retaliation for an over reliance on nuclear weapons.”²³ Aware that the Eisenhower strategy of using nuclear weapons as the primary means of deterrent was not working, Kennedy now sought to convince Khrushchev of US resolve to protect Berlin. Erin Mahan highlights that Kennedy ordered a “streamlining of the bureaucratic decision-making process and grafted a Berlin task force onto the National Security Council.” Mahan further emphasizes that throughout the summer of 1961 “Kennedy relied heavily on an interdepartmental coordinating group headed by [Dean] Acheson.”²⁴ Acheson’s report on addressing the threat to Berlin affirmed that the outcome of the Berlin Crisis “would go far to determine the confidence of Europe-indeed the world-in the United States, and the integrity of the US pledged word.” He therefore discarded negotiations over Berlin as a “waste of time and energy,” affirming that Khrushchev would prevail in negotiations because he could “not be persuaded by eloquence or logic.” Acheson suggested that a decline in the effectiveness of US deterrent had marked a shift in Soviet appraisals of US willingness to go to war over Berlin and contended that in order to “restore the credibility of the nuclear deterrent” the US need to be prepared for the possibility of war. Acheson hoped that this would make clear to Khrushchev “that what he wants is not possible without war.”²⁵

Acheson’s report advised Kennedy to begin a military expansion immediately with Britain, France and West Germany. This included “preparation of non-nuclear forces for substantial use on the ground and in the air,” quicker mobilization and increasing the ability of naval forces to block shipping and to engage in combat operations. Acheson stressed that these actions must not be

²¹ Mahan, *Kennedy, De Gaulle and Western Europe*, p. 51.

²² Reynolds, *Summits*, p. 198.

²³ Aono Toshishiko, “‘It is Not Easy for the United States to Carry the Whole Load’: Anglo-American Relations during the Berlin Crisis,” *Diplomatic History* 34.2 (April 2010): 325-56.

²⁴ Mahan, *Kennedy*, p. 52.

²⁵ Acheson Report, June 28 1961, *FRUS*, Vol. XIV, document 49.

provocative as to cause antagonization among allies, or to result in Soviet counter-challenges. Furthermore, in keeping with an ability to engage in a range of graduated “flexible responses,” Acheson advised Kennedy that economic sanctions should be explored. This included, in the event of a Berlin blockade, an ability to cut off trade, deny Bloc ships access to NATO ports, deny Soviet aircraft landing in NATO countries and to deny the transportation of Soviet goods. Acheson also recommended a propaganda campaign to discredit Khrushchev through speeches and pamphleteering, emphasizing Khrushchev’s aggression and highlighting Western aims to preserve the peaceful status quo. Acheson’s report concluded that a series of escalating measures would be implemented in the event of the restriction of access rights. Firstly, if the East Germans increased travel restrictions, an airlift would take place followed by economic countermeasures, if aircraft were shot at, air conflict would follow. If Soviets became involved, large ground forces would be placed on stand-by and economic measures stepped up, and in a blockade of Berlin the US would send a battalion to establish the blocking of the city and then a substantial non-nuclear force until nuclear strikes were required. Later in the summer, Acheson also demanded that Kennedy declare a state of national emergency in order to call up the reserves.²⁶

Thomas Paterson maintains that under Kennedy “force and toughness became enshrined as instruments of policy.” However, Dean Acheson’s hardline stance was balanced by Kennedy with the advice of more moderate advisors such as Dean Rusk, McGeorge Bundy, Robert McNamara and Arthur Schlesinger. Arthur Schlesinger warned Kennedy on July 7th that by accepting Acheson’s no negotiation stance and rebutting Soviet aide-memoirs, the US would allow Khrushchev to set the frame of discussion. Furthermore, Schlesinger suggested that a political offensive could undermine Khrushchev in world opinion.²⁷ McGeorge Bundy and Dean Rusk also raised concerns over a declaration of national emergency which Bundy considered to be a major “quantum jump” and Rusk “a dangerous sound of mobilization.” Rusk urged the actions be “low key.”²⁸ Ultimately, on July 19th 1961 McNamara’s stance prevailed over Acheson’s hawkish position. McNamara’s flexible timetable of rapid deployment of reserves in the event of a deepening crisis was considered by Kennedy to be preferable to declaring a national emergency.²⁹ The more moderate approach of

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Memo from Schlesinger for Kennedy, July 7 1961, *FRUS*, Vol. XIV, document 57.

²⁸ Memo of Conversation, mtg. of the interdepartmental coordinating group on Germany and Berlin, July 12 1961, *FRUS*, Vol. XIV, document 64.; Memo of Discussion in the NSC, July 13 1961, *FRUS*, Vol. XIV, document 66.

²⁹ Memo of Minutes of NSC mtg., July 19 1961, *FRUS*, Vol. XIV, document 77.

expanding conventional force capabilities, preparing for economic counter-measures and initiating a propaganda campaign led by the United States Information Service (USIA) was adopted. Therefore, rather than pursuing a “vigorous, belligerent” approach as Paterson suggests, Kennedy prioritized a firm and proportional approach which gave the US a greater flexibility and avoided a serious intensification of hostilities. Furthermore, Stephen Rabe highlights that Kennedy rejected Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze’s recommendation of launching “a pre-emptive nuclear attack on the Soviet Union if conflict broke out over Berlin.”³⁰

On July 25th 1961 Kennedy addressed the American nation announcing that he wished to “make clear our determination and our ability to defend our rights at all costs,” stressing that the US were open to negotiations, but that the freedom of Berlin “is not negotiable.”³¹ Kennedy committed \$3.25 billion to the defense budget, tripled draft calls, activated national guard units, deployed 11 air force fighter squadrons, improved conventional weapons capabilities and increased the armed forces strength by 300,000 men, 40,000 of which were deployed to Europe. Frank Costigliola argues that Kennedy’s decision to expand conventional forces was merely “spurred by fear of war.”³² However, Costigliola ignores the political motives of Kennedy’s decision. Erin Mahan highlights that Kennedy’s decision served two purposes. Firstly “US willingness to bear the costs of escalating the arms race if the Soviets tried to force them out of Berlin,” and secondly, to “convince the European allies that the United States was committed to sacrificing its own men to fight in Europe.”³³

Kennedy’s firm line approach also made clear that “we in the West must move together in building military strength.” Kennedy called for France, Britain and West Germany to fulfill their commitments in Europe by increasing conventional military strength. Despite Kennedy’s call for European unity, Charles De Gaulle opposed the build up of conventional forces, preferring nuclear deterrent. Mahan highlights that Kennedy’s call for cooperation by the Western powers in increasing deterrent resulted in a “relatively minimal” French response. “In the aftermath of the requests for cooperation, all the French managed was the shift of two divisions from Algeria to the metropole for quick transfer to West Germany in the event of military incidents in Berlin.” Pressure

³⁰ Rabe, *Kennedy*, p. 45.

³¹ Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Berlin Crisis, July 25, 1961, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=8259&st=&st1=#axzz1MhFUoGIS> (accessed October 5 2011.)

³² Frank Costigliola, “Nuclear Arms, Dollars and Berlin.” in Ed. Thomas Paterson *Kennedy’s Quest for Victory*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 44.

³³ Mahan, *Kennedy*, p. 56.

from the British to negotiate on Berlin further served to anger De Gaulle and West German leader Conrad Adenauer who believed that MacMillan was willing to compromise on West Berlin in return for improved relations with the Soviets. Despite this, Kennedy was successful in persuading the British prime minister Howard MacMillan to keep Royal Air Force fighter squadrons in West Germany.³⁴

Erin Mahan goes as far as arguing that Kennedy and MacMillan both “viewed negotiations as the best hope for stabilizing Central Europe.”³⁵ This contention is reinforced by Aono Toshishiko who asserts that “negotiations were something demanded by London,” with the US recognizing the importance of pursuing negotiations if they were going to convince London that military buildup was necessary.³⁶ However, Mahan undoubtedly overemphasizes the US resolve to pursue negotiations for a settlement to the Berlin Crisis post-Vienna. As Kennedy’s actions in building up conventional forces proved, Kennedy sought to strengthen his negotiating position before even considering approaching Khrushchev again on a Berlin solution. Well aware of Khrushchev’s immovability on Berlin, Kennedy’s advisors told European ambassadors on August 9th 1961 that “we should maintain our legal position with respect to our rights in Berlin” with negotiations only feasible on “who was actually responsible for executing the procedures relating to our access rights.”³⁷ The goal for the US still remained to convince Khrushchev to back down on a peace treaty with the GDR through utilizing military deterrent.

Erin Mahan asserts that “due in part to French and West German opposition, the so-called flexible response remained in the theoretical realm rather than actual adopted strategy.”³⁸ Mahan is correct in highlighting the reluctance of France to increase non-nuclear capabilities and MacMillan’s preference for negotiations. However, Mahan’s argument is ultimately flawed as the buildup of conventional forces by the US, driven by the tenets of flexible response, was undoubtedly the primary reason Nikita Khrushchev conceded a compromise solution to the status of West Berlin in August. Rather than being merely theoretical, flexible response had served a purpose at Vienna, where diplomacy had been pursued and had driven the later US expansion of non-nuclear military

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 57-61.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Toshishiko, “It is Not Easy,” pp. 325-56.

³⁷ Memo of Conversation, August 9 1961, *FRUS*, Vol. XIV, document 102.

³⁸ Mahan, *Kennedy*, p. 66.

capabilities in Europe. A direct consequence of flexible response was the deployment of 40,000 troops to support NATO. Paterson maintains that troop build-up demonstrated that “ever since the Bay of Pigs muddle, the Kennedy team had nurtured a “sense of revenge.”³⁹ However, Paterson does not acknowledge that Kennedy’s decision was taken on the defensive and was primarily aimed at deterring Khrushchev from taking action. A Kennedy advisor asserted on August 9th that “we are now emphasizing the buildup of conventional forces, not because we preferred land war in Europe to hydrogen bombs over the US, but because we were trying to force political decisions before we took military action. We had given up ‘bigger bang for a buck’ because it involves too great a danger for all states.”⁴⁰ The deterrent worked. In the night of August 12-13 1961 the border was closed between East and West Berlin and a wall constructed around the city. The additions of watch towers and minefields followed. The US threat of nuclear force had not deterred Khrushchev, but the expansion of conventional means and hardline rhetoric had. Vladislav Zubok highlights that “Kennedy’s show of force on July 25 persuaded Khrushchev that the old stability of mutual nuclear bluff was gone and perhaps it was time to refrain from brinkmanship altogether.”⁴¹

Stephen Rabe highlights that “Khrushchev had badly miscalculated.” In the summer of ’61 Kennedy had “simply vowed to preserve access from West Germany to West Berlin, to maintain a military presence in the city and to defend West Berlin. These were treaty rights of the West.”⁴² David Reynolds further contends that Kennedy’s words at his July 25th speech seemed to have “rattled Khrushchev.” Although the 40,000 troops Kennedy sent to Europe only instigated a one-seventh increase in NATO forces, this action, alongside expanding conventional war capabilities, was enough to deter Khrushchev from pursuing a peace treaty. Less than three weeks after Kennedy’s speech announcing measures to address the Berlin Crisis, Khrushchev authorized Walter Ulbricht’s plan to build a wall as a compromise solution. The mass exodus of East Germans had now been tackled, but Khrushchev had accepted the “abnormal” position of West Berlin. Despite the severe consternation in West Berlin at the construction of the wall, Reynolds maintains that the Berlin Wall was a “victory for Kennedy.”⁴³

³⁹ Paterson, “Bearing,” pp. 193-212.

⁴⁰ Memo of Conversation, *FRUS*, document 102.

⁴¹ Vladislav Zubok, “Khrushchev and the Berlin Crisis, 1958-1962.” *Cold War International History Project Working Paper* No. 6, (May 1993.)

⁴² Rabe, *Kennedy*, p. 46.

⁴³ Reynolds, *Summits*, p. 200.

Kennedy's reaction to the erection of the Berlin Wall demonstrated the president's measured, pragmatic, and moderate approach to his foreign policy highlighted in his infamous words, "a wall is a hell of a lot better than a war." Lawrence Freedman affirms that "the response of senior Washington figures was remarkably relaxed." Indeed Kennedy's stance was that "the wall would lead to an easing of tension."⁴⁴ The reaction in West Berlin was far different, Willy Brandt, mayor of West Berlin, complained at the "weak, passive response to the outrage of the wall." The wall cut off relatives from one another and accelerated the feeling of isolation among West Berliners. On August 16th 1961, 300,000 West Berliners protested against the nonexistent US response.⁴⁵ Kennedy rapidly signaled his concern by sending vice-president Lyndon Johnson and Gen. Lucius Clay, the hero of the Berlin airlift, to West Berlin. Furthermore, to test access to the city and reassure the population, Kennedy also dispatched 1600 troops down the autobahn. The strategy was an overwhelming success, Rabe highlighting that "the battle group received a tumultuous welcome from Berliners" and hundreds of thousands of Berliners turned out for Johnson's arrival, with 350,000 attending his speech.⁴⁶ Kennedy's reaction brought accusations from hard liners within his own administration and from Charles De Gaulle of appeasement, but his resolve to protect Western interests, while avoiding conflict was achieved for the foreseeable future. Beschloss describes Kennedy's handling of the crisis of '61 as "brilliantly successful."⁴⁷

Kennedy's vast expenditure on strengthening European forces helped to accelerate a temporary solution to the Berlin question by convincing Khrushchev that he was willing to protect Berlin. Khrushchev retracted his threat of a peace treaty on October 17th 1961 and the leaders permitted high level discussions on a permanent solution to the Berlin and German questions. Reynolds maintains that the Berlin Wall was a "propaganda triumph for the West"; the Soviets had forcibly prevented free movement of East Germans.⁴⁸ It is apparent that Kennedy could be accused of risking war by such a marked expansion in conventional forces and capabilities in the summer of '61. However, Kennedy's primary reason for the expansion was not the intention of engaging in war but to protect NATO access rights. The expansion also served to dispel Khrushchev's belief,

⁴⁴ Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos and Vietnam*, pp. 76-77.

⁴⁵ Beschloss, *Crisis Years*, p. 275.

⁴⁶ Rabe, *Kennedy*, p. 47.

⁴⁷ Beschloss, *Crisis Years*, p. 200.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

expressed at Vienna, that Kennedy was a weak leader. As highlighted, had Kennedy not taken this bold decision through the astute deployment of the flexible response strategy, it is possible that Khrushchev may have taken bolder steps to end Western access rights.

Thomas Paterson's contention that Kennedy was a belligerent leader who sought "to relive battles" ignores Kennedy's resolve to preserve the peaceful status quo in Berlin. Kennedy accepted a compromise solution and in September 1961 he gave a speech at the United Nations warning of the dangers of nuclear war, stating "mankind must put an end to war, or war will put an end to mankind."⁴⁹ One moment of tense confrontation did occur in Berlin in October 1961 when a US diplomat was refused entry to East Berlin (a right the US had exercised since 1945.) As a result, Gen. Lucius Clay ordered US tanks to the border-crossing "Checkpoint Charlie" with the Soviets doing likewise. The stand-off ended when Kennedy and Khrushchev ordered the tanks to withdraw. Costigliola importantly draws attention to the fact that "Clay, not Kennedy initiated this confrontation."⁵⁰ Speeches between Kennedy and Khrushchev over Berlin in 1961 are perhaps what has influenced Paterson to be so critical of Kennedy. Rather than examining Kennedy's foreign policy in action, it appears that Paterson's remarks that the Kennedy administration were "determined to win the Cold War by bold action" and that the "containment generation... craved triumphs like those over Nazism and Stalinism" are driven by what Rabe describes as the "overblown rhetoric" of Kennedy during superpower showdowns. Rabe argues that "Khrushchev somehow seemed to think that uttering hostile propaganda and threatening war, as he did over Berlin, would put the two sides on the path to peace," while maintaining that the president "must have thought that the Soviets would understand that his apocalyptic speeches were solely designed to appease extremist right-wingers in the US." Rabe draws attention to the fact that Soviet intelligence knew of the president's "deep skepticism" over nuclear war, while Beschloss highlights comments from Khrushchev's autobiography in which Khrushchev affirmed that "Kennedy knew that war brings impoverishment to a country and a disaster to a people, and that a war with the Soviet Union wouldn't be a stroll in the woods... He showed great flexibility and together we avoided disaster."⁵¹ As the events of 1961 demonstrate, Kennedy espoused moderacy and practiced proportionality in the defense of West Berlin.

⁴⁹ Rabe, *Kennedy*, p. 47.

⁵⁰ Costigliola, "Nuclear Arms," p. 45.

⁵¹ Rabe, *Kennedy*, pp. 186-187 and p. 39; Beschloss, *Crisis Years*, p. 705.

Michael Beschloss highlights that “unlike Eisenhower, Kennedy was not comfortable with ambiguity when the stakes were as high as they were over Berlin. He was always afraid of nuclear war by miscalculation.”⁵² Flexible response therefore provided a means to, not only deter Khrushchev, but allow a less ominous solution to the potential blocking of access to West Berlin. Nuclear weapons were still the final form of deterrent for Kennedy and he made this clear, but by having access to a wider scope of conventional means, Kennedy made Khrushchev further aware that he was prepared to defend Berlin. The Berlin Wall hence became a temporary solution to the crisis. Not a perfect solution, but one which was far less grave than Kennedy anticipated. The wall also addressed Khrushchev’s increasing political embarrassment over the exodus of East Germans to West Berlin. Kennedy’s decision to use the graduated policies of flexible response ultimately secured a temporary peaceful resolution to the confrontation. Standing down hardline stances of Dean Acheson and Paul Nitze, Kennedy rejected a call for a state of national emergency and for “immense escalation of military preparedness for nuclear war over Berlin.”⁵³ Kennedy also avoided perpetuating Khrushchev’s notion that he was a weak leader by rejecting pressure from Howard MacMillan and Walter Lipmann for more negotiations after the Vienna Summit which would have accepted a Soviet presence in West Berlin. Tensions would persist between the two superpowers beyond 1961 and Kennedy was still aware of Khrushchev’s threat of a peace treaty. However, the building of the wall represented a short term compromise which drastically reduced fear that West Berlin would be imminently threatened. The desire of West Berliners to remain governed by the tripartite powers was fulfilled and Kennedy’s adherence to “appropriate action” through flexible response ensured the stabilization of the Western position in Berlin.

⁵² Ibid., pp. 279-280.

⁵³ Record of mtg. of Coordinating Group on Berlin, June 16 1961, *FRUS*, Vol. XIV, document 42.

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