

*The United States and the German Nuclear Question under Eisenhower and Kennedy*

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The German nuclear question is not just one of many questions Cold War historians happen to be interested in. It instead lies at the very heart of the story of why the Cold War ran its course the way it did. And why was it so important? The answer is fairly simple. In 1945 Europe was divided between east and west. That situation was obviously not to everyone's liking. Each side, the Soviet Union and the western powers, would certainly have preferred to see its system prevail throughout the continent. But there was no way that either side could push the other out of the part of Europe it dominated without a war, and for both sides the status quo of a divided continent was vastly preferable to an armed conflict. And that situation soon gave rise to a certain political system, one based on the idea that each side would control things on its side of the line of demarcation in Europe. The two sides could coexist peacefully in that sort of system.

But if that had been all there was to the story, there would have been little cause for concern. There certainly would have been no risk of war. The problem was that there was one great exception to that general rule about how the two sides could get along—one, and only one, major exception to the general principle that each side could do as it pleased on its side of the line of demarcation in Europe—and that exception had to do with Germany. For even west German resources were such that the Soviets were bound to worry about what might happen if a strong and fully independent state came into being in western Germany. Britain, France, and America might be perfectly willing in practice, whatever they said, to live with a divided Europe, including a divided Germany. But the Germans could never be happy with that situation, and a strong West German state would not be dependent on the western powers for protection and would therefore not be locked into a purely defensive policy. It would be able to push more energetically for change. It might even be able to intervene in the event of an anti-Communist uprising in eastern Germany. And the East Germans might be more likely to rise up against their Communist overlords once it became clear that that was the case.

So even in the late 1940s the Soviets could not remain indifferent to what was going on in western Germany. And they had ways of making their adversaries take their concerns seriously. They could put pressure on Berlin, isolated as it was well within the part of Germany they controlled. They could even threaten war, if their former allies ignored their concerns and sponsored a major buildup of German power. This general question was thus, from the start, the one major issue that could put the two sides on a collision course. And when it became clear in the 1950s, with the creation of massive nuclear arsenals by both the United States and the Soviet Union, that the only way West Germany could become a strong and truly independent power was by acquiring a nuclear force under its own control, the German nuclear issue was practically bound to emerge as a central problem. It was not just that the Soviets might

move energetically if the West Germans began to develop a nuclear force. The other half of the problem had to do with the fact that the Federal Republic, exposed to Soviet power as it was, had a very strong incentive to build a nuclear force of its own, if only for purely defensive purposes. For it was obvious that a state armed only with conventional weapons could never stand up, by itself, to a great nuclear-armed power like the USSR. And the Germans might feel that in the final analysis they needed to be able to stand up on their own. As the Soviets built up their power, the Germans were bound to wonder whether they could rely on the United States to protect them—bound to wonder, that is, whether the Americans really would go nuclear if West Germany was attacked, given what a Soviet counter-attack could do to American society.

So a decision on the part of the West German government to build a nuclear force was by no means out of the question, and it is not difficult to understand why a decision of that sort could lead to very serious trouble indeed. It was, in fact, hard to see anything else that could lead to a major war in Europe. But didn't this mean that there was no chance that the Federal Republic would pursue a policy of that sort, and that the German nuclear question could therefore not have been very important? And, indeed, it is often said that the Federal Republic's allies, and especially the United States, would never have tolerated a nuclear-armed West German state, and that—whether for that reason or for other reasons—that state never sought to acquire a nuclear force under its own control. One German scholar who has worked in this area was asked, for example, what he thought of the idea that Konrad Adenauer, the West German chancellor for 1949 to 1963, had not ruled out the option of a German nuclear force. His answer was very direct. It would have been “political suicide” for Adenauer to go that route; even the plans for some sort of European nuclear force, he said, had met with massive resistance on the part of the Americans; so “what sort of resistance do you think a national program would have met with?”<sup>1</sup>

This is a very common view, and I also used to believe that the Americans from the start were opposed to the Europeans acquiring nuclear forces under their own control. But the historical sources made it quite clear that that general view was simply incorrect. The evidence showed unambiguously that Dwight Eisenhower, the U.S. president from 1953 to 1961, strongly believed that the NATO allies needed to have nuclear forces of their own. It was also clear that that belief played a key role in determining what the U.S. government actually did during his presidency. By 1960, in

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<sup>1</sup> Ralph Dietl, in Klaus Schwabe, ed., *Konrad Adenauer und Frankreich, 1949-1963: Stand und Perspektiven der Forschung zu den deutsch-französischen Beziehungen in Politik, Wirtschaft and Kultur*, Rhöndorfer Gespräche, vol. 21 (Bonn: Bouvier, 2005), pp. 73-74.

fact, the NATO allies, including the Germans, had acquired effective control over hundreds of American nuclear weapons, and that certainly had not happened by accident.<sup>2</sup>

For Eisenhower, it turns out, very much wanted the Europeans to be able to defend themselves. Even in 1951, when he was sent over to Europe as the first NATO commander, he felt that in the long run there was “no defense for Western Europe that depends exclusively or even materially upon the existence, in Europe, of strong American units.” “The spirit must be here,” he wrote from Europe, “and the strength must be produced here.” America could not be “a modern Rome guarding the far frontiers with our legions,” he wrote, “if for no other reason than that these are *not*, politically, *our* frontiers.” What the Americans had to do instead was to help the Europeans “regain their confidence and get on their own military feet.”<sup>3</sup> And it was obvious from the start, given that the USSR was determined to become a great nuclear power, that the Europeans could not defend themselves if they did not possess nuclear weapons of their own. But for Eisenhower the prospect of America’s allies being armed with those weapons was by no means appalling. To be sure, he did not feel that the Europeans should move ahead on a purely national basis. His hope, in fact, was that as the allies became better able to defend themselves, and as the Americans gradually turned over responsibility for the defense of Europe to the Europeans, NATO would devolve into an essentially European defense organization (with a European general as supreme commander), and that the Europeans would cooperate with each other within that structure. But they would cooperate voluntarily, and the forces themselves (including their nuclear components) would, in the final analysis, be under national control.

Eisenhower felt that it would make sense, moreover, at least for the time being, for the Europeans to be armed with nuclear weapons produced in America. But if the allies wanted to be more independent, he was prepared to help them build their own nuclear forces. The United States, as U.S. Secretary of Defense McElroy told the other NATO defense ministers in April 1958, had “no objection” to the collaborative effort by France, Italy and Germany to develop nuclear weapons, generally referred to as the FIG project. If that effort was conducted under NATO auspices, the Americans, he said, “would be able to furnish technical and certain financial assistance.”<sup>4</sup> Secretary of State John

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<sup>2</sup> See Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945-1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), esp. pp. 146-215. Much of the analysis that follows is based on the evidence presented in that part of the book. Many of the documents cited there were scanned and are now available online. See <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/trachtenberg/scans/Intro.htm> for links to the pdfs.

<sup>3</sup> Eisenhower to Bermingham, February 28, 1951, in Dwight Eisenhower, *Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower*, ed. Louis Galambos et al., vol. 12 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 76-77. Emphasis in original text.

<sup>4</sup> Elbrick to Dulles, April 24, 1958, U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States* [FRUS], 1958-1960, vol. 7, part 1, p. 318 ([link](#)).

Foster Dulles had taken much the same line when Adenauer told him about the FIG project in December 1957; Dulles thought, in fact, that the project might be expanded to include America and Britain, whose expertise would certainly have made it easier for the continental countries to move ahead in this area.<sup>5</sup> The Americans were also willing to help the Europeans build their own delivery systems. The U.S. government, Eisenhower announced at the NATO Heads of Government meeting in December 1957, believed “that the follow-up development and production of IRBMs [Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles] could advantageously be undertaken in Europe.” To that end, he said, the U.S. government was “prepared to make available under appropriate safeguards blueprints and other necessary data relating to the IRBM delivery system.”<sup>6</sup>

So Eisenhower personally was quite serious about what in the 1950s was called “nuclear sharing.” That basic conclusion is supported by a truly massive amount of archival evidence. And it is important to note that he explicitly included West Germany in the list of “selected allies” who were to be helped in this way. Other U.S. officials were opposed to the idea of helping the Federal Republic acquire nuclear forces under its own control, but not Eisenhower. Yes, a strong Germany had been a problem in the past, he admitted, but that had only been because Russia had been weak. But now that Russia was strong, he said in 1960, he would “take a strong Germany.”<sup>7</sup> And this had been his view for some time. In 1959, for example, when his Secretary of Defense seemed to oppose the idea of helping “the Germans to develop nuclear capabilities for themselves”—“Secretary McElroy said that during the 1900’s Germany had been rather an unstable member of the international community”—Eisenhower was quick to make his own views clear: “The President observed Germany had been his enemy in the past, but on the principle of having only one main enemy at a time, only the U.S.S.R. was now his enemy.”<sup>8</sup> Given that situation, the Germans, in his view, had to be treated as full allies, and that meant that they, like the other NATO allies, should be helped to acquire nuclear forces under their own control.

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<sup>5</sup> Dulles-Adenauer meeting, December 14, 1957, *U.S. Declassified Documents Online*, document number GHREYZ752367678.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace*, p. 207. A background paper on nuclear policy prepared for the December 1957 meeting gives some sense for what the U.S. government had in mind. According to that document, a “European production capacity” for IRBMs “should be established in the near future. A European missile research and development capacity to design future missile types should also get underway now. U.S. transfers of missile technology will be essential to the success of any such venture. U.S. disclosure policy must be modified to enable this.” U.S. Department of State, Policy Planning Staff, background paper on nuclear policy, December 4, 1957, released in response to a Freedom of Information Act request filed by Robert Wampler (full document available at [http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/trachtenberg/scans/1957\(2\).pdf](http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/trachtenberg/scans/1957(2).pdf), f. 195).

<sup>7</sup> Eisenhower-Macmillan meeting, March 28, 1960, FRUS 1958-60, 9:260 ([link](#)).

<sup>8</sup> National Security Council [NSC] meeting, July 30, 1959, FRUS 1958-60, 3:289 ([link](#)).

Why, then, have so many people—European leaders at the time, scholars dealing with the subject years later, and even Eisenhower’s successors in the Kennedy administration—failed to understand what Eisenhower was trying to do in this area? The main reason was that the president felt he could not be entirely open about his efforts in this area. Under U.S. law custody of the weapons had to remain in American hands. Since the law could not be changed, Eisenhower’s solution was to make the custody arrangements so weak that the Europeans would have no trouble getting control of the weapons in an emergency. The weapons, he said, would only nominally be in American hands: as he told the NATO commander in June 1959, “we are willing to give, to all intents and purposes, control of the weapons. We retain titular possession only.”<sup>9</sup> But a policy of that sort, which amounted to doing an end-run around the law—even a law which Eisenhower was convinced was unconstitutional—could scarcely be proclaimed openly. And that meant that it was hard to prevent State Department and other U.S. officials who did not approve of “nuclear sharing” from giving the Europeans and others the impression that America was opposed to nuclear forces under European national control. Not just that, but the documents themselves, when they were declassified years later by governments that had a very different policy in this area, were often released in a “sanitized” form that suggested the U.S. government had been opposed all along to independent European (and especially German) nuclear capabilities.<sup>10</sup>

But no matter how those officials felt, the president’s own views were of more fundamental importance, and Adenauer certainly understood, especially after the December 1957 Heads of Government meeting, how open Eisenhower was to the idea of helping the Europeans in this area. That did not mean he thought it would be easy, because of the president’s support, to build a German nuclear force, assuming he wanted to move in that direction. But it was certainly clear to him that the U.S. government, during this period, was not as deeply opposed to the idea of the Germans acquiring a nuclear capability as many scholars and other observers have assumed.

He was also well aware of the fact that the Federal Republic’s most important European partner, France, was a good deal more open to the idea of a German nuclear force than many people have assumed. This was true not

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<sup>9</sup> Eisenhower-Norstad meeting, June 9, 1959, FRUS 1958-60, vol. 7, part 1, p. 462 ([link](#)).

<sup>10</sup> The record of a meeting between Secretary of State Dulles and his German counterpart, Foreign Minister Heinrich von Brentano, in November 1957 is a good case in point. Dulles-Brentano meeting, November 21, 1957, <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/trachtenberg/documents/brentano.html>. The “sanitized” version, as published in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* [FRUS] series in 1986 (and which suggests the U.S. government was opposed to the Europeans having nuclear forces of their own) is given in the linked version in black; the passages deleted from the version in FRUS, but included in the full version found in the archives (and which give a very different impression), are given in red. For an example of how one very serious scholar was misled by the “sanitized” version in FRUS, see Peter Fischer, “Zwischen Abschreckung und Verteidigung: Die Anfänge bundesdeutscher Nuklearpolitik (1952—1957),” in Klaus Maier and Norbert Wiggershaus, eds., *Das Nordatlantische Bündnis 1949-1956* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1993), pp. 289-90 ([link](#)).

just of the governments that had negotiated the FIG agreements in 1957-58. It was also true of the France of Charles de Gaulle, at least in the period from 1960 until his policy shifted radically in 1963. De Gaulle strongly believed that a country could not be truly independent if it had to depend entirely on a foreign power for protection; that situation was intolerable, and that was why he very much wanted France to build a nuclear force of its own. But, as he told Adenauer explicitly when they met at Rambouillet in July 1960, that basic point applied not just to France but to Germany as well. The Federal Republic, he said, would therefore also eventually want to acquire its own nuclear force and the two countries should form a kind of union; only in that way could the Europeans free themselves from their present excessive dependence on the United States.<sup>11</sup>

So the obstacles, in the late Eisenhower period, to the Federal Republic becoming a nuclear power were not nearly as great as many people think. But did Adenauer really want his country to go that route? The evidence, I think, shows quite clearly that he did. If the Europeans had no nuclear forces of their own, they would be totally dependent on the United States for their security, and for Adenauer, as for de Gaulle, that situation was in the long run intolerable. It was “unbearable,” he thought, that two great states—the United States and the Soviet Union—should be the sole possessors of nuclear weapons and thus should hold the fate of every people on earth in their hands; for the other peoples, this was “an unbearable situation.”<sup>12</sup> The Federal Republic could not forever remain an American “atomic protectorate”: sooner or later, it needed to be able to produce its own nuclear weapons—“we must produce

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<sup>11</sup> Adenauer-de Gaulle meeting, July 30, 1960, *Documents diplomatiques français* [DDF] 1960, vol. 2 ([link](#)), pp. 165-66, and, for the German record, Konrad Adenauer Papers, Bestand III, item 25, ff. 315-26, Stiftung Bundeskanzler-Adenauer-Haus, Rhöndorf ([link](#); provided by Andreas Lutsch; for the key passages, see pp. 3-4 and 8 in the document). Those passages are so remarkable—and the basic point here is so widely overlooked—that the French and German originals are worth quoting at length. “Cette situation,” de Gaulle told Adenauer, “implique incontestablement une union entre la France et l’Allemagne et impliquera sans doute qu’à partir d’un certain moment, celle-ci ne reste pas, non plus, dépourvue d’armes nucléaires. . . . Il est intolérable pour nos deux peuples, qui assument de grandes responsabilités et ont de grandes capacités, d’admettre que ce n’est pas à eux de se défendre par eux-mêmes, le cas échéant, et que les Américains en sont responsables à leur place.” In the German record he was, if anything, even more explicit about what he had in mind. “Dazu bedürfe es insbesondere,” he said, “eines engen französisch-deutschen Bündnisses und insbesondere der französisch-deutschen Zusammenarbeit auf dem Verteidigungs- und Rüstungsgebiet. Seiner Meinung nach bedeute dies, daß es eines Tages auch keine Diskriminierung zwischen Deutschland und Frankreich geben werde hinsichtlich der Waffen, über die diese beiden Länder verfügen.” The key extracts from the French record of the meeting were first published (in German translation) in Georges-Henri Soutou, “De Gaulle, Adenauer und die gemeinsame Front gegen die amerikanische Nuklearstrategie,” in Ernst Willi Hansen et al., *Politischer Wandel, organisierte Gewalt und nationale Sicherheit* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1995), pp. 498-99.

<sup>12</sup> Adenauer in a meeting of the Christian Democratic Union executive committee, September 20, 1956, in Günter Buchstab, ed., *Adenauer: "Wir haben wirklich etwas geschaffen": Die Protokolle des CDU-Bundesvorstands 1953-1957* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1990), pp. 1029 and 1073 ([link](#)).

them,” he said—and indeed in 1956 and 1957 he thought that his country might be able to build those weapons, probably in a joint program with the French, in the not-too-distant future.<sup>13</sup>

And those were not just ideas that he was toying with for a brief period in the late 1950s. Even in the 1960s, in a very different international environment, he continued to believe that the Federal Republic needed to keep its nuclear options open. It was for that reason that he was so opposed to the idea of Germany having to sign the nuclear non-proliferation treaty—something which, as his biographer Hans-Peter Schwarz noted, “literally enraged him until his dying day.”<sup>14</sup> None of this meant, of course, that the Federal Republic under Adenauer had actually begun to construct facilities that would eventually produce nuclear weapons. Adenauer certainly understood that enormous obstacles had to be overcome before anything of the sort could be done, and his policy was directed toward dealing with those obstacles—that is, toward gradually clearing the way for some sort of German nuclear capability.<sup>15</sup>

All this was bound to have a major impact on Soviet policy, and when I studied this issue in the 1980s and 1990s it seemed clear to me that the Soviets were alarmed by the prospect of West Germany getting control of nuclear weapons and, indeed, that Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev’s decision in 1958 to start the Berlin Crisis had to be understood in that context.<sup>16</sup> But that conclusion was based largely on inference and supposition, so it is important to note here that additional evidence has come to light in more recent years that supports that basic interpretation. Oleg Troyanovsky, Khrushchev’s foreign policy advisor, later wrote, for example, that “what finally impelled Khrushchev to resort to what today might be called shock therapy” by starting the Berlin Crisis “was information from various sources that serious discussions were proceeding within the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and, in particular, between the United States and West Germany, regarding the possibility of the Bundeswehr’s being granted access to atomic weapons in one form or another.” “The U.S. ambassador to Moscow, Llewellyn E. Thompson,” Troyanovsky continued, “hit the nail on the head on November 18, 1958, when he cabled Washington: ‘Khrushchev is a man in a hurry and considers that time is against him on this issue, particularly in relation to atomic arming of West Germany. Therefore, I believe

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<sup>13</sup> See Hans-Peter Schwarz, *Adenauer: Der Staatsmann, 1952-1957* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1991), esp. pp. 157-58, 299, 330 and 396 (for the quotation), or (for the English translation) Hans-Peter Schwarz, *Konrad Adenauer: German Politician and Statesman in a Period of War, Revolution and Reconstruction*, vol. 2: *The Statesman, 1952-67* (Providence: Berghahn, 1997), pp. 124-25, 239-40, 264 and 319.

<sup>14</sup> Schwarz, *Adenauer* (German ed.), p. 908, and Schwarz, *Adenauer* (English ed.), p. 743.

<sup>15</sup> See Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace*, pp. 232-38, 280-81, 339-42 and 347.

<sup>16</sup> Marc Trachtenberg, *History and Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 170-73, and Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace*, pp. 251-56.

Western powers should prepare for major showdown within coming months.’ This was a remarkably prescient piece of analysis, for the showdown came within nine days of the ambassador’s warning.”<sup>17</sup>

It is therefore scarcely surprising that the German nuclear issue played a key role in determining how that crisis ran its course, or that the crisis itself played a key role in determining how that issue was handled in the 1960s. And one of the key points to note here is that the Berlin crisis, which Khrushchev revived in 1961, forced the newly-elected U.S. president, John F. Kennedy, to think hard about how he would deal with that issue. Kennedy, in fact, very early on adopted a policy in this area which differed radically from the policy his predecessor had pursued. The new president wanted above all to settle the conflict with the USSR, which now focused on Berlin. To be sure, the United States for the moment could prevail in the current crisis simply by digging in its heels, since it still enjoyed a large measure of strategic superiority; but its strategic edge, Kennedy knew, would soon be gone, and when that happened a war over Berlin could scarcely be contemplated; so to avoid a humiliating surrender a few years down the road, a negotiated settlement needed to be reached now, while the strategic situation was still relatively favorable. And he thought a settlement with the USSR was within reach. The Soviets wanted their sphere of influence in eastern Europe (including eastern Germany) to be accepted; they were also concerned about West Germany, and especially about the Germans acquiring a nuclear force of their own. The United States could give them what they wanted in those areas, but in exchange the Soviets would also have to accept the status quo in Europe, and in particular around Berlin. The peace could be based, in other words, on a general acceptance of a divided Europe, a divided Germany, and a divided Berlin, plus a promise on the part of the United States to keep West Germany non-nuclear.<sup>18</sup>

So when Kennedy met with the Soviet leader at Vienna in June 1961 he told him that the United States did not “wish to act in a way that would deprive the Soviet Union of its ties in Eastern Europe”—which was tantamount to saying that his government accepted that area as a Soviet sphere of influence.<sup>19</sup> He also told Khrushchev that the United States was “opposed to a buildup in West Germany that would constitute a threat to the Soviet Union”—which obviously meant the development of an independent German nuclear capability, since a purely conventional buildup

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<sup>17</sup> Oleg Troyanovsky, “The Making of Soviet Foreign Policy,” in William Taubman, Sergei Khrushchev, and Abbott Gleason, eds., *Nikita Khrushchev* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 217-18 ([link](#)).

<sup>18</sup> These arguments about the Kennedy policy are based on the analysis in Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace*, esp. pp. 283-85 and 322-28. The discussion that follows is also based on chapters eight and nine in that book.

<sup>19</sup> Kennedy-Khrushchev meeting, June 4, 1961, FRUS 1961-63, 14:95 ([link](#)). The importance of this statement is underscored by the fact that it was “sanitized” out of the version of the document declassified in 1990.

would pose no threat at all.<sup>20</sup> All he asked in return was that the Soviets agree to live with things as they were in Berlin. These basic ideas were fleshed out a bit in late 1961; and in March 1962 the Soviets were presented with an important paper containing the outline of a possible settlement. The present borders of East Germany would be respected, the status quo in Berlin would be maintained, and—although this point was worded in more general terms—West Germany would not be helped (or really allowed) to become a nuclear power.

It was one thing, however, to propose a settlement of this sort, and quite another to bring into being a political system based on those ideas. To achieve that goal, Kennedy, in effect, had to fight a war on two fronts. He had to get the Soviets to accept this kind of arrangement, and he also had to get his European allies—and above all the Germans—to go along with it. And the most important point to note about Soviet policy in 1962 is that the USSR, although happy to pocket the concessions the Americans were offering, was not willing to close the deal and accept the sort of arrangement the U.S. government had put on the table. Why that was the case is by no means clear; Troyanovsky thought Khrushchev had no “clear plan of action” nor even any clear sense for what his “ultimate objective” was.<sup>21</sup> And Anatoly Dobrynin, the Soviet ambassador in Washington at the time, obviously thought it was a huge mistake for the USSR not to accept the American offer: he noted Kennedy’s “readiness to reach an understanding on the status quo in Europe” and thought that if an agreement of that sort had been reached, “it would have been one of the highest achievements of Soviet diplomacy.”<sup>22</sup> Certainly U.S. leaders at the time found Khrushchev’s refusal to work out an agreement on the terms they had proposed absolutely outrageous. Here the Americans were offering the Soviets everything they could reasonably ask for. They were offering, in particular, to in effect keep West Germany non-nuclear—something that is, which would have solved the USSR’s number one security problem in Europe and maybe in the world as a whole. But the Soviets, incredibly, refused to agree to what the Americans were proposing. So the Americans in the course of the year came to believe that a showdown was inevitable. And that being the case, Kennedy now felt, it made little sense to try to play for time and avoid a confrontation. “The military balance,” he thought in early October, “was more favourable to us now than it would be later on.” That implied that it might be better “to allow a confrontation to develop over Berlin now rather than later.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 91 ([link](#)).

<sup>21</sup> Troyanovsky, “Making of Soviet Foreign Policy,” p. 219.

<sup>22</sup> Anatoly Dobrynin, *In Confidence: Moscow’s Ambassador to Six Cold War Presidents* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001) ([link](#)), p. 64.

<sup>23</sup> Home to Foreign Office, October 2, 1962, FO 371/163581, British National Archives, Kew (<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/trachtenberg/scans/Br1962.pdf>, f. 246).

As it turned out, the showdown was triggered by the USSR's deployment of missiles in Cuba, discovered later that month, and not by anything the Soviets did in central Europe. But the outcome of the Cuban missile crisis had a profound impact on the situation on the continent; in 1963 the Berlin issue faded away and the Soviets seemed far more willing, in practice, to go along with the sort of arrangement the Americans had proposed in 1962. But even if some tacit understandings between the two superpowers had come into being, that in itself only solved half of the problem. The U.S. government would also have to get its own allies to go along with the plan, and it became very clear in 1962 that Adenauer especially was determined to oppose the sort of arrangement the Americans had in mind. He particularly objected to an agreement that would guarantee West Germany's non-nuclear status. The Kennedy administration, however, hoped to force the Germans into line, and in December 1962 the president opted for a new policy designed to achieve that goal.

What was new about that policy? The Kennedy leadership had from the start been deeply opposed to the idea of a German nuclear force. What that meant, the argument ran, was that the United States would also have to oppose the French nuclear program and would, in addition, have to try to get the British "out of the nuclear business." There was still some feeling, however, that the Europeans had to be given "something" in the nuclear area, so the Americans proposed that they and the Europeans together build a new sea-based force—the famous Multilateral Force, or MLF—an idea that had been developed at the end of the Eisenhower period. The difference now was that while the Eisenhower administration thought that the use of that force, sooner or later, would, not be subject to an American veto, the Kennedy administration had no intention of ever accepting that sort of arrangement. That, in the eyes of many people (including the president himself) meant that the MLF was a bit of a sham; the French, in fact, liked to refer to it as the "Multilateral Farce." But Kennedy was told by many of his advisors, especially in the State Department, that without the MLF, or if the U.S. government did anything to support the French and even British nuclear programs, the German nuclear problem would become unmanageable. The idea was that you couldn't say "yes" to the French but "no" to the Germans; but if you said "no" to the French, you couldn't continue saying "yes" to the British. And Kennedy went along with that view until the very end of 1962 when he jettisoned that policy.

His new approach became clear when he met with British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan at Nassau in the Bahamas in December of that year. The Americans had promised to provide Britain with an air-to-ground missile called Skybolt, if the Americans themselves decided to go ahead with the production of that weapon. It turned out that they decided not to proceed with the Skybolt program, and that raised the question of whether they would provide Britain with an alternative, and if so what that alternative should be. The Polaris submarine-launched ballistic missile

was an obvious substitute, but the MLF lobby within the U.S. government strongly opposed the idea of letting the British have Polaris. Skybolt would have prolonged the life of the British bomber-based deterrent by only a few years, whereas Polaris would allow Britain to have a credible deterrent capability for a much longer period of time; since one of its main goals was to “get the British out of the nuclear business,” that group felt that the U.S. government could not allow the British to acquire that submarine-launched missile. Kennedy, however, not only agreed at Nassau to provide the British with Polaris (which they would be free to use independently when supreme national interests were at stake), but also decided to treat France the same way. Later that month, after flying back from Nassau, he met with the French ambassador, Hervé Alphand, and explained what he had in mind. Alphand left the meeting like a “cock-of-the-walk”; he could “smell warheads at the end of the road.” Kennedy had now rejected the argument that if you said “yes” to the French the German nuclear problem would become unmanageable. His idea now was that if the Americans rebuilt their relationship with France—and providing nuclear assistance to France would be a key element of that effort—the Federal Republic could be isolated within the western alliance. The three western powers—the United States, Britain and France, acting as a bloc—could then make it clear to the Germans that they would not accept an independent German nuclear capability. The Germans, for their part, would then realize that they had little choice but to give way to that pressure and accept a non-nuclear status.

But things did not quite work out the way Kennedy had wanted. Instead, the following month de Gaulle rose up against the Americans—in large part, it seems, because Kennedy’s policy had been sabotaged by Undersecretary of State George Ball, the highest-ranking member of the MLF lobby within the U.S. government. On January 14, 1963, de Gaulle announced, at a memorable press conference, that France would not accept Britain as a member of the European Economic Community; if Britain were admitted, the continental countries would be absorbed into a “colossal Atlantic Community dependent on America and under American control”; this prospect, totally at odds with his own vision of a “European Europe,” he was determined to rule out.<sup>24</sup> A week later Adenauer arrived in Paris, embraced de Gaulle, and signed a treaty calling for close cooperation between their two countries. The German chancellor clearly agreed with de Gaulle about Britain, about America, and about the need for a more independent Europe. The Americans were absolutely livid. The continentals seemed determined to pull away from the United States and pursue a foreign policy of their own; that implied that they intended to develop the sort of military force that would allow them to pursue that kind of policy; and given military realities that meant an independent European nuclear capability. And

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<sup>24</sup> De Gaulle press conference, January 14, 1963 ([link](#)).

since what they had in mind was not a true federal Europe but rather a Europe composed of independent nation-states, that in turn implied that the Federal Republic would itself be armed with nuclear weapons under its own control. De Gaulle, in fact, had declared at the January 14 press conference that it was up to the Federal Republic to decide whether it wanted to go nuclear; he told Adenauer when they met a week later that he thought Germany would eventually want to build its own bombs, that he could understand why the Federal Republic would want to do so, and that France would do nothing to prevent the Germans from going that route.<sup>25</sup>

But the Americans were dead set against the idea of a nuclear Germany. As McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy's national security advisor, put it that very month, it was a fixed point of U.S. policy that "Germany should not have independent control of nuclear weapons."<sup>26</sup> U.S. officials were well aware of the fact that the Soviets were deeply opposed to the prospect of a German nuclear force; even if a German nuclear program did not lead to war—and there was no guarantee that it would not—for the United States to countenance a program of that sort would weigh heavily on its relations with the USSR and make it much harder to reach a basic political understanding with that country that could lay the foundation for a relatively stable peace. So the U.S. government reacted very strongly—almost violently—to what de Gaulle and Adenauer had done in January. And it was clear to Kennedy which country the Americans had to focus on. There was "not much we can do against France," he said, "but we can exert considerable pressure on the Germans." A line was drawn in the sand. It was made clear to the Germans that they could not "have it both ways": if they wanted America to defend them, they could not pursue a fully independent "European" policy, at odds with the approach the Americans proposed to take.<sup>27</sup> And forced to choose, the Germans opted for the alliance with the United States. This was symbolized by the German decision to unilaterally add a preamble to the Franco-German treaty reaffirming the Federal Republic's commitment to the Atlantic alliance. Adenauer's fall from power in April—he felt "as if his arms and legs had been cut off"—is also to be understood in this context.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> De Gaulle-Adenauer meeting, January 21, 1963, DDF 1963 ([link](#)), 1:95-96, and Rainer Blasius et al., eds., *Akten zur Auswärtigen Politik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland [AAPD] 1963* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1994), 1:117-18 ([link](#)).

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace*, p. 284.

<sup>27</sup> NSC Executive Committee meeting, January 25, 1963, FRUS 1961-63, 13:489 ([link](#)), and NSC Executive Committee meeting, January 31, 1963, *ibid.*, p. 163 ([link](#)).

<sup>28</sup> On these matters, see the brief discussion in Trachtenberg, *Constructed Peace*, pp. 373-77. For other accounts, see Schwarz, *Adenauer*, 2:818-39; Daniel Koerfer, *Kampf ums Kanzleramt: Erhard und Adenauer* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1987), pp. 707-51; and Tim Geiger, *Atlantiker gegen Gaullisten: Aussenpolitischer Konflikt und innerparteilicher Machtkampf in der CDU/CSU 1958-1969* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2008) ([link](#)), pp. 197-232. A short book written at the time by a leading French Germanist—Robert d'Harcourt, *L'Allemagne d'Adenauer à Erhard* (Paris: Flammarion, 1964)—is also of considerable interest in this context. The issue can also be followed in the AAPD 1963, vol. 1 ([link](#)); see esp. docs. 49, 50, 52, 58, 65, 88 and 92. On the final point, see Koerfer, *Kampf ums Kanzleramt*, p. 745.

Nor was that the end of the story. There were many signs the Americans wanted to reach a settlement with the USSR on the basis of the status quo, that a guarantee of West Germany's non-nuclear status would be a key part of the kind of settlement they had in mind, and that they were prepared to move ahead in this area, if necessary, no matter how their allies felt. Adenauer and his followers—the Germans “Gaullists,” as they were called—tried to resist that policy. But in 1963 the “Gaullists” were in a minority, even within Adenauer's own party; the majority felt that the Federal Republic, in the final analysis, had to go along with what the American protector wanted. So when in July the Americans, along with the British, negotiated the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty with the USSR and asked the Federal Republic to sign it, the Germans felt they had to agree—even though they understood that one of the main goals of the treaty was to make it harder for them to acquire a nuclear capability of their own.<sup>29</sup>

So by the end of 1963 a major threshold had been crossed. The Americans had essentially achieved their goal. Both the Soviets and the Germans were now willing to accept the kind of arrangement the Americans had in mind, a settlement that provided (among other things) for a non-nuclear Federal Republic. This is not to say, however, that the German nuclear issue simply faded away. The German “Gaullists” were, of course, deeply opposed to the sort of arrangement the Americans had in mind and from 1965 on fought hard to prevent the Federal Republic from signing the proposed Nuclear Non-Proliferation treaty, which in their view would tighten the noose yet further. In campaigning against that treaty, Adenauer himself, as Schwarz writes, “had found the last great theme in his political life.”<sup>30</sup> It was worse than the Morgenthau Plan, the former chancellor said in 1967; that same year, his former defense minister, Franz-Josef Strauss (another leading German “Gaullist” and at that point finance minister in the coalition cabinet headed by Kurt Kiesinger), called it “a Versailles of cosmic proportions.”<sup>31</sup> But the German “Gaullists” no longer had enough political clout to prevent the Federal Republic from going along with what the Americans wanted; and the Federal Republic, in signing and ratifying the non-proliferation treaty not long afterwards, eventually did agree to do without a nuclear force of its own.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Horst Osterheld, *“Ich gebe nicht leichten Herzens . . .”: Adenauers letzte Kanzlerjahre—ein dokumentarischer Bericht* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald, 1986), p. 242.

<sup>30</sup> Schwarz, *Adenauer* (English ed.), p. 743, (German ed.), p. 908.

<sup>31</sup> Adenauer interview in *Der Spiegel*, February 27, 1967, quoted in Schwarz, *Adenauer* (German ed.), p. 974. Strauss comment (at a reception for British prime minister Harold Wilson), quoted in “Schlag der Trommeln,” *Der Spiegel*, February 27, 1968, p. 18 ([link](#)). The Non-Proliferation Treaty, Strauss had declared a week earlier, would institutionally perpetuate “the powerlessness of the non-possessors.” Quoted in AAPD 1967 ([link](#)), p. 284 n.3.

<sup>32</sup> See Werner Link, “Détente auf deutsch und Anpassung an Amerika: Die Bonner Ostpolitik,” in Detlef Junker, ed., *Die USA und Deutschland im Zeitalter des Kalten Krieges 1945–1990* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2001), 2:55–65; and Link's contribution to Karl Dietrich Bracher, Wolfgang Jäger, and Werner Link, *Republik im Wandel 1969–1974: Die Ära*

The United States and the Soviet Union, by that point, had come to recognize that they had a common interest in keeping the Germans from acquiring a nuclear capability. As McGeorge Bundy, now President Johnson's national security advisor, told Ambassador Dobrynin in 1964, the U.S. government "understood the Soviet concern with Germany and that indeed we shared it." He could, moreover, "give him categorical assurance that there was no one in the [U.S. Government] who had the smallest intention of allowing the Germans to have national control of nuclear weapons."<sup>33</sup> And for U.S. leaders that point about a common U.S.-Soviet interest in keeping nuclear weapons out of German hands had major implications. It meant that a relatively stable superpower relationship could be built, in large measure, on a sense that the United States and the USSR had a common interest in keeping Germany from acquiring a nuclear capability; a non-nuclear Germany could be a key element in a political system both sides could live with.

That view remained alive within the American policy-making elite for the remainder of the Cold War. It played a key role in shaping basic U.S. policy even in 1990, when the fundamental structure of the post-Cold War political system was being worked out. In February of that year, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker met in Moscow with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze. The two sides were grappling with the basic issue of what the soon-to-be-reunified Germany's place would be in the new European order that was then coming into being, and in particular whether that state would remain part of NATO. Baker emphasized the importance of keeping the Germans in the Atlantic alliance; if Germany left NATO, he told Shevardnadze, that country "would undoubtedly acquire its own independent nuclear capability."<sup>34</sup> In another meeting with both Shevardnadze and Gorbachev later that day, Baker again outlined the problems that might develop if Germany left NATO. A neutral Germany, he said, "is not necessarily going to be a non-militaristic Germany. It could well decide that it needed its own independent nuclear capability as opposed to depending on the deterrent of the United States."<sup>35</sup> And he returned to the point later in the meeting, this time raising it in the guise of a question. He was talking about the "wave of emotion" in Germany that would soon make the country's internal unification an accomplished fact. But it was important, he said, "for the sake of peace in the world to do everything possible in order to develop external mechanisms that will secure

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*Brandt*, vol. 5, part I, of the *Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1986), esp. pp. 276–78.

<sup>33</sup> Bundy-Dobrynin meeting, November 24, 1965, FRUS 1964-68, 13:273 ([link](#)).

<sup>34</sup> Baker-Shevardnadze meeting, February 9, 1990, in Svetlana Savranskaya and Tom Blanton, eds., "NATO Expansion: What Gorbachev Heard," National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 613 [NSAEBB613] (<https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/russia-programs/2017-12-12/nato-expansion-what-gorbachev-heard-western-leaders-early>), document 4, p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> Gorbachev-Baker meeting, February 9, 1990 (U.S. notes), NSAEBB613 ([link](#)), document 5, p. 6.

stability in Europe.” If the Soviets had to choose, he wondered, would they prefer “a united Germany outside of NATO, absolutely independent and without American troops” or a united Germany that remained part of the NATO system? Gorbachev’s answer was very important. His government had to think things over, he said, but he thought it was “quite possible” that the U.S. troop presence in Germany could “play a containing role.” He was clearly impressed with the argument “that a united Germany could look for ways to rearm and create a new Wehrmacht, as happened after Versailles”—that if Germany were “outside the European structures, history could repeat itself.”<sup>36</sup> Jack Matlock, the U.S. ambassador in Moscow at the time, came away from that meeting with the sense that a major threshold had been crossed: he told Baker on the way back to the embassy that Gorbachev was “going to buy this”—the idea of a united Germany remaining in NATO—because it was “in the Soviet interest to have Germany tied to NATO and some U.S. military presence in Europe as a guarantee.”<sup>37</sup> And just a few months later the Soviets officially agreed to an arrangement of that sort: the treaty providing the framework for the reunification of Germany formally reaffirmed that country’s non-nuclear status.

American policy was thus still rooted in the basic thinking that had taken hold during the Kennedy period. Even at the end of the Cold War a non-nuclear Germany was a key part of the political structure American leaders sought to bring into being. And they were astonishingly successful in that regard: a non-nuclear Germany remains a central element in the political system we live with today, decades after the Cold War ended.

But let me make one final point, one which also relates to the nature of the political system we live in today. This has to do with the fact that people on both sides of the Atlantic are still reluctant to talk openly about the German nuclear issue and the role it played in the Cold War. It seems hard for the Germans to admit that Adenauer really wanted their country to become a nuclear power, or to accept the fact that it was more or less forced by its allies to accept a permanent non-nuclear status. The claim that the Federal Republic never wanted nuclear weapons in the first place is evidently more palatable. As for the Americans, they also have a strong interest in playing down the point that the containment of Germany, at least from 1961 onwards, was one of the main goals of their European policy. For to rub the Germans’ noses in the fact that their country had been discriminated against might tend, in the long run, to

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<sup>36</sup> Gorbachev-Baker meeting, February 9, 1990 (Soviet notes), NSAE6613 ([link](#)), doc. 6, pp. 8-9.

<sup>37</sup> Matlock to Pavel Palazhchenko, n.d., quoted in Pavel Palazhchenko, “Mikhail Gorbachev and the NATO Enlargement Debate: Then and Now,” in Daniel Hamilton and Kristina Spohr, eds., *Exiting the Cold War, Entering a New World* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2019) ([link](#)), pp. 448-49.

undermine their willingness to go along with that system; it might lead to the emergence of the sort of strong and independent German state the basic policy had been designed to head off.

So U.S. political leaders and other members of the American foreign policy establishment have tended to use softer, less explicit, language when discussing these issues. Brent Scowcroft, U.S. national security advisor under both Gerald Ford and George H.W. Bush, is a good case in point. In a 1999 interview, Scowcroft referred to the question of why the Bush administration had felt it was so important to keep “U.S. troops on the ground in Europe” after the Cold War. Remaining in Europe, he said, was “critical, not just because of the Soviet Union.”<sup>38</sup> But he did not expand on the point; he could not quite bring himself to explain what the other reasons were. Or take the case of the political scientist and government consultant Richard Neustadt. The German nuclear question lay at the heart of the analysis in the “top secret” report he wrote for President Kennedy about the Skybolt/Nassau affair of 1962 (only released thirty years later). But that issue was essentially ignored in the chapter on that affair in his book *Alliance Politics*, published in 1970.<sup>39</sup>

The case of Jack Matlock, the U.S. ambassador to Russia at the end of the Cold War, is also worth noting. Matlock had attended Secretary of State Baker’s meetings with the Soviet leadership in February 1990 and thus understood full well the key role that Baker’s argument about a fully independent and nuclear-armed Germany had played in those talks. And yet in Matlock’s very important (and very long) book on the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ending of the Cold War, *Autopsy on an Empire*, he scarcely alluded to the issue.<sup>40</sup> It was not that he did not understand its importance. He explained many years later why he had thought in 1991 that NATO had to be kept in business. “We need to keep it,” his thinking ran, “because we need to keep Germany under control. Germany unites—you want them loose from everything, or do you want them tied to an alliance, so they don’t have an independent military? What would an independent Germany that goes nuclear do to the peace of the world two generations from

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<sup>38</sup> Scowcroft interview with Philip Zelikow and others, November 12-13, 1999, George H.W. Bush Oral History Project, Miller Center, University of Virginia (<https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/brent-scowcroft-oral-history-part-i>), p. 76.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Neustadt, “Skybolt and Nassau: American Policy-Making and Anglo-American Relations,” November 1963 (declassified in April 1992), in National Security Files, box 322, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston (<https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/JFKNSF/322/JFKNSF-322-020>), and subsequently published as a book: Richard Neustadt, *Report to JFK: The Skybolt Crisis in Perspective* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); and Richard Neustadt, *Alliance Politics* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1970).

<sup>40</sup> See Jack Matlock, *Autopsy on an Empire: The American Ambassador’s Account of the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (New York: Random House, 1995), pp. 383-84.

now?”<sup>41</sup> But in the 1990s Matlock, it seems, was reluctant to express such views in the book he was writing, a book that was sure to have a large audience. Some political figures at the time, to be sure, did express concerns about Germany openly. In the 1997 Senate hearings on NATO enlargement, for example, then-Senator Joseph Biden, for example, explained what he thought the purpose of NATO had been. “It was not merely to contain Russia,” Biden said. “It was to harness Germany; it was to bring stability in Europe; and it has never, never, never only been to contain Russia.”<sup>42</sup> But such blunt expressions of distrust for one of America’s most important allies were rare; when dealing with this issue, most members of the U.S. establishment tended to be far more discreet.

This is all totally understandable, but it is important to recognize that it had major consequences. Because those arguments about the control of German power (and thus about the importance of keeping Germany non-nuclear) could not be spelled out too explicitly or too openly, other arguments had to be trotted out to explain why NATO had to remain in business. Indeed, new goals had to be formulated—like the need to “expand the area of the democratic peace”—that could provide a plausible rationale for NATO’s continued existence. All this certainly had a significant—and not altogether positive—impact on international politics in the whole post-Cold War period. And if the effects have not been altogether positive, that in turn suggests that maybe the time has come to deal with these issues more openly, letting the political chips fall where they may. Perhaps that conclusion simply reflects the prejudices of a professional historian, but it is hard to avoid feeling that a willingness on our part to see our nuclear past for what it was might be the healthiest attitude in the long run.

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<sup>41</sup> Jack Matlock: “The US is not the Victor of the Cold War,” January 19, 2017 (link) at 20 minutes, 40 seconds), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Z404fE8s1Y>.

<sup>42</sup> U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, “The Debate on NATO Enlargement,” October–November 1997 (<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-105shrg46832/html/CHRG-105shrg46832.htm>).