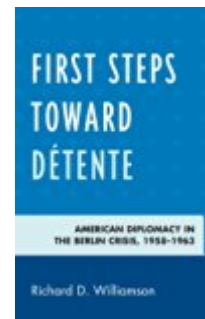


Richard D. Williamson. *First Steps toward Détente: American Diplomacy in the Berlin Crisis, 1958-1963.* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012. xxx + 237 pp. \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7391-6880-6.



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For a decade and a half of on-again, off-again crises, Berlin was at the center of the Cold War. And of all the Cold War flash points, Berlin proved among the most persistent and arguably the most dangerous. It was the issue that kept presidents and secretaries of state up at night. "When I go to sleep at night, I try not to think about Berlin," Dean Rusk confessed in 1961. Dwight Eisenhower agreed.[1] Cold War Berlin was more than a piece of conquered real estate. A combination of the peculiar bargain that had divided the city amongst the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France in the race to the city in the closing days of World War II and deep-rooted insecurities about German power had doomed the city to become a hotbed of intrigue where Cold War tensions simmered and frequently threatened to boil over in genuine nuclear crises.

Over half a century removed, the notion that the United States would tie its own survival to the plight of two million Germans who, until recently, had been wartime enemies, seems to defy belief. And yet from the late 1940s through the early

1960s--some of the most dangerous years of the Cold War--that is precisely what successive American presidents did. Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, and John Kennedy vowed to defend the freedom of West Berlin from communist aggression just as they would defend Washington, Chicago, or Los Angeles. Those blunt statements of resolve, dating back to Truman's promise to protect West Berlin "come what may" in the 1948 Berlin blockade and extending through the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, amounted to an entanglement of the highest order. And yet neither Congress nor the American people ever seriously questioned it.

For the Western Allies, it was point of acute vulnerability that called for high-stakes deterrence. For the Soviets, it was a powerful point of diplomatic leverage that could be ratcheted up, seemingly with impunity. And so long as West Berlin remained such a pivotal place in the Cold War, the chances of détente were limited.

In *First Steps toward Detente*, Dr. Richard Williamson picks up the story with Nikita

Khrushchev's ultimatum of November 1958 to sign a peace treaty with East Germany and turn West Berlin into a "free city," and follows it through the signing of the Limited Test Ban Treaty in 1963. Drawing on American archival sources at the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson presidential libraries along with the National Archives at College Park, the author presents an America-centric narrative of diplomacy with allies and enemies.

The author credits the United States with choosing diplomacy over military options: "In an unpromising environment of equally contentious NATO allies, belligerent opponents, and little encouragement, *U.S. leaders consistently chose diplomacy over military action*. This decision reflected long-term interests and skepticism over effective use of force, especially with a divided command in Europe" (p. xii, emphasis in original). And: "Limited-war problems of using nuclear force in restrictive regions encouraged a diplomatic approach" (p. 15). It is not clear what military options were offered as choices to improve the situation. The Pentagon and NATO were awash with military contingency plans, but they were for reactive, defensive measures designed to preserve the status quo in the face of Soviet pressure. Because of the Soviet preponderance of conventional military power in Europe, sustained ground operations were ruled out, even after Kennedy pointedly rejected the massive retaliation doctrine of the Eisenhower administration and declared flexible response as Washington's new deterrence strategy of choice. In theory, it was designed to create more options than surrender or nuclear war. But when it came to the Berlin situation, it had little practical effect. And so American contingency planning for the Berlin crisis typically involved stepped escalation bolstered by the ultimate threat of nuclear war. Symptomatic of there being so few real military options available, Kennedy even allowed the extreme option of launching a nuclear first strike to be briefly entertained as a potential reaction to Sovi-

et moves.[2] For Washington, there were no useful proactive military options for solving or normalizing the Berlin problem.

There were diplomatic options available, but new ideas emanating from Washington were few throughout this period. The Soviets pressured from one side. The Allies pressured from another, and Washington found again and again that negotiating with them was often as difficult--perhaps even more so because of the various angles--as dealing with the Soviets. The positions of the Western Allies varied and shifted but were defined sharply by the hypersensitivity of the political leadership of West Germany and West Berlin to any hint of a wavering of Western resolve. In this difficult diplomatic milieu, the author writes, "The United States continued its intense and complex Berlin diplomacy for almost five years, in spite of mistakes and disappointments and lack of support from its Allied partners, because of a growing need for more cooperative relations with the Soviet Union" (p. xi).

As Williamson's narrative makes clear, there was a lot of talking, but most of the time there was little real meat to the negotiations; the United States and Soviet Union were often caught on a diplomatic merry-go-round of tired position statements and dead-end discussions. The story is peppered with words like "fruitless" and "disappointing." There were twists and turns, to be sure, but few fresh ideas.

The value of all this diplomacy lay in defusing crisis moments, but it made little genuine headway in solving the core problem or substantially altering the dynamic. Despite five years of diplomacy, the Berlin problem dynamic remained largely the same at the beginning of October 1962 as it had been in November 1958. In the end, external factors made the difference. It was only after the Cuban missile crisis that the Soviets' West Berlin lever was reduced in effectiveness and the American sense of vulnerability somewhat alleviated. That was in part the result of the sobering

reality of a near-miss with nuclear war. But it was also in part because the new diplomatic reality at the end of the Cuban missile crisis was that, as Kennedy put it in January 1963, "Cuba's almost the same position Berlin was with us for a decade. Any action they take in Berlin we can take an action in Cuba." [3] The episode also convinced Khrushchev to delink the West Berlin issue from disarmament negotiations, no longer requiring progress on one to be contingent on progress on the other (p. 204). Those crucial changes in the dynamic markedly improved the prospects of East-West detente and opened new avenues toward arms control agreements.

"The Berlin Crisis," Williamson concludes, "helped catalyze America's maturity as a super-power" (p. 211). The prospect of war over Berlin, he argues, ultimately brought the two sides closer, something that in turn facilitated the Limited Test Ban Treaty. "U.S. leaders got to know their Soviet counterparts," he writes, and "American leaders were beginning to realize that detente was what the United States wanted. In the diplomatic campaign for a Berlin agreement, the United States took its first steps toward detente and, eventually, strategic-arms limitation" (p. 220). Both are fair points, but the tight focus on negotiations neglects larger, probably more important consequences of the Berlin crisis that helped inform U.S. foreign policy in other parts of the world, including the roles of credibility and resolve in advancing national interests and projecting power and the lessons U.S. policymakers learned--rightly or wrongly--about drawing lines in the sand.

Notes

[1]. Donald P. Steury, *On the Front Lines of the Cold War: Documents on the Intelligence War in Berlin, 1946-1961* (Washington, DC: CIA History Staff, Center for the Study of Intelligence, 1991), xi; "Memorandum of Conversation," John Foster Dulles and Dwight Eisenhower, November 30, 1958, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958-60*, vol. 8, 142-43; "Memorandum of Conver-

sation," Dulles and Eisenhower, November 18, 1958, *ibid.*, 84-85.

[2]. Fred Kaplan, "JFK's First Strike Plan," *The Atlantic Monthly* (October 2001).

[3]. Quoted in David Coleman, *The Fourteenth Day: JFK and the Aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012), 191.

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