

**185. Letter From President Kennedy to the Supreme Commander,
Allied Powers Europe (Norstad)**

Washington, October 20, 1961.

DEAR GENERAL NORSTAD: Since your visit here¹ I have given further thought to the two principal subjects of our discussion in relation to the Berlin situation, namely, contingency planning and the preparatory build-up in NATO military strength.

As you have been informed, all the measures you recommended for immediate action have been authorized and put in motion, except for the replacement of the 3rd battle group now in Berlin which will take place when additional such units move to Europe as part of the Long Thrust exercise.

My present thinking on the preferred sequence of types of actions that we should take in the event of any abrogation of Western rights in Berlin is reflected in the sequence of four courses of action designated by Roman numerals in the enclosed outline. The import of this sequence should be clear to you, and I desire that it serve as the guidance for your discussions with our Allies and for your planning of detailed military operations.

In the course of that planning I ask that you spell out for me with particularity your operational concepts for the command and control procedures within your command to be used in the "selective nuclear attacks" and "limited tactical employment of nuclear weapons" referred to in Contingencies IV A and B of the enclosure.

Two aspects of my present thinking about Berlin planning and preparation deserve especial emphasis.

First: What I want is a sequence of graduated responses to Soviet/GDR actions in denial of our rights of access. The purpose is to maintain our rights and preserve our alliance. The responses after Phase I should begin with the non-military and move to the military. We cannot plan in advance the exact time each response should be initiated; for one reason, because we cannot now predict the date of Soviet/GDR action, for another because we cannot foresee the duration or the consequences of each response. But there are some principles applicable to this matter of timing. The earlier responses should be thoroughly prepared in advance and the purpose should be to initiate them and keep them going long enough so that the next response may, if necessary, come in when needed. This requires vigor in preparation, readiness for action, and

Source: Eisenhower Library, Norstad Papers, Subject File, Kennedy, John F. Top Secret. Regarding the drafting of this letter, see Document 184.

¹ See Document 166.

caution against going off half-cocked. The military sequence indicated begins with the air action outlined in III A 1. Since it seems likely that any form of Soviet blockade will include interference with air access, every effort in preparation should be made to increase the chance of success in air operations. The rewards of success would be great indeed. The other indicated steps are those outlined in III A 2 and III B. These courses will require the timely addition of considerable forces to your command, and appropriate dispositions on your central front. Should it appear that Soviet forces sufficient to defeat these actions are being brought into play, the response, on which you would receive specific directives, will be one or more of those contained in paragraph IV.

Second: At this juncture I place as much importance on developing our capacity and readiness to fight with significant non-nuclear forces as on measures designed primarily to make our nuclear deterrent more credible. In saying this I am not in any sense depreciating the need for realization by the U.S.S.R. of the tremendous power of our nuclear forces and our will to use them, if necessary, in support of our objectives. Indeed, I think the two aspects are interrelated. It seems evident to me that our nuclear deterrent will not be credible to the Soviets unless they are convinced of NATO's readiness to become engaged on a lesser level of violence and are thereby made to realize the great risks of escalation to nuclear war. I will be interested to hear of any suggestion from you as to how we might intensify that realization.

When contingency plans have been completed and received through established channels, the Joint Chiefs of Staff will review them with me and my other advisors.

Sincerely,

John F. Kennedy

Enclosure²

Washington, October 20, 1961.

U.S. POLICY ON MILITARY ACTIONS IN A BERLIN CONFLICT

In the event military force is applied in the Berlin situation, it is United States policy that the nature and sequence of such use should preferably be:

² Top Secret. On October 23 Bundy transmitted this paper to Secretaries Rusk and McNamara as NSAM No. 109.

I *If Soviet/GDR administrative or other action interferes with Berlin access by ground or air but is short of definitive blockage, then the tripartite powers should execute Berlin contingency plans, to include tripartitely agreed probes of Soviet intentions by a platoon or smaller force on the ground and by fighter escort in the air; they should continue to use fully any unblocked mode of access.*

(Comment: Through this point, risks of major war, unless Soviets wish to start one, are not materially raised by any tripartite action, and therefore, decision on execution is tripartite rather than NATO responsibility.)

II *If, despite the above tripartite actions, Soviet/GDR action indicates a determination to maintain significant blockage of our access to Berlin, then the NATO Allies should undertake such non-combatant activity as economic embargo, maritime harassment, and UN action. Simultaneously, they should mobilize and reinforce rapidly to improve capability for taking actions listed below. Meanwhile, they should use fully any unblocked access to Berlin. (If, however, the situation has so developed that NATO forces have been substantially reinforced, after appropriate non-combatant measures undertake without delay one or more of the courses of military action shown below.)*

(Comment: Since the Alliance proposes to exploit other means before initiating major military operations, non-combatant efforts to restore ground access will precede the military efforts shown below in any case. A separate issue is the choice between delay while reinforcing in Europe, and prompt action. Without a build-up by the Allies, the range of options for early military action by us is limited. Undue delay could weaken nuclear credibility, threaten the viability of West Berlin, and erode Alliance resolve, but these potential disadvantages may be outweighed by the higher risk of nuclear escalation if early non-nuclear action were taken with no more than the currently available forces. To the extent that Alliance forces in Europe are raised above present levels, the delays in initiating military action can be reduced or the military action can be tailored to the existing force levels.)

III *If, despite the above Allied actions, our Berlin access is not restored, the Allies should take appropriate further action to clarify whether the Soviets/GDR intend to maintain blockage of air or ground access, or both, while making clear our intention to obtain re-opened*

access. *Then* embark on one or more of the following expanded military courses of action:

A. European Theatre

1. Expanding non-nuclear air action, against a background of expanded ground defensive strength, to gain local air superiority. Extend size and scope as necessary.

(Comment: Opposing strengths probably will be roughly comparable. Military success locally is not impossible. As a political operation, this shows the Soviets visibly higher risks of nuclear war. The pace and volatility of extended air operations raise risks of rapid escalation.)

2. Expanding non-nuclear ground operations into GDR territory in division and greater strength, with strong air support.

(Comment: This is a politically oriented military operation aiming to display to the Soviets the approaching danger of possibly irreversible escalation. Military overpowering of determined Soviet resistance is not feasible. The risks rise, as do the military pressures on the Soviets.)

B. World Wide

Maritime control, naval blockade, or other world-wide measures, both for reprisal and to add to general pressure on the Soviets.

(Comment: This action, by itself, is not apt to be effective and might lead to Soviet initiation of action on the European central front in any case. It lacks direct relation to Berlin and may entail political liabilities. It exploits pronounced Allied naval superiority. It would have a delayed impact on nuclear risks. It is the view of the JCS and the principal unified commanders that a naval blockade should be accompanied by other military action in Central Europe.

IV *If, despite Allied use of substantial non-nuclear forces, the Soviets continue to encroach upon our vital interests, then the Allies should use nuclear weapons, starting with one of the following courses of action but continuing through C below if necessary:*

A. Selective nuclear attacks for the primary purpose of demonstrating the will to use nuclear weapons.

B. Limited tactical employment of nuclear weapons to achieve in addition significant tactical advantage such as preservation of the integrity of Allied forces committed, or to extend pressure toward the objective.

C. General Nuclear war.

(Comment: The Allies only partially control the timing and scale of nuclear weapons use. Such use might be initiated by the Soviets, at any time after the opening of small-scale hostilities. Allied initiation of limited nuclear action may elicit a reply in kind; it may also prompt unrestrained pre-emptive attack.)