Perhaps so. But one might also argue that Truman was more mature than most others at the time because he saw, almost from the start, that nuclear weapons were going to change the meaning of "strategy" itself. That word implies the calculated relationship of means to ends; but Truman persistently maintained that in a nuclear age such calculations were no longer possible. When an adviser reminded him in October 1943 that he had an atomic bomb up his sleeve, the President acknowledged this but commented: "I am not sure that it can ever be used."108 "[W]ar has undergone a technological change which makes it a very different thing from what it used to be," the President explained seven years later in his final State of the Union message:

The war of the future would be one in which man could extinguish millions of lives at one blow, demolish the great cities of the world, wipe out the cultural achievements of the past—and destroy the very structure of a civilization that has been slowly and painfully built up through hundreds of generations. Such a war is not a possible policy for rational men.

Truman concluded by revealing what he would say to Stalin—who retained his belief in the eventual inevitability of war through the final weird months of his life109—if the two should ever meet again, face to face:

You claim belief in Lenin's prophecy that one stage in the development of communist society would be war between your world and ours. But Lenin was a pre-atomic man, who viewed society and history with pre-atomic eyes. Something profound has happened since he wrote. War has changed its shape and dimension. It cannot now be a "stage" in the development of anything save ruin for your regime and your homeland.110

Little noticed at the time nor widely remembered since,111 Truman's January 1953 valedictory anticipated the difficulties all of his successors would have—as would those elsewhere in the world who would come to possess them—translating the physical power of nuclear weapons into effective instruments of statecraft. The absence of coherent strategy in the Truman administration, therefore, may have demonstrated not so much lack of sophistication as an abundance of it. Truman's nuclear education simply preceded that of everyone else.

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FIVE

The German Question

"Now, Mr. Molotov," Bevin demanded: "what is it that you want?"

"I want a unified Germany," said Molotov.

"Why do you want that? Do you really believe that a unified Germany would go communist? They might pretend to. They would say all the right things and repeat all the correct formulas. But in their hearts they would be longing for the day when they could revenge their defeat at Stalingrad. You know that as well as I do."

"Yes," said Molotov, "I know that. But I want a unified Germany."

"We were fortunate in our opponent." (Harold Nicholson1)

Dean Acheson2

By the time Truman left office and Stalin died, early in 1953, the basic pattern of the Cold War were firmly established. Neither the United States nor the Soviet Union would accept the other's vision of a postwar world, even as neither would risk war—at least not intentionally—to achieve their own. Both sought allies but did not always control them; both built nuclear weapons but found it difficult to know what to do with them. Neither proved capable of separating foreign policy from domestic influences, but those influences differed enormously, producing correspondingly dissimilar external behavior. Certain that history was on their side, the first generation of Cold War statesmen proceeded from strikingly divergent views of history itself and where it was taking them.

One common destination, they would have been surprised to learn, was to be three and a half additional decades of confrontation. The issues over which Soviet-American conflict had arisen at the end of World War II were still unresolved, for the most part, in the mid-1980s: indeed their very irresolution had become, by then, so familiar a feature of international life as to seem to some observers reassuringly normal.2 Cold War history, is, at least in part, the story of how what was thought to be unendurable became endurable, how order and stability, if rarely justice, evolved from bitter and sustained rivalry.

Surely the nuclear revolution provides one explanation. These new weapons
raised the costs of challenging the status quo even as they lowered the burdens of defending it: once they were in place on both sides and in sufficient quantity, they created a kind of stalemate that neither thought it could safely change. Surely Soviet and American military-industrial complexes found the "managed" competition of deterrence and counter-deterrence very much to their advantage; they could prepare for war without the mess of waging it. Surely domestic politics in both the democratic West and the authoritarian East continued to play a role: Stalin had no monopoly on the ancient practice of using external enemies to justify internal policies. Surely the existence of allies encouraged continuity, for the trouble of constructing an alliance can make its perpetuation seem as vital as its purposes. And surely, too, the sheer passage of time slowly accustomed those who fought the Cold War to its omnipresence. It became, in a way, the geopolitical equivalent of a Skinner box, within which it was difficult to see that alternative patterns of stimulus and response might be possible.

One of these alternatives—a path not taken—was a negotiated settlement that might have ended the conflict before it became a habit. It is easy now to say that the Cold War could only have disappeared when the Soviet Union did; but we ought not to accept this proposition without testing it. Were there opportunities to resolve outstanding differences through diplomacy? Did the West do all it could to pursue them, if they existed? To what extent is it fair to conclude that the victors in the Cold War, by refusing to accept anything short of victory, themselves perpetuated it?

It is not as though no negotiations took place. The wartime allies agreed, in 1946, on peace treaties for former German satellites, and the Council of Foreign Ministers continued to meet regularly if unproductively through the end of 1947. The international control of atomic energy was thoroughly discussed at the United Nations, even if no agreement emerged. Soviet and Western diplomats attempted to resolve the Berlin blockade crisis through the summer and fall of 1948, and eventually succeeded in the spring of 1949. After the Korean War broke out, behind-the-scenes contacts involving all combatants eventually led to formal—if for another two years futile—armistice negotiations. Further talks would produce a fragile Indochina settlement in 1954, a mutual withdrawal of occupation forces from Austria in the spring of 1955, and the first of many Cold War summits: the meeting between the American, Soviet, British, and French heads of government that took place at Geneva in July of that year.

And yet there was a frustrating quality to all of these deliberations, because none of them addressed the issues that were keeping the Cold War going. They failed to dismantle Soviet and American spheres of influence in Europe, or to slow the intensifying nuclear arms race, or to restrain competition in what was coming to be called the "third world." Above all, they left Germany divided, thereby perpetuating a situation which, if it had not directly caused the Cold War, did more than anything else to delay its settlement. The German question provides a useful case, hence, through which to explore the possibility that opportunities existed, but were missed, to end the Cold War at an earlier stage in its history.

The most striking anomaly of the Cold War was the existence of a divided Europe, within which there resided a divided Germany, within which there lay a divided Berlin. No one in Washington, Moscow, or anywhere else had sought such an arrangement, so at odds with all previous standards of geopolitical logic. Few who witnessed how it came about prior to 1949 would have expected it still to be in place as late as 1989. Still the passage of time can make even the oddest situations seem ordinary. This one would become so in the years following construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, to such an extent that the abrupt collapse of that structure and the system it symbolized twenty-eight years later came as an even greater surprise than its creation. Some strange mechanism seems to have been at work in Germany that allowed the bizarre years to become unexceptional, only to reverse the procedure virtually overnight.

Germany was going to be divided at the end of World War II whatever else happened: invasion on several fronts by several enemies ensured different treatment from that accorded the Japanese. In this sense, Hitler himself—who collected enemies as avidly as he did art—was the architect of German disunity, as of so much else. Presumably, though, the occupying powers could have reunited Germany quickly had they agreed on what its character was to be. There were two reasons why they were unable to do this.

The first had to do with lessons of the past. Would punishing the Germans more harshly than after the first world war provide the best protection against a third? Or had the Versailles Treaty failed precisely because of its harshness? Permanent partition would make sense if the punitive option were chosen; reunification if the goal was to be reconciliation. The problem here was not that the Americans, British, and Russians disagreed with one another, but rather that they were themselves unsure of what course to follow. Only the French were clear on the need for punishment and partition; but they were hardly in a position to affect what their more powerful allies would eventually do. Disarray within as much as among the victors, therefore, could have delayed a German settlement, even if there had been no Cold War.

But of course there was a Cold War, and it became the second and more significant reason for Germany's division. What each superpower most feared was that its wartime enemy might align itself with its Cold War adversary: if that were to happen, the resulting concentration of military, industrial, and economic power could be too great to overcome. "[T]he Soviets have abandoned the policy to weaken Germany but are relying instead on their belief that a reasonably strong Germany is more to their advantage." White House aide Clark M. Clifford warned President Truman in September 1946. That same week Soviet Ambassador Nikolai Novikov reported to Moscow: "[T]he United States is considering the possibility of terminating the Allied occupation of German territory before the main tasks of the occupation—the demilitarization and
democratization of Germany—have been implemented. This would create the prerequisites for the revival of an imperialist Germany, which the United States plans to use in a future war on its side.10

It was this convergence of concerns—how to avoid the danger of a resurgent Germany itself, on the one hand, and the threat of a Germany on the wrong side in the Cold War, on the other—that made its future so central an issue in the evolution, if not the actual origins, of that conflict. But that convergence did not occur simultaneously in Moscow and Washington. It is now clear that Stalin came to see Germany as a postwar and a Cold War problem well before the Americans did.

New evidence reveals that Stalin met with the leaders of the German Communist Party (KPD) as early as 4 June 1945, to lay out plans for incorporating a reunified Germany within Moscow’s sphere of influence. Two principal instruments would accomplish this: the Red Army would control the Soviet occupation zone, while the KPD would seek popular support beyond the reach of Soviet military authority. Germany would at first be divided, with its eastern territories administered by the Russians, the remainder by the Western allies. Within the east the KPD would merge with the Social Democrats (SPD) to form the Socialist Unity Party (SED), thus following the example of other Eastern and Central European communist parties which were, under Soviet instructions, organizing "national fronts" with non-communist parties on the left. Having consolidated its position in the SED, operating under KPD control, would then solidify the allegiance of Social Democrats and other sympathetic Germans in the west, and by these means bring about unification.11 "[A]ll of Germany must be ours," Stalin assured the Yugoslavs in the spring of 1946, "that is, Soviet, Communist."12

Several things are worth noting about this plan. First, it shows that Stalin wanted both partition and reunification: the first would make the second possible on terms he could accept. Second, it reveals his assumption—a year before they decided to do it—that the Americans, British, and French would treat their zones as a single unit: that view was at odds with Moscow’s official position at the time, which was to favor common economic and administrative structures for all of Germany. Third, it confirms that Stalin hoped to see Soviet influence spread throughout Germany without his having to impose it: the KPD-SPD merger is hard to explain except as an effort to increase the German communists’ popularity in the west.13

But if that is true, then Stalin’s plan also suggests a fourth point, which is that his strategy was out of line with his tactics. The Soviet Union was not winning friends among Germans anywhere by allowing its army to rape, pillage property, indiscriminately extract reparations, or unilaterally transfer large portions of prewar territory to the Poles.14 As one Soviet official admitted: "there are more Communists in the Western part of the country, which [has] not been in touch with the Red Army, than in Berlin."15 Finally, Stalin appears to have given little thought to what his wartime allies might do, within their own occupation zones, that might interfere with his grand design. How did the Russians mean to bring it all about, the Yugoslavs asked one of the great man’s subordinates. He answered: "I don’t know myself."16

The Americans, however, were at least as confused in the summer of 1945. Supporters of the defunct Morgenthau Plan in the War and Treasury Departments continued to call for punishment and possible partition without regard to how this might affect relations with the Soviet Union: their influence lingered, as we have seen, in the provisions of JCS 1067, the official directive for the occupation of Germany. General Lucius Clay, on the scene, had a very different view: he stressed the need for rehabilitation and quick reunification; but he carefully insulated his thinking from Cold War controversies elsewhere, assumed Moscow’s cooperation, and saw the most likely resistance as coming from the French. Meanwhile a third group, centered in the State Department, supported Clay on rehabilitation but thought reunification unlikely, not so much because of what the Russians were doing inside Germany but because of what was happening elsewhere in Eastern Europe. George Kennan put this argument in its starkest form: "We have no choice but to lead our section of Germany—the section of which we and the British have accepted responsibility—to a form of independence so prosperous, so secure, so superior, that the East cannot threaten it."17

It was left to the British to push the Truman administration into choosing between these alternatives. More accustomed than the Americans to thinking about the occupation of Germany, more skeptical about Soviet intentions, more worried about the costs of administering separate zones, the British Foreign Office had been quicker to see Kennan’s logic than his own government had been. During the summer of 1946, Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin maneuvered Secretary of State James F. Byrnes into proposing that the American and British occupation zones become a single economic unit,18 thereby beginning the process of zonal consolidation Stalin had foreseen a year earlier. General George C. Marshall, who replaced Byrnes early in 1947, still hoped to find an acceptable basis for reunification at a four-power foreign ministers’ meeting in Moscow that would run from early March through late April. But forty-three unproductive sessions with Molotov made it clear that that was not likely to happen.

The Soviet foreign minister’s reputation for repetitiously tedious obstinacy has misled historians into assuming that nothing much occurred at Moscow. Being stuck in the Soviet capital with little to do but listen to Molotov—particularly at a time when the President had just proclaimed the Truman Doctrine—must have seemed, to Marshall, Bevin, and French Foreign Minister Georges Bidault, like serving on a sequestered jury in a very long trial. But they put the experience to good use by holding informal conversations on the future of Germany. These produced the first consensus among all the Western allies, including the French, in support of Bevin’s view that a truncated and rehabilitated Germany would be less dangerous than a unified state that might come under Soviet control.19

The discussions must have taken place within range of Stalin’s eavesdropping
devices. But the Soviet leader, in this instance, failed to see what was happening under his nose and even inadvertently encouraged it. The failure to agree on Germany, he told Marshall as the conference drew to a close, was not so tragic:

[These were only the first skirmishes and brushes of reconnaissance forces on this question. ...] Compromises were possible on all the main questions including demilitarization, political structure of Germany, reparations and economic unity. It was necessary to have patience and not become depressed. These relaxed remarks profoundly alarmed Marshall—almost certainly because Stalin's reassurances in the past had provided so little basis for reassurance. If the Kremlin boss was optimistic about Germany then that was ample reason for the West not to be: he must have a plan, and he must think that it was succeeding. What it might be was not yet clear, but the status quo, as Charles E. Bohlen recalled, was bad enough: "All the way back to Washington, Marshall talked of the importance of finding some initiative to prevent the complete breakdown of Western Europe." The product of these ruminations was, of course, the Marshall Plan, for which Marshall himself, quite properly, has received most of the credit. But Stalin too ought to be remembered as at least an unwitting architect, because it was his apparent confidence that time was on his side in Germany that drove the American Secretary of State to propose the initiative in the first place. The United States now set out to reverse that perception, not only in Stalin's mind but, more significantly, in the minds of the Europeans whose actions would ultimately determine what happened on the Continent. Washington's promise of economic assistance achieved that psychological effect long before the aid in question had actually arrived, with the result that the Americans soon had a sphere of influence in Europe that was at least as solid as its Soviet counterpart. The Marshall Plan had an equally decisive effect, we can now see, on Stalin's hopes for a reunited Germany under Soviet control.

II

It was clear by this time that Europe could not revive without Germany: earlier ideas for rehabilitating Germany's neighbors while punishing the Germans themselves—particularly through such measures as an internationalization of the Ruhr—had come to seem increasingly unworkable. But Stalin's rejection of the Marshall Plan excluded eastern Germany from it, along with the rest of Eastern Europe. The idea of a western Germany linked to a reviving Western Europe therefore gained support through the last half of 1947. After yet another foreign ministers' conference failed to produce progress toward reunification, the Americans, British, and French began openly planning the consolidation of their occupation zones and the establishment within them of a provisional German government. By June 1948, the three allies plus the Benelux countries had agreed to allow the West Germans "those governmental responsibilities which are compatible with the minimum requirements of occupation... and which ultimately will enable them to assume full governmental responsibility." This "London Conference program," as it came to be known, was not yet an irrevocable decision to divide Germany: the participants claimed to be acting primarily to promote economic recovery, and left open the possibility of subsequent reunification. But there were stark geopolitical implications in what they had decided to do.

One of these was the abandonment of any further pretense at four-power cooperation. Stalin's intentions with respect to Germany were still not clear to western observers, but his behavior elsewhere in Europe left little reason to assume their benevolence. Clay, who had earlier resisted letting Cold War concerns shape his policies, now shifted to a completely opposite view: "we must have the courage to proceed quickly with the establishment of a government for western Germany... 42 million Germans in the British and American zones represent today the strongest outpost against Communist penetration that exists anywhere." The western occupying authorities were, in short, coming to think of the Germans more as future allies than as defeated adversaries. And once they began to involve the Germans in local and regional administration, it was difficult to restrict them to that level; efforts to rebuild German self-confidence produced—not very surprisingly—German self-confidence. By the summer of 1948, then, the idea of establishing a separate West German state had gained considerable momentum.

Stalin's 1945 plan, conversely, was losing it. He had expected that economic distress in western Germany would cause class consciousness to merge with national consciousness, so that the inhabitants of that region would seek unification with the east by electing parties on the left under Moscow's control. This was not a completely implausible prospect: Germans had, in the past, demonstrated the capacity to produce authoritarian governments by constitutional means. But Hitler gained and retained power in 1933 by promising an economic and a national revival. Stalin was unable to do the same. The brutal behavior of Soviet troops in Germany, the forced merger of the SPD with the KPD, the territorial concessions to Poland, all took their toll. "Deviations from Marxist positions pose a substantial danger for the [SED]," a worried Colonel S. I. Tsipanov, who handled propaganda for the Soviet occupation authorities, reported to Moscow in September 1946: "We run the danger of allowing the party to revert to extreme nationalism." Remarkably enough, Stalin allowed free municipal elections in the Soviet zone the following month, despite warnings—correct, as it turned out—that the SED would fare badly in them. One desperate apparatchik even suggested, shortly before this embarrassment, that Moscow might want to send in musical groups, symphonies, opera and theater troupes to demonstrate to the resentful Germans the superiority of Russian culture.

The task Stalin faced in Germany was one for which he was ill-prepared: he had to win the support of people he could not entirely control. It would have been easy enough to impose his will inside the Soviet zone, but only by using...
prospects for incorporating the rest of Germany within Moscow’s sphere of influence. To achieve that larger goal, he would have to make his policies in the east attractive in the west, no simple task given his reliance on such seedy and subservient characters as Pieck, Grotewohl, and Ulbricht. Stalin was loath to abandon reunification: he appears to have clung, almost to the end of his life, to the illusion that ideology sooner or later would override nationalism and bring all Germans, by their own choice, into the socialist camp. But this was, yet again, an example of romanticism residing within authoritarianism. In the light of what was happening in western Germany at the time, it was never a realistic strategy. The Marshall Plan gave Germans outside the Soviet zone a choice: they could follow the Stalinist path toward national unity, knowing that the Soviet Union’s capacity to bring about economic recovery was minimal and likely to remain so; or they could seek immediate economic assistance through alignment with the United States and its allies, knowing that the effect might be to postpone German reunification for years to come. When put that way, the dilemma was not too difficult to resolve: the material benefits of prosperity—especially when linked to the political advantages of democracy—outweighed, for most West Germans, whatever the psychological satisfactions of reunification might have been. “Unfortunately, at a certain stage,” Nikita Khrushchev would later comment, “ideological issues are decided by the stomach, that is, by seeing who can provide the most for people’s daily needs.” Pieck acknowledged as much when he warned Soviet officials, late in March 1948, that support for the Marshall Plan was growing in western Germany while the SEZ had lost ground and was coming to be seen as the “so-called Russian official party.” Tiulpánov was even more pessimistic. He admitted to the East Germans that the Soviet occupation force in Germany has made incredible mistakes, which unfortunately can only be rectified with great difficulty. As the only excuse, I can only say that we never previously had to deal with a Socialist occupation. Perhaps I can give assurance that if in the future we should be compelled once again by our opponents to carry through another Socialist occupation then we will have learned from our experiences in Germany and will do it better. Increasingly worried about winning elections even within the east, the SEZ leaders, with Moscow’s approval, now began planning their own separate regime. “The West will make Western Germany their own,” Stalin explained to the Yugoslavs, “and we shall turn Eastern Germany into our own state.” It is not yet clear to what extent this shift in strategy influenced Stalin’s decision to begin tightening restrictions on Western access to Berlin. But it has long been apparent—and such Soviet documents as are available now confirm—that the blockade was a reaction to the London Conference program in general, and to its plans for currency reform in particular. The idea, a Soviet foreign ministry official noted, was to “take steps which would not only restrict separate actions of the US, Britain, and France in Germany but also efficiently thwart their plans of knocking together a Western bloc, with Germany to be incorporated in it.”

Stalin’s grudging acknowledgement that the blockade had failed, early in 1949, allowed the configuration of postwar Germany to fall into place. The Western allies hastened to proclaim the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), whose “Basic Law,” or provisional constitution, went into effect in May 1949. The German Democratic Republic (GDR) was established, under Soviet sponsorship, the following October, with Berlin remaining under four-power occupation deep within its territory. A set of arrangements hastily improvised at the end of the war had hardened into an improbable but indefinite status quo: the postwar German settlement, or so it seemed, was to be the postwar European settlement projected down to the level of a divided country and even a divided capital. How long this situation would last was not clear at the time. But one thing was: none of the parties concerned—neither the Berliners, nor the West or East Germans, nor the Americans and their allies, nor the Russians—saw it as a permanent solution.

III

Washington’s role in all of this had been uncharacteristically passive: officials there gave relatively little thought to the German problem as a whole during the early postwar years, preoccupied as they were with containing Soviet expansionism, reviving the European economy, and demonstrating resolve in Berlin. The British had been more purposeful, nudging the Truman administration toward a consolidation of occupation zones which then complemented the Marshall Plan; having gone that far, it seemed to make sense to form a separate West German state. Policy emerged incrementally, though: no one sat down to determine whether Kennan’s 1945 vision of an indefinitely divided Germany would provide the basis for a sustainable policy. Meanwhile another British initiative—Bevin’s idea of a military alliance that would link the United States to Western Europe—was gaining support on both sides of the Atlantic without anyone having decided how the West Germans were going to fit into it. For a country whose geopolitical significance should have been obvious, Germany’s future was being determined on a surprisingly ad hoc basis.

It was Kennan who first questioned this process: “We should not consent,” he argued in August 1948, “to let the important decisions depend entirely on the action of others.” Although the Truman administration had accepted the substance of what he recommended in 1945, Kennan resisted this apparent vindication: he so strongly distrusted conventional wisdom that he could reject his own arguments when they seemed likely to attain that status. As director of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff, it was his responsibility, in any event, to think ahead; and as he did so during the midst of the Berlin blockade, he came to the conclusion that the indefinite division of
Germany—the very thing he had advocated at the end of the war—would be a great mistake.

How could a stable settlement in Europe ever evolve if the spheres of influence of the United States and the Soviet Union had extended to the point where they could divide a single nation—potentially the most powerful on the Continent—between them? This system would keep Germany down, to be sure, but it would also lock the Cold War in by complicating any mutually negotiated withdrawal of Soviet and American forces from the advanced positions they had occupied at the end of the war. Several things could then happen, none of them good. The American public might grow tired of sustaining such a military burden at a time when it was also financing European recovery; cuts in Congressional appropriations might then force a unilateral pull-back the Russians could exploit. The Soviet Union itself might promise such a pull-back, knowing that it could rapidly reintroduce its forces from neighboring Poland; the Americans would have no comparably convenient staging area. Even if these events did not occur, the Germans would not stand for having Soviet and American troops indefinitely on their soil. Sooner or later they would make their own settlement, not necessarily to the advantage of the United States. "[T]he development of life in Europe cannot await the composure of east-west differences," Kennan concluded. "Something must be done; and something will be done, whether we like it or not."43

The alternative, he argued, should be free elections throughout Germany, the formation of a central government, and the withdrawal of occupation forces into enclaves just inside the country's borders. This plan came to be known as "Program A." The American, British, and Soviet positions would be supplied by sea, an important aspect of Kennan's proposal, since it would remove Moscow's principal excuse for keeping the Red Army in Poland. A four-power high commission would initially monitor the actions of the new German government, but the Germans themselves would bear primary responsibility for their own affairs.44 Kennan hoped that they would align with either the Soviet or the American side, but rather constitute a "third force" in Europe: this would fit his larger strategy of seeking to deny the Russians potential centers of industrial-military power without having the United States dominate them.45 It was only on such a basis, he insisted, that one could begin to see how the Cold War might end.

KKennan gave the impression, in his memoirs, that Program A was never taken seriously in Washington,46 but this is not correct. The plan was thoroughly discussed within the Policy Planning Staff and reviewed by outside consultants, all with the approval of the Secretary of State Marshall. Shortly after Acheson took over the State Department in January 1949, he in turn read Program A and indicated his general agreement with it. He did not understand, he commented, "how we ever arrived at the decision to see established a Western German government or State."47 Both approaches to the German question—continued division and eventual unification—received careful consideration prior to a May 1949, foreign ministers' meeting to which the Western allies had agreed in return for the Russians' lifting of the Berlin blockade. "Just as the unification of Germany is not an end in itself," Acheson observed, "so the division of Germany is not an end in itself."48

Program A generated resistance, though, from Pentagon planners, who found Kennan's idea of military enclaves questionable, and even more from those Americans whose energies had gone into developing the London Conference program. It would amount to "turning the show over to Russia and the Communists without a struggle," General Clay complained: "We have won the battle, and . . . we are writing an armistice as if we had lost the battle."49 50Moreover, as diplomat Robert Murphy pointed out, the choice need not be between reunification and continued division: a prosperous West Germany linked to Western Europe could serve as a "magnet" that would in time attract the East Germans, detaching them from Soviet control.50 Acheson had made no effort, meanwhile, to persuade the British and the French of Program A's merits, or to prepare the West Germans for it; and shortly before the foreign ministers met, an oversimplified version leaked to the press. The resulting speculation that the United States might withdraw its forces sent shivers down European spines, and the Secretary of State immediately shelved Kennan's plan.51

The demise of Program A was not so much the abandonment of an objective as of a process. Kennan had hoped that policy on Germany could emerge as had the Marshall Plan: from a careful balancing of long-term interests against immediate capabilities that would allow the United States to seize the initiative and shape the outcome. Murphy's "magnet" strategy had evolved, however, from incremental adjustments and hasty improvisations. No one on the American side designed it; the British, the French, and increasingly the West Germans— from whom the idea of a "magnet" may have originated—largely drove it. Reunification would remain the declared goal, but neither the United States nor its allies would risk security or prosperity to achieve it. As Paul Nitze, an expert on the distinction between declaratory and actual policies, would later remember: "Even those who feared the strength of a reunited Germany saw no prospect of its being accomplished and therefore no danger in supporting it as an objective."52

There were those, however, who feared the strength even of a divided Germany: this became clear when the issue of rearming the West Germans suddenly arose in the summer of 1950. British and French support for the London Conference program had been based on the expectation that the new government in Bonn would have no military forces of its own;12 indeed, there had been so little disagreement over this point that it had hardly come up prior to the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty and the establishment of the German Federal Republic. But once there was a West German state and a NATO alliance, there would have to be a military relationship between them. The situation, from NATO's standpoint, was not encouraging; estimates were that the Soviet Union could draw on some 175 divisions in any future war while the alliance would be able to manage only 12. Experts knew better, but even so there was then and remains now no question of Soviet conventional-force superiority on the Continent.53
Whatever the military imbalance, resistance to rearming the West Germans remained strong in the United States, Western Europe, and even among many West Germans. The Truman administration had had to scramble to persuade Congress of the need to arm NATO allies in the summer of 1949.56 and despite NSC-68’s conclusion that American military capabilities, together with those of the new alliance, were “dangerously inadequate,”57 few people in Washington and even fewer in London, Paris, or Bonn were ready to contemplate the prospect of a new German army so soon after the defeat of the old one. Chancellor Konrad Adenauer himself, who worried publicly and often about the inadequacy of West German defenses, would only go so far as to endorse the idea of a federal police force.58

From a purely military standpoint, rearming the Germans would make sense, just as it would have accepted General Francisco Franco’s invitation to construct American air bases in Spain or to have included the Chinese Nationalists on Taiwan within the self-proclaimed United States “defensive perimeter” in the western Pacific. All of these options were considered in the Pentagon during the spring of 1950.59 But for the Truman administration the political costs of yielding to military expediency, in each of these instances, outweighed the advantages. “Decisively militaristic,” President Truman snapped, when a Defense Department report in June imprudently coupled rearming the West Germans with support for Franco. “Both as wrong as can be.”60

This same consideration was weighing in Korea later that month erased the gap between military desirability and political feasibility in the minds of American officials, though, and West German rearmament, like bases in Spain and the defense of Taiwan, now became realistic possibilities. Korea, it appeared, might be only a prelude to more substantial Soviet military offensives elsewhere: if that were to happen, fastidiousness in selecting allies would seem foolish. East German party leader Ulbricht helped advance this viewpoint by imprudently citing Kim II-sung’s example as a way to reunify Germany: “If the Americans in their imperialist arrogance believe that the Germans have less national consciousness than the Koreans, then they have fundamentally deceived themselves.”61 Moved by the obvious alarm the West Germans felt—but also by their equally obvious willingness to resist—American High Commissioner John J. McCloy cabled Washington on 18 July: “If no means are held out for the Germans to fight in an emergency my view is that we should probably lose Germany politically as well as militarily without hope of regain. We should also lose, incidentally, a reserve of manpower which may become of great value in event of a real war and could certainly be used by the Soviets against us.”62

But even though the British and the French had pushed for the creation of an independent West German state, and even though the Korean crisis had badly shaken them, they did not find it easy to accept German rearmament. To reassure them, the Truman administration—confronting the uncustomed prospect of budgetary plenty, Korea having so dramatically legitimized the arguments of NSC-68—decided to send four army divisions to Western Europe to supplement its occupation forces inside Germany. The French at this point proposed another of their palliatives, like the idea of a European Coal and Steel Community earlier in the year,63 designed to ease the pain of collaborating with the Germans. At the suggestion of Premier René Pleven, it was agreed that the FRG would have no army of its own, but rather that its military forces would be integrated into those of a multinational European Defense Community, coordinated with but apart from NATO. The Americans, in turn, enhanced the Pleven Plan’s appeal by announcing that the universally respected General Dwight D. Eisenhower would come out of retirement to become NATO’s first Supreme Commander.64

This intricate sequence of commitments and compromises transformed the NATO alliance from what it had been in 1949—a promise that the United States would assist the West in case of a Soviet attack—into an arrangement that would place American troops squarely in the path of such an invasion if it should ever occur.65 There they would fight, if necessary, alongside the West Germans, who would certainly be honorary if not actual NATO partners. What the Russians had most dreaded was about to come to pass: a West Germany rehabilitated, rearmed, and thoroughly incorporated within an American sphere of influence. What they could hardly have anticipated was the extent to which their own actions had brought this about.

The critical decisions that shaped the future of West Germany—zonal consolidation, the London Conference program, the American Coal and Steel Community—finally the Pleven Plan—were made in each case improvisations suggested by allies and accepted by the Americans: Washington had no “grand design.” Neither, though, was what happened an accident. Each of these initiatives was a response to what Stalin had done: his initial reluctance to reach a four-power agreement on Germany, his rejection of the Marshall Plan, his decision to blockade Berlin, his authorization to Kim Il-sung to invade South Korea.66 To this extent, the Soviet leader inadvertently founded and rearmed West Germany. He was in this instance, as in so many others, the ultimate source of his own worst fears.

Stalin was not oblivious to all of this, though. The more we learn about his policy toward Germany during the last four years of his life, the more it makes sense to see it as an increasingly desperate series of maneuvers aimed at reversing the unfavorable trend he had set in motion and salvaging his own scheme for a reunified Germany under Soviet control. The final and most dramatic of these initiatives, launched early in 1952, would be the aging autocrat’s own version of Kennan’s Program A.

**IV**

Old men normally do not like surprises, but Stalin sprang more than his share in his declining years. The Korean War, of course, was the biggest; but he also took the time, while it was going on, to participate in an extended debate on
linguistics (in which he predictably prevailed), to convene the first Soviet Communist Party Congress in thirteen years, to publish—or have published under his name—a monograph on Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR, to declare the new American ambassador in the Soviet Union, George Kennan, persona non grata, and to begin a new round of purges involving several of his closest associates, ultimately even his own physicians. Within this period of increasingly erratic behavior, though, Stalin suddenly launched what some observers have regarded as his most enlightened act of statesmanship: the proposal of 10 March 1952 for a four-power conference to arrange free elections throughout Germany, which would in turn establish an independent, reunified, rearmed, but neutral state. It was as if he had somehow stumbled upon Kennan’s rejected proposals from three years earlier, and had decided to make them his own.

There was little inclination in Western capitals to exploit this offer. It arrived just after the NATO allies had agreed, at Lisbon, on an ambitious conventional force build-up—including West German forces operating through the European Defense Community—that would have gone some distance toward redressing the military imbalance in Europe. It preceded, by only a few weeks, the signing of treaties ending the occupation regime in West Germany and incorporating that state into the EDC. Intelligence reports had anticipated that the Russians would offer just such an exchange of reunification for neutralization, and there was little doubt that it would attract support within an increasingly prosperous and self-confident FRG. Adenauer’s preference for alignment with the United States and Western Europe was by no means universally popular among his countrymen, not least because it seemed to postpone reunification indefinitely, if not to abandon that objective altogether. Nor was there confidence that a unified Germany would always remain neutral: few who remembered the Rapallo agreement of 1922 and the Molotov–Ribbentrop pact of 1939 could rule out the possibility that Germans and Russians might again be tempted into disastrous collaboration.

As in earlier crises involving Germany, it was the British—not the Americans—who shaped the Western response. Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden acknowledged that the Soviet government might “now be prepared to pay [a] bigger price” to prevent West Germany’s integration into Western Europe. But there would be too many risks involved in finding out: the safer choice would be to “strengthen support for West Ger[man] reunament within [an] EDC framework.” Acheson himself was willing to consider negotiations with the Russians, if for no other reason than to “convince Ger[men] we mean business and are not afraid to talk,” to “expose Sov[iet] insincerity,” and “if Sov[iet]s are really prepared to open Eastern Zone, to force their hand.” But the British and the French as well as Adenauer rejected this course, and there ensued what Eden called the “battle of the notes”: a series of carefully-drafted public exchanges with Moscow that delayed any action on the Soviet initiative until the projected treaties had been signed ending the occupation and bringing West Germany into the EDC. Stalin himself soon abandoned his proposal and his successors never revived it, committing themselves instead to ensuring East Germany’s survival.

Ever since, though, the question has lingered: could Stalin have been serious? If he feared, above all else, the alignment of a former adversary with a current and future one—as there is every reason to think he did—would it have been so implausible to sacrifice an increasingly unpopular and ineffective East German regime in order to forestall such an outcome? Should the United States and its Western European allies not at least have tested Stalin’s sincerity? Did not their own preoccupation with building strength cause them to miss an opportunity to moderate, if not to end, the Cold War in Europe, and to achieve German reunification almost four decades earlier than it was in fact accomplished?

It is clear now that Stalin never wanted a separate East German state. He repeatedly sought to restrain the German communists from taking measures within the Soviet zone that might alienate Germans elsewhere, and he appears to have agreed only reluctantly—after it had become obvious that there was to be an independent West Germany—to the establishment of the German Democratic Republic in the fall of 1949. Even then, the SED received only associate membership in the Cominform. The GDR did not participate on an equal basis with other East European satellites in major diplomatic initiatives, and the Soviet Union did not establish full diplomatic relations with it until after Stalin’s death. It is entirely possible, then, that the Soviet leader did see the East Germans as expendable: the question was under what circumstances he would be prepared to expend them.

The idea for the March 1952 note came from the Soviet Foreign Ministry. Such an initiative, Deputy Foreign Minister Gromyko suggested, would strengthen “the struggle for peace and against remilitarization of West Germany,” and would “help the advocates of Germany’s unity and of peace to unmask the three Western powers’ aggressive intentions.” Prior Soviet and East German efforts to achieve this had not worked, the Poles and the Czechs were told. The new approach was intended “to develop a respective campaign in the press and among the German population against the aggressive policy of the three powers concerning West Germany.” The East Germans themselves were informed that West German membership in the EDC would be equivalent to membership in NATO itself, and that the purpose of the note was to prevent that development by bringing down the Adenauer government. Soviet diplomat Vladimir Semyonov recalled Stalin asking: was it certain the Americans would turn the note down? Only when assured that it was did Stalin give his approval, but with the warning that there would be grave consequences for Semyonov if this did not prove to be the case.

The initial Western response, conveyed on 25 March, must have made Semyonov nervous, for it was not a flat rejection. It observed that the United Nations had already established a commission to investigate whether the facilities for free elections existed inside Germany, and invited the Soviet Government to say whether it would be allowed into East Germany and East
But this was enough for Stalin. "[I]nrespective of any proposals that we can make on the German question," he told East German leader Ulbricht and Breck on 7 April, "the Western powers will not agree with them and will not withdraw from Germany in any case."

They say that they have there their army [to defend] against us. But the real goal of this army is to control Europe. The Americans will draw West Germany into the Atlantic Pact. They will create West German troops. Adenauer is in the pocket of the Americans. All ex-fascists and generals also are there. In reality there is an independent state being formed in West Germany. And you must organize your own state.

Henceforth the line of demarcation between the two halves of Germany was to be seen "not as a simple border but as a dangerous one. One must strengthen the protection of this frontier." It might still be too soon to construct socialism in the GDR, the Kremlin boss cautioned. But in July the SED Party Conference announced an all-out program to do just that. Stalin did not object.

Although the "battle of the notes" continued through the summer, it had a decidedly perfunctory character. Kennan, now serving in Moscow, saw signs of a Soviet position "having been prepared by hacks supplied only with grudging, cryptic and guarded instructions" and told to make "[the] best of it." But as he himself would later acknowledge, much the same could be said of his own government's attitude. Acheson's expressions of interest in German reunification were abstract and fleeting. The Secretary of State found it easier to go along with than to try to reverse the momentum that had built up within the Truman administration and among its European allies—now including the West Germans themselves—behind completing as quickly as possible the division and consolidation Kennan himself, ironically, had recommended in 1945.

That this process frightened Stalin is clear enough. He received an intelligence report in July 1952 warning that the EDC would not be able to control West Germany, which might once again attack France and seek to regain territories lost to the Soviet Union, Poland, and Czechoslovakia at the end of World War II. "What guarantee is there," he asked in Economic Problems of Socialism, which appeared in October, "that Germany and Japan will not rise to their feet again, will not attempt to break out of American bondage and live their own independent lives? I think there is no such guarantee." But it is not at all clear that Stalin would ever have negotiated seriously with the Americans, British, and French to keep this from happening; from 1945 on his consistent position had been that only a Germany under Moscow's control could, with any reliability, ensure the Soviet Union's safety. The March 1952 note may have represented a last fragile hope on Stalin's part that he could achieve this outcome by popular consent and without a war; had there been any possibility of this, the East German communists surely would have been expendable. A Soviet-dominated Germany, however, would not have been. Stalin, as Molotov later put it, "would never have abandoned the conquests of socialism."

If such a Germany was not to be—and Stalin seems to have become convinced that his offer had failed before the West had formally rejected it—then a socialist East Germany firmly incorporated within the Soviet bloc would be the next best alternative. The Soviet leader finally settled on this option during the last months of his life. The battle of the historians over Stalin's note would continue for decades afterwards, but the battle in his own mind was over: there was, here, no "missed opportunity." Stalin was not about to implement Program A.

Stalin's death on 5 March 1953, however, opened up what may have been a more promising opportunity to reunify Germany; although only very briefly and through the actions of a distinctly odious historical agent, the long-time Soviet secret police chief Lavrentii Beria. From the day of the old dictator's demise his successors began trying to free themselves from his oppressive legacy. Part of this process was a strikingly more conciliatory approach to the outside world. As early as 1 April, a State Department official was noting that during the past several weeks there had been "more Soviet gestures toward the West than at any other similar period," and that the climate for negotiations looked sufficiently promising that the United States should begin to formulate the positions it might take. In response to this new mood President Eisenhower, on 16 April, made a dramatic speech deploiring the costs and risks of the nuclear arms race, welcoming the new initiatives emanating from the Kremlin, and calling on it to "help turn the tide of history." To the astonishment of almost everyone, Pravda on 25 April ran a full and accurate translation, an event the new American ambassador to the Soviet Union, Charles E. Bohlen, described as "unparalleled in the Soviet Union since the institution of the Stalinist dictatorship."

Germany was an area where new approaches were urgently needed. Ulbricht's program of forced industrialization and collectivization, which he had rushed to implement after Stalin abandoned his own reunification proposal in the summer of 1952, had quickly proven disastrous. By the end of the year the Soviet Union was heavily subsidizing the East German regime, and the East Germans themselves were fleeing as rapidly as they could to West Germany—some 120,000 left in the first four months of 1953. At Stalin's funeral, Ulbricht appealed for further economic assistance, but the new Soviet leaders turned him down, advising him instead to slow the pace of socialization. Ulbricht refused; he was, Molotov later admitted, "a politically conscious comrade, who was somewhat blunt and lacked flexibility." Within weeks the new government in Moscow was facing a major crisis in its East German satellite. The Presidium of the Soviet Council of Ministers met to consider the problem on 27 May, and it was there that a remarkable new initiative on Germany surfaced, from none other than Beria.

Most of what we know about this plan comes from Beria's enemies, who used it as one of their excuses for arresting and subsequently executing him; but a rare surviving sympathizer has now confirmed its basic outlines. The scheme
appears to have assumed that continued efforts to force socialism on East Germany would only saddle the Soviet Union with a permanently unstable satellite, while facilitating West Germany's ever-closer alignment with the EDC, NATO, and the United States. Would the Soviet Union not benefit more from a united and neutral Germany which, even if capitalist, could serve to balance both Soviet and American influence in Europe? Might the West Germans not be prepared to pay the USSR substantial reparations in order to have East Germany demoted to some kind of subordinate status within a single German state? If indeed these were the general outlines of Beria's program, they went well beyond Stalin's March 1952 note, which would have accepted reunification only in the form of a socialist state under Soviet control. "[A]ll we want is a peaceful Germany," Molotov recalls Beria as arguing, "and it makes no difference whether or not it is socialist."

Beria had apparently chosen to use the German issue—and the prospect of improving relations with the West that such an approach might bring—to bolster his own position within the Kremlin leadership, and eventually to secure his position as successor to Stalin. This was only one of several dramatic measures he was contemplating at the time: the others included restricting Communist Party control over state institutions, dismantling the official terror apparatus he himself had helped to install during the late 1930s; and allowing greater cultural and political autonomy to the non-Russian nationalities. It was neither the first nor the last time in Russian history that the very architects of authoritarianism had produced, from within, a perceptive self-diagnosis, coupled with the compulsion to reform.

Worried as much by Beria's ambitions as by his ideas on Germany, however, his Presidium colleagues objected strongly, insisting instead on a reversion to Stalin's pre-1952 policy of restraint while at the same time leaving the way open for the eventual reunification of the entire country under Soviet control. The idea, as Molotov remembered it, was to be one of "pursuing a path toward socialism, not forcibly but cautiously, and maneuvering skillfully until our position was stronger." Orders went out that the East Germans were to abandon Ulbricht's program of rapid socialistization in favor of a more modest approach, aimed at "the recovery of the political situation in the GDR and... a strengthening of our positions... in Germany itself" as well as bringing about "maximal division of the opponent's forces and the exploitation of every oppositional current against the tactics of the mercenary Adenauer clique."

The East German government announced the new policy on 10 June, but Ulbricht immediately sabotaged it by failing to rescind an unpopular measure that had increased labor norms by 10 percent. This combination of relaxation with continuing repression proved a volatile mix, and on 16-17 June workers in East Berlin and elsewhere in East Germany rose up in revolt, the first time such a thing had happened on such a scale anywhere within the postwar Soviet sphere of influence. Red Army troops quickly suppressed the uprising, with relatively few casualties. But it soon became clear that there had been a very prominent casualty in Moscow. On 26 June, at a tense Presidium meeting arranged by Khrushchev, Beria's colleagues confronted, arrested, and charged him with treason: the scene could have grasped "Godfather" movies of a subsequent generation. By the end of the year, he had been tried and executed, thereby earning the ironic—but well-deserved—distinction of being the last Soviet leader to suffer such a fate. Beria's downfall meanwhile ensured Ulbricht's survival: he was now able to move against his own potential opponents with impunity. The East German leader may, or may not, have planned all this way. But he certainly wreaked what little was left of Beria's German initiative; and the resulting disorders gave Beria's rivals in the Kremlin the excuse they needed to move against him. Having done so, it would have been difficult for any of them—at least as long as the succession struggle was under way—to oppose Ulbricht, since that would have suggested association with rebellion and treason. The culture of distrust Stalin had left behind now linked his heirs to an East German leader Stalin himself had never trusted.

Had things turned out otherwise—had Beria succeeded Stalin and then revived his original proposals on the future of Germany—an interesting situation would have arisen. For if we understand his ideas correctly, they came as close as the Soviet Union ever did, prior to the Cold War's end, to proposing a basis for German reunification the West might have accepted. It is even possible that Beria's program could have survived his demise: there were well-known precedents in Soviet history for the victors taking over the policies of the vanquished. No such program could have succeeded, though, without some willingness on the part of the United States, Great Britain, France, and especially West Germany to consider reunification in the first place. It is worth asking then, whether the West had become so accustomed to the reality of a divided Germany that it was no longer willing to examine alternatives.

VI

Kennan thought so. "Our people are unwilling to contemplate at any time within the foreseeable future, under any conceivable agreement with the Russians, the withdrawal of United States forces from Germany," he noted in September 1952, just before his expulsion from Moscow. "Our stand [means] in effect no agreement with Russia at all and the indefinite continuation of the split of Germany and Europe." It is not so clear in retrospect that the Western position was in fact rigid: certainly it is difficult to establish any specific point during the early 1950s at which the Americans categorically rejected the desirability, or even the eventual feasibility, of reunification. But this was definitely a long-term goal. There were more immediate priorities—detering the Russians, reassuring the Europeans, keeping the Americans involved in both tasks—and pursing them did have the effect, whatever the intent, of keeping Germany divided.
"It is time America began sailing by the stars and not by the driftwood floating by," an uncharacteristically brash national security adviser Robert Cutler admonished President Eisenhower during a discussion on Germany in August, 1953. "Should we just wait for events and make policies to meet them, or should we have alternatives worked out in advance?" 106 Kennan had made the same point four years earlier; but Eisenhower and his advisers had no greater success than their predecessors in separating long-term interests with respect to Germany from the more pressing requirements of fighting the Cold War. Their first systematic review of this problem, completed by the National Security Council that same month, reflected the difficulty. The goal, it stated, was to be:

Firm association of a united Germany, or, at a minimum, the Federal Republic, with the West, preferably through an integrated European Community, to enable Germany to participate in the defense of the West and make the greatest possible contribution to the strength of the Free World, with the least danger of its becoming a threat to the United States.107

But what if a divided Germany was itself perpetuating the Cold War? What if a united but neutral Germany might lessen the need to defend the West or to strengthen the Free World in the first place? Was the treatment, as Kennan had been insisting since 1949, only prolonging the illness?

One who worried about this, curiously enough, was the man who had forced Kennan into retirement early in 1953, the new Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles. The time had come, he suggested to Eisenhower on 6 September, for a "spectacular effort to relax world tensions" based upon the creation of a "broad zone of restricted armament in Europe, with Soviets withdrawn from satellites and U.S. from Europe." The current situation there was inherently unstable: sooner or later, American troops would have to leave, either because the Europeans would come to regard their bases "as lightning rods rather than umbrellas" for growing Soviet nuclear capabilities, or because they would simply reject an increasingly irritating American military presence in their midst. Having a new and more conciliatory regime in the Kremlin could hasten this process. Why not make a major push now for liberalization in Eastern Europe, the international control of nuclear weapons and guided missiles, an end to the Soviet Communist Party's world revolutionary mission, and an opening up of East-West trade, all with a view to preparing the way for Europe to regain control of its own affairs under the most favorable possible circumstances for the United States? 108

This breathtaking proposal was not just speculative brainstorming: that was hardly Dulles's style. Rather, it responded to several concerns that were in the air at the time. One had to do with the new administration's determination to cut the defense budget: it was not at all clear, Eisenhower had complained in March during a discussion on overseas troop deployments, "whether national bankruptcy or national destruction would get us first." 111 There was also the danger of being too protective: would the West Europeans ever assume their full responsibilities for defense as long as the Americans were there to do it for them? 112 Meanwhile, pressures were intensifying to test the new Soviet leaders' sincerity by engaging them in negotiations: Eisenhower himself had encouraged these with his 16 April speech, and in May Winston Churchill, now back in power as British Prime Minister, had called publicly for a summit conference with Stalin's successor to take place "without delay." 113 Finally, Adenauer, whose Christian Democratic government won triumphant re-election on the day Dulles drafted his memorandum, had himself called during the campaign for new four-power talks, and was evolving a negotiating position based on creating a demilitarized zone that would remove Soviet forces from Poland and East Germany. 114

Eisenhower responded to Dulles's memorandum by expressing "emphatic agreement that renewed efforts should be made to relax world tensions on a global basis," and that "mutual withdrawals of Red Army Forces and United States Forces could be suggested as a step toward relaxing these tensions." But the President saw at least one immediate difficulty with such a proposal: "any withdrawal that seemed to imply a change in basic intent would cause real turmoil abroad." 115 Other problems quickly surfaced. Could the United States afford to abandon its forward bases in Europe, from which it would deliver nuclear weapons if war came, in the absence of a comprehensive agreement with the Russians on nuclear arms control? But how far could such talks proceed without dismantling bases? Was Adenauer really seeking disengagement, or was his willingness to endorse negotiations just a tactic to undercut advocates of reunification? Would such discussions enhance or endanger prospects for the European Defense Community Treaty, the delicate structure, as yet unratified by the French, into which a rearmed Germany was to fit?

Had the Russians at this moment renewed Stalin's March 1952 offer, or put forward some version of Beirat's May 1953 plan, it is not at all clear what the Western response would have been. Although the Americans and their allies had not written off the possibility of German reunification, neutralization—even within a capitalist framework—would have been much more difficult for them. 116 It is worth pointing out, however, that one reason Eisenhower and Dulles so strongly favored the EDC was that they so strongly opposed West German membership in NATO. German rearmament was necessary, they believed, but German ambitions were still to be feared, especially if Germany regained a military establishment of its own not under European control. 117 The German government structure," James B. Conant, the new United States High Commissioner in Germany, warned, "is too new to trust the final command of a national army to the hands of the unknown German leaders of the future." 118 Adenauer himself, to the Americans' relief, shared this view. He would not have accepted neutralization, but neither was he eager to see Germany develop an independent military capability. For him, as for Eisenhower and Dulles, the EDC had become a way of reconciling these positions: they all worried, as four-power talks approached early in 1954, about what impact a new Soviet proposal on Germany might have on its prospects. 118

They need not have. The Russians still saw the EDC as only a disguise for West German membership in NATO, and failed to explore the possibility of
reunification within such a framework. Indeed, as Dulles cabled Eisenhower, "Molotov made [his] German proposal so extreme, calling in effect for complete Sovietization of all Germany and withdrawal of US, UK and French forces, that we believe Western position has been greatly strengthened by exhibition of his uncompromising approach." The principal reason the Soviet government took such a rigid position, it now appears, is that in the wake of the June 1953 uprisings in East Germany it had committed itself to the survival of the Ulbricht regime. Stalin's idea of reunification had been to proceed from a position of strength in the East to project Soviet influence over West Germany; but it was now painfully apparent that it would take longer than expected for the East Germans to reach such a position. "The German people have not yet had time to be educated in the great advantage of Communism," Khrushchev admitted to Eisenhower at the 1955 Geneva summit. An East German collapse, in the meantime, would be a humiliating defeat for the USSR. "The GDR was our ally," Khrushchev later emphasized.

We had a strategic, economic, and political—as well as an ideological—stake in its independence. To allow [West] Germany to create a single capitalist German state allied with the West would have meant for us to retreat to the borders of Poland. That would have been a major political and military setback. It would have been the beginning of a chain reaction, and it would have encouraged aggressive forces in the West to put more and more pressure on us. Once you start retroacting, it's difficult to stop.

Ulbricht had thus maneuvered himself into a position of strength by being weak; and much of what happened afterward in Germany grew out of this particular accomplishment.

Meanwhile, American allies were taking actions of their own that would further diminish prospects for German reunification. To the intense disgust of Eisenhower and Dulles, the French National Assembly in August 1954 refused to ratify the EDC treaty, despite the fact that the French themselves had proposed this option in 1950. Perceiving, correctly enough, that the Americans had no alternative, the British quickly stepped in with the suggestion that West Germany simply become a member of NATO. With an equanimity that surprised everyone including themselves, the French accepted this idea, and the FRG joined the alliance in May, 1955. Four years of debate over the EDC had produced no EDC, but it did buy time—no insignificant commodity. For with an ingenuity at least equal to that of Ulbricht, Adenauer had skillfully used that interval to gain the confidence of his Western European neighbors, so that the idea of Germans in NATO seemed far less dangerous than when that possibility had first surfaced half a decade earlier.

American leadership did not bring this about. What happened instead was that the United States allowed its allies—the French, the British, and especially the West Germans—to determine the conditions under which West Germany would again become a military power. Postponing reunification and joining NATO was hardly the only way in which Germany could have rearmed: indeed, as the historian Marc Trachtenberg has pointed out, "Adenauer was viewed by western statesmen, especially by those who remembered Weimar, as almost too good to be true, as much more committed to the West than they logically had any right to expect from a German statesman." Because of this, though, the West German chancellor gained "considerable leverage, amounting almost to veto power, over the policy the Western Powers could pursue on the German question." The effect was to undercut whatever interest in reunification still existed in Washington, much as Ulbricht's actions had ruled out further efforts, in Moscow, to explore such options.

The Russians reacted surprisingly mildly to West Germany's incorporation within the NATO alliance, probably because they had never taken the EDC alternative seriously in the first place. They did immediately organize the Warsaw Treaty Organization, with East Germany as a prominent member; but they also accepted a long-delayed treaty providing for the mutual withdrawal of occupation forces from Austria and went ahead with plans for the July summit conference in Geneva. Two months later, Khrushchev welcomed Adenauer himself on an official visit to Moscow, applauding in particular the West German chancellor's warnings on the danger of nuclear war. "Not only were we keeping our number one enemy in line," he recalled, "but Adenauer was helping us to keep our other enemies in line, too.

Neither at this meeting, nor at a subsequent foreign ministers' conference later that year, did the Russians seek to revive the issue of reunification; instead they cheerfully established diplomatic relations with the FRG as well as the GDR. "The Germans are beginning to get 'upshis' again," Khrushchev explained to British officials early in 1956, "and it was probably a good thing for everybody that Germany was divided."

The German problem," another historian, Frank Ninkovich, has observed, "was analogous to the dual key system that the Americans use to control the launch of nuclear-tipped missiles—nothing happens unless both operators agree to turn their keys simultaneously." The metaphor captures the edginess with which the United States and the Soviet Union approached the German question, the ambivalence with which they sought simultaneously to rely upon and to contain German power, and the asynchronous character of their efforts to reach agreements on Germany's future. Kennan's Program A, Stalin's note, Beria's plan, and even Dulles's scheme for a "spectacular effort to relax world tensions" had been based on the premise that there could somehow, someday, be a simultaneous turning of the keys. But there were multiple hands on each of these, and it was allies on both sides—including German allies—who kept them from being turned.

VII

The continued division of Germany was, therefore, a convenient, perhaps even a comfortable option for the Americans, the Russians, and their respective allies; however illogical the post-1945 map of that country might be, the statesmen of