

Dean Rusk Oral History Collection

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Martin Joseph Hillenbrand interviewed by Thomas J. Schoenbaum

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SCHOENBAUM: --1986 Interview with the Honorable Martin Hillenbrand, former Ambassador to West Germany and active in the Berlin Crisis from 1961 to 1963, and perhaps before. The interviewer is Thomas Schoenbaum. I have a little bit of the chronology here and some of the Issues. Maybe we can start with the--well, why don't you say when you first became involved? You were head of the office of German affairs in 1961?

HILLENBRAND: That's right. The title was Director of the Office of German Affairs. But I had come back to Washington In the fall of '58. I had been the U.S., United States, political advisor in Berlin for a period of two years before that. I was brought back to become Director of German Affairs. And shortly after my arrival In Washington, [Nikita Sergeevich] Khrushchev made his speech and Issued his ultimatum on Berlin: the six month ultimatum. So, i was immediately engulfed in dealing with Berlin problems. When the Kennedy Administration came into office at the beginning of 1961, I had already had two-and-a-half years of involvement in the Berlin issue.

SCHOENBAUM: Yes, the original ultimatum was in 1958.

HILLENBRAND: November 10, 1958 is when he made his speech. And the note which transmitted the ultimatum was later that month. I think it was November 27th.

SCHOENBAUM: Okay. Now, when the Kennedy Administration came into office there was another Soviet memo in connection apparently with the summit conference In Vienna. And that memo was dated June 4, 1961, a memo that also gave basically a six month deadline--end of the year--for the establishment of a free city, a demilitarized free city. And the threat of concluding a Soviet-East German peace treaty. Where there--before that, before June 4th, there were consultations between Dean Rusk and the allies In connection with the NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] meetings and other meetings. Did people expect the ultimatum at that time, before June 4th?

HILLENBRAND: Well, you must remember that the June 4th ultimatum came six months or so after the Kennedy Administration was In power. It came after the Bay of Pigs fiasco and was actually delivered, in effect, at the Vienna Summit. Now, when the Kennedy Administration came into office there was, I think, an orderly transition. I remember that Dean Rusk himself had an office in the State Department for nearly a month before he actually became Secretary of State during the month of January. I don't know exactly when he appeared. Perhaps It was already In December that he took over his office in the State Department on the ground floor In the conference facilities. Those of us who had been dealing with the Berlin problem--and I was obviously central to that. I had been chairman of the U.S. delegation to the four-power working party who drew up the positions for the '59 Foreign Ministers meeting and the 1960 summit meeting, the abortive meeting in Paris. Foy [D.] Kohler was then Assistant Secretary of State. He

and I had been the two elements of continuity between the [Dwight David] Eisenhower Administration and the Kennedy Administration on this subject, which we recognized could immediately become a major preoccupation of the new administration. Well, like all new administrations there were feelings of some of the new people, particularly people in the White House, that they had to reinvent the wheel. And as you know, Kennedy brought down a lot of bright young people--some not so young--but bright people from Harvard University, who, I think, viewed the remnants of the Eisenhower bureaucracy with the usual suspicion that new administrations exhibit towards the old hangovers, bureaucratic hangovers from previous administrations. So, Kohler and I, and I think with the help of Dean Rusk, who very quickly caught on--we had briefed him before he became Secretary of State--I remember going down to the ground floor--

SCHOENBAUM: You, personally, briefed him?

HILLENBRAND: Yes, and I'm sure he had briefings from Foy and other people who were going to be bureaucratically retained. So, he was aware of the complexities of the Berlin problem, to a much greater degree, I think, early on in the administration than the people in the White House were. There were a lot of people in the White House, and some of the Kennedy people planted in the State Department--A. [Abram] Chayes, for example, who became the legal advisor--who really sort of felt that they had to apply a completely new broom to the situation, sweep aside all that had gone before and sort of take a new look at the Berlin problem. Foy and I realized fairly quickly, and as I say, I think Dean Rusk caught on very quickly too, that the Berlin problem was endemic; and that Khrushchev was going to continue with the same position, the same adamant position he had during the Eisenhower period; and that a summit meeting with Khrushchev was going to be a tough one. We, or no one, anticipated that he would deal with President Kennedy precisely the way he did. It was obvious, I think, at Vienna--where I also was--that he had come to the conclusion after the Bay of Pigs fiasco that the President was a young, inexperienced and, maybe, soft man and that he could bully him, which he tried to do at Vienna.

SCHOENBAUM: And so there was a direct relationship, you think, between the Bay of Pigs and the ultimatum?

HILLENBRAND: Well, I can't--

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah, speculation, yeah--

HILLENBRAND: --prove it obviously, but I can say that it is very logical to conclude that Khrushchev was not impressed by the way that the Bay of Pigs was allowed to turn into a fiasco.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

HILLENBRAND: He must have drawn some conclusions about the capability of the Kennedy Administration on the basis of the Bay of Pigs fiasco. I don't recall whether Khrushchev makes a point of this in his memoirs. It might be worth checking the memoirs to see what link he made. But in any event it was quite clear that his behavior at Vienna was, I would say, influenced by

three factors. The first factor was that he thought that Kennedy could be bullied. Secondly, I think it was conditioned by the growing desperation of the East German government that they were losing the best part of their population through Berlin and, therefore, something had to be done to solve the Berlin problem. And, I think, the third factor was probably--and I can't prove this again--that the Soviet Embassy in Washington was informing the Soviet government that there were people in the White House particularly who were much more amenable to concessions on Berlin, to a new approach on Berlin than had been the case during the Eisenhower Administration. Here again, I think the only thing that is provable is the second point. He was under great pressure from the leaders of the GDR [German Democratic Republic] and, of course, at that time they weren't thinking in terms of a wall. They were thinking of a Berlin settlement in six months which would, in effect, cut off the refugee traffic since it would no longer be permissible to go through West Berlin. So that was the situation, briefly described, as Kennedy went to the summit in Vienna.

SCHOENBAUM: Now, June 15th Mike [Michael Joseph] Mansfield made his free city speech, and that was wildly interpreted as a trial balloon. What was the attitude in the administration, by Dean Rusk in particular? Can you remember what he thought of that speech?

HILLENBRAND: I can't remember specifically. I can tell you what we thought of it. And I'm sure that this was the view that we conveyed to him, Foy Kohler and I. And that is that, if we went along that route, it wouldn't be just a matter of getting rid of Berlin, but we would have a major crisis with our western European allies within NATO, and that this would be a disaster. Now, I do not know whether he did this on his own. That's something we never were able to find out, nor did we particularly inquire after. Of course, we knew Mansfield's views were really off target anyway, generally, because of the general attitude he had towards the U.S. presence in Europe and so on, and his annual attempts to reduce our military presence. So, I can't say that the fact that Mansfield did this came as an enormous shock to us. It just, we felt, made it more difficult to do what we knew had to be done that summer. And that was to go through an elaborate exercise which then led to the Kennedy speech in which he announced the reserves were being called up, and that we were sending additional forces to Europe. And that we were taking all sorts of measures and spending additional money on an arms build-up.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah. There was a meeting. A key meeting seemed to have been on June 23, 1961, a meeting with JFK and [Robert Strange] McNamara and Rusk and maybe you were there.

HILLENBRAND: I think I was there, yes.

SCHOENBAUM: Do you--

HILLENBRAND: You see, at that point we were in the process of setting up a Berlin task force, and I was charged by Foy Kohler with sort of coordinating the preparations of positions. We had Pentagon representation, Joint Chiefs representation, on this incipient task force. It wasn't called the "Task Force" yet, but it developed into the Berlin Task Force. We had to prepare the position papers, which had to be approved by the President before they became national policy. We worked around the clock really for some weeks there.

SCHOENBAUM: I see. Do you remember any details or stories about that meeting? That got a lot of press. And that seems to be an important meeting. And there was some idea that Dean Rusk charged the Berlin task force to prepare a whole bunch of proposals dealing with various Issues, such as the Oder-Neisse line, and reducing--perhaps some window dressing reducing--on a mutual basis, that kind of thing. There's some--it seemed reading--there seemed to be some idea that Dean Rusk was looking to divert the Russians from the central issue, and saying, "Well, but we don't accept what you are saying, but we will negotiate. And we can negotiate about this and this and this." Dean Rusk was trying to find substitute measure. Or maybe that came out of the State Department.

HILLENBRAND: Well, we were charged obviously with drawing up options, of various ways at going at the problem. And Rusk had fairly early on after the Vienna meeting come to the conclusion that we had to continue to talk to the Soviets, and that led to his efforts with Gromyko the following year, talks which we were never able to persuade the French, for example, as to their advisability. You know we had a running battle with the French. The four foreign ministers met in Paris that summer, after meetings of senior level officials who drew up proposals for the foreign ministers; and the idea of having talks to be called exploratory talks to determine whether a basis for negotiations existed.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah. That was very clever.

HILLENBRAND: That was the formula. The French always opposed it, of course.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah.

HILLENBRAND: [Charles Andre Joseph Mario] de Gaulle was there, and [Maurice Jacques] Couve de Meurville was the French foreign minister. The debates became very acrimonious between foreign ministers on this particular Issue. Both the British and the Germans were prepared to accept the need for negotiations. The Germans were less enthusiastic than the British, so I think already during the immediate post-Vienna period, Dean Rusk, with his fertile mind, was thinking "What can we do?" to get into talks, and what can be the substance of these talks in order to cool down the Berlin issue.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah.

HILLENBRAND: And this later on emerged in the form of the Principles Paper, which we handed the Soviets in the spring of '62, nine or ten months later.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah. And so the decision--that sounds to me typical of Dean Rusk's personality--the kind of exploratory talks to find a basis for negotiations: kind of keeping the door open, but at the same time saying that the Soviet note of June fourth did not form a basis for new negotiations.

HILLENBRAND: That's right. Of course, there are two other things you have to remember. First of all, there was the influence of Dean [Gooderham] Acheson. He was asked by the President to draw up recommendations. And he drew up recommendations that were very tough,

that contemplated going to the point of a nuclear confrontation over Berlin. So they were fed in and, of course, they were vigorously opposed by people like Abe Chayes and others in the White House group. Mac [McGeorge] Bundy was never clear in my mind at least where he was. But the other people in the White House generally were for fuzzing the issue and taking a relatively soft position.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah.

HILLENBRAND: That was one aspect of the Acheson role there: toughening up the U. S. stance, and particularly his influence on the President with his recommendations.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah.

HILLENBRAND: And secondly, we also had had the experience during the [Dwight David] Eisenhower period that the Soviet ultimatum could be stretched out. We went to Geneva in '59-- the foreign ministers did--with a six month ultimatum hanging over our head which was expiring during the first few weeks of the foreign ministers meeting. Well, the Soviets had said that since we're now meeting and talking, therefore we suspend the ultimatum.

SCHOENBAUM: I see.

HILLENBRAND: And I think it might have been very much on Dean Rusk's mind, although there I wouldn't want to purport to speak for him. It was in our minds that somehow or another if we could engage the Soviets in talks, we could, in effect, cancel the application of the ultimatum, and prolong the entire discussion. That was based, as I say, on the experience we had in the Eisenhower Administration where the ultimatum was several times suspended because we were engaged in discussions with them.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah. Yeah.

HILLENBRAND: And at Camp David the formula, of course, that Eisenhower and Khrushchev agreed was that, while the Berlin situation was abnormal, in effect, It would not be changed unilaterally by either side. And that, in effect, amounted to the suspension of the ultimatum which had already been suspended once in the context of the foreign ministers meeting which started in June and ran through August.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah. Yeah. Another tactic was to (unintelligible) to place the (unintelligible) on the Russians not to do anything to push, but to place the responsibility clearly on the Russians. That they would have to do something to change the situation if--

HILLENBRAND: Well, I think we were obviously satisfied in a relative sense with the status quo. It was not we who were urging the necessity for a change of the status of West Berlin. We were sitting there as military occupiers and claiming to be there by right of conquest; and therefore, we were not to be moved not the status to be unilaterally changed. So we were, in effect, status quo defenders in the Berlin context. I think that was the only position to which we could adhere. Now, one thing that we did get started, too, was the Ambassadorial Group,

established in Washington as sort of an extension of the Four-Power Bonn group. And we were charged, among other things, with bringing contingency planning for Berlin into a more orderly state. And so we tried to anticipate all possible Soviet actions: unilateral actions; actions with the GDR and so on, which might affect our position; and to plan responses, appropriate responses. That went on during the fall of '61. And, of course, we kept Secretary Rusk and the White House fully informed of step-by-step progress, even though what became known as the "Bible" of contingency planning became a book about the size of those two manuscripts there on top of each other.

SCHOENBAUM: Was that the so-called "Berlin Book" of--JFK's Berlin Book? Or was that something else?

HILLENBRAND: Well, no. JFK's Berlin book, I think, was a book that must have been put together by Mac Bundy in the White House with, largely, State Department input.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah.

HILLENBRAND: But, obviously they had copies once it was ready, of the contingency planning. It was revised. Maybe in the White House [it] was called the JFK Berlin book, but I suspect that referred to something that Mac Bundy put together.

SCHOENBAUM: I see. What about the role of the U.N. [United Nations]? At first it was thought not to refer Berlin to the U.N., but then in July--July 24th, Berlin was referred to the U.N. Was that any--

HILLENBRAND: Well, actually it was referred to the U.N. in the sense that we asked the U.N. Secretary General to intervene. There had been, even during the Eisenhower Administration, some thought given to proposals that might involve the U.N.--sort of creating an extraterritorial access route to Berlin under U.N. supervision. That was one variant. Or simply turning West Berlin over to the U.N., making it a U.N. trusteeship. These proposals never really got very far because there was not sufficient confidence in the ability of the U.N. to do this. The West Germans opposed them generally. The French opposed them. And there was no indication that the Soviets had the slightest interest in doing that. So, these U.N. proposals, while they were floated every now and then, and papers were written pro and con, never really got to the point where the President was asked to decide "We are going ahead on this route" or not. I can't remember that this was ever a matter for Presidential decision. We discussed, I know, this possibility with Dean Rusk on a number of occasions. But it never, in my view, got to the point of decision making.

SCHOENBAUM: Now, historically, Dean Rusk's career--he was looked upon as (unintelligible) for everything in the U.N., but he did not push for the U.N. in this case?

HILLENBRAND: Not that I can recall. I think he pushed us to produce arguments, pro and con. But as far as I am aware this was never something he advocated strongly in White House meetings so much. I may be wrong, but within my recollection I do not recall that he ever did.

SCHOENBAUM: No. No. Now, in August there was--Khrushchev said that he was ready to negotiate. Was that a big break to the crisis? That was right before the wall, of course. But at least there was an August fourth note from Khrushchev saying he was ready to negotiate. And (unintelligible)--

HILLENBRAND: Nothing like going to the documents.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah.

HILLENBRAND: To make sure exactly what he said.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah. Yeah.

HILLENBRAND: No, I don't see anything In this note, with a quick reading of the text, that would indicate that the Soviets were already proposing talks at the beginning of August.

SCHOENBAUM: Okay. Now, what was the feeling--of course, when the wall went up, what-- was there any serious consideration of doing, intervening some way In preventing the wall from being built? Where did you--you had contingency plans by then. What did this trigger within the Administration?

HILLENBRAND: Well, first of all, I think you have to start with the fact that such intelligence as we had anticipated the Soviets and the East Germans would have to do something to stop the flow of refugees. But the consensus was that they would do that by erecting barriers between East Germany and East Berlin at the zonal-sector boundary, rather than at the sector-sector boundary. So, the actual wall came as somewhat of a surprise. Kennedy in his speech, in that portion written in the State Department--and I think Dean Rusk was partly responsible for this formulation, as were we all--stressed three vital interests in Berlin: the presence of the western forces; their freedom of access to the city; and the economic viability of West Berlin, whatever that meant. We had never stipulated as a vital Interest of the United States that we would intervene, either militarily or in any other way in East Germany or East Berlin, in order to affect or prevent them from doing something that we expected them to do, but expected them to do it in a somewhat different way than they actually did. The fact that it was on the sector- sector boundary made it much more visible, and it wouldn't have been, had it been on the zonal-sector boundary.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah. Yeah.

HILLENBRAND: So it became much more of an emotional issue, and it seemed a lot easier to run American tanks and allied tanks into East Berlin and to knock down the wall with bulldozers than if it had been twenty miles away from us. The fact is that we have never regarded what happened in East Berlin as of vital interest. We rather punctiliously protested when military displays took place in East Berlin, that were in violation of the four-power status of the city. But we never expected that these rather perfunctory protestations of indignation on our part would change the behavior of people in East Berlin. We just assumed that on the first of May they would have military parades and so on. It was never within our planning to move into East

Berlin. It would have been foolhardy. After all we were aware of the fact that we had a minimal number of tanks in West Berlin. The total garrison of all three occupying powers was less than 12,000 fighting troops. We had one brigade actually, and we were the largest single element there. We knew that there were twenty-one Soviet divisions, all of which they could bring into Berlin, some of them already around Berlin, and that it would have been absolute suicide militarily to attempt to move into East Berlin. We would have been clobbered. In fact, it was always assumed that if the Soviets were to attack West Berlin, the most that could be done would be to fight a delaying action of a few days duration at most in order to mobilize opinion and to get high level communications going back and forth. But an effective defense of West Berlin was impossible.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah. Wasn't our contingency planting kind of a buff [sic] then? What did we--what could we have done?

HILLENBRAND: Well, we had various forms of contingency planning. You see, one thing, I think, that subsequent writers sometimes neglected to note was that we were never so concerned about an outright military invasion of West Berlin. We were concerned about interference with access because that was the traditional way, right from the start with the blockade of '48-'49, which the Soviets had always chosen to use when they wanted to put the squeeze on us in Berlin. That was the obvious way. They could do it in their own territory without encroaching on West Berlin. They could turn it on or off at will. We couldn't control what they did in East Germany. And there was a hundred-mile line of communication which they, in effect, could control.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah.

HILLENBRAND: So contingency planning was basically directed at various possibilities which the Soviets could exercise to interfere with access: either air access, ground access, or barge access for that matter. Because that had been the traditional way in which they had interfered. We had contingency planning for what we regarded as illegal activities in East Berlin, but they didn't go beyond protestation. And most of the really effective economic countermeasures were not measures we could take; they were measures the Federal Republic could take directed mainly at the GDR.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah.

HILLENBRAND: Now we did also, as we moved into '61 and '62, draw up plans for military actions to clear the Autobahn routes if military access was hindered to West Berlin.

SCHOENBAUM: Where were the Autobahn routes? In East Germany?

HILLENBRAND: In East Germany, yes, involving a number of allied divisions. The British and the French always thought this was foolhardy. And our commander, General [Lauri Norstad, who was an air force general, as Supreme Allied Commander Europe [SACEUR] at that time, always regarded these plans as, if not non-implementable, at least never likely to be implemented because the French and the British in the final analysis would never agree. Those governments had reserved their right to make a decision at the last minute as to whether these contingency

plans would actually be implemented. My own guess is that the Soviets came into possession of these plans. Again I can't prove this. But Khrushchev made a number of remarks that he knew what our contingency plans were. And we know that the Frenchman Paques, Chief Documents Officer of NATO, was a Soviet agent. So he was undoubtedly feeding eastward all these highly classified and sensitive NATO contingency plans. These plans didn't involve only the United States but they involved the entire alliance, because these were troops that were under allied command.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah.

HILLENBRAND: I always speculated that perhaps if these plans thus came into Khrushchev's possession, they might have served somewhat as a deterrent. Because if they are crazy enough to try anything like that with our twenty- one divisions here, they are crazy enough to start a war over Berlin. Again, unprovable. But certainly Khrushchev, despite all the bluster and bluff, until he began to deploy missiles in Cuba which may or may not, we don't know again, have been related to his frustrations over Berlin, not being able to move us out of Berlin. Certainly that was one factor. There were other factors too, including that with the end of the myth of the missile gap it was quite clear that American superiority in missile strength, as well as in bomber delivery strength, and so on, plus our deployment of Jupiter missiles in Italy and Turkey, gave us what he might have regarded as a strategic advantage, and the ability to hit the Soviet Union. And I think Cuba was a compensatory reaction to that. It didn't work obviously. Mr. Khrushchev's motives were quite complex.

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BEGINNING OF SIDE 2

SCHOENBAUM: I wanted to ask about--Bobby [Robert Francis] Kennedy at one point made a well-publicized statement, I think it was in September of '61, that JFK would use--Yes, September 2U-r-Bobby Kennedy announced that JFK would use atomic bombs in Berlin and on the Soviets. I don't know--he was vague of course.

HILLENBRAND: Yeah.

SCHOENBAUM: Was that a deliberate peer tactic to--

HILLENBRAND: We had no control, in the State Department, over the Kennedy brothers' rapport with each other. And what the President might have told Bobby to do or not to do, or whether Bobby--You see, we never knew whether this was Bobby's bright idea, or whether it was the President's idea and he was using Bobby as an instrument. Dean Rusk might have more information on this. Obviously this was not calculated particularly to calm fears of our British and French allies. Whether it had any impact on the Soviets we don't know. And it was certainly

not an impression we did not wish to give, that Soviet attempts to displace us from Berlin would not lead to a nuclear confrontation.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah.

HILLENBRAND: After all, our guarantee of Berlin was always within the framework of NATO strategy which contemplated the use of nuclear weapons if our position, our military position, otherwise became untenable. You know there were constitutional problems in extending the guarantee to Berlin. It was done during Dean Acheson's time as Secretary of State. And the formula used was very carefully guarded in order to make sure that we didn't run into any constitutional problems by the extension of executive power. But it affected all the NATO countries, to the extent that they accepted the basic NATO strategy, which at that time was still not called "flexible response." Only later in the 60's were we able to get formal approval of NATO for the McNamara strategic conception of flexible response as the best way to describe NATO strategy. Even in the early '60's the British argued that you would have a sort of trip-wire effect, or pane of glass effect: if the pane of glass or trip-wire were set off, then nuclear weapons would be deployed. But we didn't like that concept. That was essentially British language. But it was not totally inaccurate in describing what some of the common suppositions were about how NATO would defend itself, and obviously Berlin came within that orbit of reasoning. So the Kennedy statement--I don't recall the exact wording of it anymore--certainly did seem to go beyond what everyone assumed might happen in the last resort. But some of our European allies were very sensitive about saying it too openly.

SCHOENBAUM: What in your mind convinced the Russians that they should negotiate at that point? In September [Andrei Andreevich] Gromyko and Rusk had their first meeting to set the talks. Why did the Russians then change their tone from the tough August 3rd note to now being ready to negotiate after (unintelligible)?

HILLENBRAND: Well, again we don't know exactly, but I suppose it's logical to conclude that the military measures that the President had announced and that had been approved by NATO, the American buildup and American willingness to spend more money on arms and so on, the threat of an arms race, might have persuaded the Soviets that talk was better than getting into an arms race with the United States. You know, that was always a consideration at that time. Herman Kahn the strategist had written a little pamphlet, I remember, which I had read, which I quoted from in one of the memos I wrote, saying that the one thing that the Soviets would wish to avoid and which we could use as a potential threat was the threat of an arms race. Because they could not out-spend us. And I think the Kennedy military program must have given the Soviets the impression that we were determined to move ahead now, and massively build up in a military sense, calling up the reserves and all of these things. I think possibly that gave Khrushchev, assuming that he was under pressure to take a hard line in the Politburo, the argument he needed to say, "Why not get into these exploratory talks with the Americans and see what comes out of them? Maybe a formula will come out which will enable us to say that we have achieved our objectives in Berlin. So why not?" I'm reasonably sure Gromyko probably supported Khrushchev in the willingness to have these exploratory talks. The Soviets must have been aware because it was already in the press that the French were opposed. They might have

jumped to the conclusion, "Ah, the Americans are going to be soft on this." And they were aware also of the soft positions of some of the White House types.

SCHOENBAUM: The American position--and I ask whether Rusk was or who was responsible for this--the American position seems to have been at that time an interesting combination of on the one hand, we are going to call up the reserves and we are going to build up militarily. But on the other hand, we want to talk and there are--we can't talk about the central issue of access and things like that. But there are a number of things that we might talk about, such as the Oder-Neisse line or some extraneous issues. Is that a fair statement? Am I interpreting their position or--

HILLENBRAND: Well, I think Dean Rusk, if I interpret his reasoning and his feelings directly, had the sense that the United States would have the primary responsibility if there were to be a confrontation over Berlin, which might raise the nuclear question in acute form, that it was only common sense to see whether we couldn't explore some diplomatic way out of the seeming impasse, rather than permit the situation to drift toward confrontation. That it seemed to me was a perfectly logical position, but one which the French were never willing to accept. The French always thought that all we have to do was be firm and the Soviets will back away. Well, since we had the nuclear responsibility and the French did not, I think our path, the path that Dean Rusk chose to follow and which the President chose to follow, was the only sensible one. You don't knowingly move toward a nuclear confrontation if the diplomatic channels are still open. And it was clear the Soviets were willing to use this formula of exploratory talks to ascertain whether a basis for negotiation exists. We dragged it out for a whole year.

SCHOENBAUM: That was the interesting thing. And as Dean Rusk said, "They talked for great length about nothing."

HILLENBRAND: That's right. Well, there were a few little pieces of paper exchanged, for example, our principles paper, which caused quite a stir. But the Soviets obviously weren't prepared to accept it. And we weren't prepared to accept their counter-proposals which Gromyko handed Dean Rusk. So the talks were I think a rather masterful exercise in delaying diplomacy, to take the heat out of an issue and take away any ultimatum features that might lead to confrontation.

SCHOENBAUM: And that's where Dean Rusk played his experienced role?

HILLENBRAND: Oh, definitely. I was present at all of these talks with Gromyko. I was usually the note taker and I provided him with his briefing materials. And we also had our ambassador in Moscow [who] was very active. In the beginning of '62 the basic discourse was between Gromyko and Tommy Thompson in Moscow. Then it moved back to Geneva, where Dean Rusk went there in the spring of '62. I thought it was a masterful diplomatic achievement on the part of the Secretary and the U.S. government. We, in effect, diffused the Berlin issue successfully for a year. And then, as I say, we don't know whether that led to the Cuban Missile Crisis and what the causal relationship was in Khrushchev's mind and in the Politburo and so on. But certainly Berlin ceased for a time being the center of crisis. In fact, as you know, during the Cuban Missile Crisis the assumption was that the Soviets would retaliate in Berlin for our action in the Caribbean. In

fact, I was part of a special task force set up in the White House to devise reactions should they counteract against us in Berlin. Well, they never did; Berlin was very quiet. The Berlin crisis wasn't over because we still continued to have exchanges of notes and so on with the Soviets. And some harassments of access which lasted until the fall of '63. But the real heat was off. I think with the resolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis there was no longer danger of the Soviets in effect giving us another ultimate threat on Berlin. They did exercise their physical control over the access routes to continue to harass us during '63. And it wasn't entirely clear that the Berlin crisis was over until the last harassment in the early fall of '63 was resolved. That is, they were stopping U.S. military convoys. The "tailgate" issue was the--

SCHOENBAUM: The fall of '63.

HILLENBRAND: The fall of '63. That was the last major confrontation on the access route. The so-called "tailgate" crisis involving American military convoys.

SCHOENBAUM: And why did that suddenly disappear?

HILLENBRAND: Well, because we didn't concede. And I think there is some evidence that this crisis was not one that Khrushchev had fully approved. And that it was something the Soviet command in East Germany had really originated and allowed to expand. We don't know because Khrushchev's position was already beginning to be threatened within the Politburo, although he didn't fall in '63. Nevertheless, it was obvious in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis that he never quite recovered the absolute position that he had had before that. But as an exercise in skillfully diplomacy, it seemed to be that Dean Rusk's conduct of the discussions with Gromyko in '61-62 should go down in history as one of the more productive delaying actions, skillfully used and skillfully carried out by the Secretary.

SCHOENBAUM: Could you tell any anecdotes about what was it like? They would go into a room and talk all day?

HILLENBRAND: Talk for five or six hours.

SCHOENBAUM: What did they talk about?

HILLENBRAND: It was very often highly repetitive, but you do that when negotiating with the Soviets anyway. You sort of have to go through the whole restatement of your position initially an hour or so on each side, with interpreters. Gromyko always used interpreters despite his knowledge of English, except when he was talking just with Dean Rusk informally before or after sessions.

SCHOENBAUM: Then he would use English.

HILLENBRAND: Yes, then he would use English. But generally speaking in these long meetings he would use Russian and would have to be interpreted, not simultaneously but consecutively, so that a six hour meeting really meant three hours of discussion. Particularly since translating English into Russian takes a long time. It's--

SCHOENBAUM: Did it consist mainly of statements like Dean Rusk makes a statement, then Gromyko makes a statement? Or was there question-answer, a give or take?

HILLENBRAND: I think there was some give and take after the initial repetitive statements of position were made. And as I say there were little papers sometimes exchanged, which then would have to be responded to. The usual response was, "We will have to take this under consideration. And in our next meeting we will give you a response."

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah, I see.

HILLENBRAND: It was seldom that either Gromyko or the Secretary were prepared to sort of throw it right back in each other's face and say it was obviously impossible. And I must say the Soviets, in the spring of '62, did come up with counter proposals that at least warranted a hard look before we rejected them. You couldn't just throw them right back in his face and say off hand that it was totally untenable.

SCHOENBAUM: Are your notes anywhere? Are they in the Kennedy Library?

HILLENBRAND: Well, no they are not. I think they should be. I don't think they are in the Kennedy Library. They are probably still in the State Department. Because you see all of these conversations and my recording of them were embodied in telegrams, those that took place in Geneva and elsewhere. Or they were embodied in detailed memoranda of conversation. God knows I spent a good part of my waking hours at these discussions and then putting them into transcriptions. They should be available. I don't think they are available in the Kennedy Library because these were not White House documents. They are presumably available in the State Department.

SCHOENBAUM: In these talks we weren't asking for anything as such, were we? We were simply talking about our position, and it was the Soviets that were the--

HILLENBRAND: That's right. They were the aggressors, potential aggressors here. We were obviously prepared to live with the status quo in Berlin. So what we were trying to do was to partly get rid of any Soviet ultimate intentions, which for them meant declaring Berlin a free city, signing a peace treaty with the GDR. They varied the formula. But basically their claim was that if they signed a peace treaty with the sovereign GDR, then any residual rights we might have had in West Berlin would be extinguished, because Berlin was on the territory of the GDR. That was their big claim. They started out with somewhat different legal position in '58-'59s but that was the position to which they drifted by '61-'62. So what we were trying to do was to defuse the situation, to sort of offer a Berlin solution within a broader framework, that involved possible recognition of the Oder-Neisse line, willingness to contemplate certain changes in Berlin, but not fundamental changes. That had been our proposal in '59 as well at the Geneva foreign ministers conference. We always tried to develop our Berlin proposals in a broader context so that we would not, in effect, be conceding the basic Soviet claims to a fundamental change of status of West Berlin. And that was essentially what the discussion was all about. We varied the formulations, varied the contents of papers. And there were some crises within the alliance. I

mean we had problems with Adenaur. And then Schroder got into trouble, the German foreign minister, because he accepted our principles paper which Rusk had shown him in Geneva at a meeting there with Schroder before we met with Gromyko. And Schroder accepted it to be presented to the Soviets. And the Chancellor didn't like that at all. Schroder was in hot water for a while. But on the whole, one can only view this as diplomacy at its best because it succeeded in its basic objective, which was to prevent any Soviet unilateral action with respect to Berlin which would have led to a confrontation.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah. Were you at any time--did you interpret fear that there was imminent action on the horizon? Or was it always a kind of low key crisis after all? Many people called it the most difficult crisis for the United States since the end of World War II.

HILLENBRAND: Well, I think it was because it was the one crisis situation that if it had been allowed to develop could have led to a nuclear confrontation. I think in that sense there was always this vision of a nuclear confrontation in the backs of the minds of the American officials who were involved. And it certainly was very much on Kennedy's mind after his confrontation in Vienna. As I say our experience during the Eisenhower period, when there had been similar tense months under threat of Soviet ultimatum, led us to be perhaps a little more sanguine about the possibility of deferring Soviet action vis-a-vis Berlin than some of the new people who came in and sort of got jittery in the White House, and felt that somehow or another we had to make concessions, and that Berlin was an indefensible position to maintain. I think Dean Rusk came around to the view that as long as those three vital interests were maintained, and they were fairly fundamental [they would have been incompatible with any change in the status of Berlin of the kind the Soviets were contemplating], then we didn't have to worry too much about other things that they did. That's why the wall crisis never really generated the excitement in the U.S. government that one might have expected it would. It did generate a lot of excitement in Europe, and particularly on the side of the Germans. So we had to send Lyndon [Baines] Johnson there. And we had to do other things to improve Berlin morale. But these were not regarded as intrinsically called for by the situation. It was only when we saw the Berlin morale plummeting that we felt we had to make these gestures, send additional troops there, Lyndon Johnson, and make other gestures. General [Lucius Dub] Clay was then sent there.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah. So there were no really close calls at no time. At no time did you think that they are going to do something and this is the date? And then the crisis passed.

HILLENBRAND: No, I can't recall. You know one of the most dangerous crises in terms of the possibility of incidents was when they tried to close the air corridors early in '62. That happened partly while Rusk was talking to Gromyko in Geneva. They dropped chaff in the corridors. And then they also tried to preempt altitude space. But we decided to continue to fly regardless of--

SCHOENBAUM: Even though it was dangerous to do so.

HILLENBRAND: And the civil airlines [Pan Am, Air France, and British Airways] also, after consulting with their governments, decided they would continue to fly. And I must say that it was a very successful and skillful operation. After about a month and a half the Soviets saw this was a losing game. And I think Rusk put the heat on Gromyko and said, "You know, it's

impossible for us to be talking while you are dropping chaff in the corridors, trying to preempt altitudes to prevent our civil aviation and military aviation from flying back and forth through the corridors." So it was called off. But theoretically you can envisage, had they knocked down a few of our planes, particularly a civilian plane with a couple of hundred passengers on it, then we would have been immediately been in a confrontational situation, because we had contingency plans to provide fighter protection. And we did send fighters up into the corridors in demonstrative flights. We didn't try to accompany each civil aircraft with a fighter escort. We were prepared to provide fighter escort if necessary. So that could have escalated very rapidly. Fortunately, the Soviets chose not to do so. But at that point we said that this is really dangerous because with ground access you can retreat. You're held up and you can't through. Then it becomes a diplomatic incident. But in the air it is much more dangerous because if planes are shot down you don't have just a diplomatic incident, then you have, in effect, a quasi-military confrontational situation. But fortunately we had no incidents. Fortunately all the civil pilots maintained their cool. They did not refuse to fly. You know, they might have very well have said this is an unsafe situation; we refuse to fly. The Soviets, I think, were fairly meticulous in avoiding any preemptive altitude flying which might have caused some near misses. The chaff-- you see, one of the problems with flying into Berlin is that there is a ten thousand foot limit on altitude for western planes in the corridors, which has a long history behind it. Cloud cover very often in the corridors is above ten thousand feet. So you are flying on instruments through the corridor. And if you throw chaff all over the corridor then your instruments are not working right. So fortunately during most of that period, which is usually a bad time of the year, we had clearer weather than was normal. So the chaff didn't cause quite the confusion that it might have had we had high clouds at all altitudes.

SCHOENBAUM: You mean you can't fly over ten thousand feet?

HILLENBRAND: No.

SCHOENBAUM: Oh, so you have to stay within that ten thousand feet of the ground.

HILLENBRAND: Of course, it's very uneconomical for jet planes. It was all right when you had propeller driven planes.

SCHOENBAUM: And that's still true today?

HILLENBRAND: That's still true today. There is no plane that flies into Berlin, any western plane, above ten thousand feet. As I say, it has a long history, and there were some who were for testing our right to fly above ten thousand feet. But the Joint Chiefs said, "No, we are not going to risk it. As long as we can physically manage below the ten thousand foot altitude level we are not going to try to have a confrontation by flying in at eleven thousand feet."

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah, yeah.

HILLENBRAND: Now, there have been a few cases where planes have strayed into the above ten thousand feet. They were immediately accompanied by Soviet fighters.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah, that's interesting. What was the role--I guess we're almost at the end and I don't want to hold--I'll ask one more question.

HILLENBRAND: One more question, sure.

SCHOENBAUM: What was the role of Dag [Hjalmar Agne Carl] Haramarskjold in the thing? Was he active?!

HILLENBRAND: Not really, no. Because--

SCHOENBAUM: Was more or less--

HILLENBRAND: The willingness of the U.S. government to get the U.S. government to get the U.N. involved was generally a minimal one. Obviously those proposals that were floating around to get the U.N. involved in a long-range solution would have involved the Secretary General. But in practice he never really got involved.

SCHOENBAUM: Okay. Well, good. Well, thank you very much.

HILLENBRAND: Well, as you go along, you may have additional questions.

SCHOENBAUM: Yeah.

HILLENBRAND: Have you seen the [Honoree Marc] Catudal book? On the Kennedy wall crisis? You ought to. I helped him put that together. It's the Berlin--I think it's called Kennedy--Another Berlin Wall Crisis. I'm sure they must have a copy in the library. If not, I can probably find a copy at home.

END OF SIDE 2