

JFK's Road from His 'Peace Speech' to the Limited Test Ban Treaty

by Carl Osgood

July 20—When President John F. Kennedy delivered his June 10, 1963 Commencement Address at The American University, he did so with the intention that it would be followed by concrete actions to put the world on the path to the “peace for all time” that he envisioned.

One course of action that Kennedy had been focused on was the negotiation and implementation of a comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty. Both the United States and its allies, and the Soviet Union and its allies, he said,

have a mutually deep interest in a just and genuine peace and in halting the arms race. Agreements to this end are in the interests of the Soviet Union as well as ours....

A treaty to outlaw nuclear tests, Kennedy said later in his address, was the one place where a “fresh start” was badly needed. Negotiations, under way since 1958—when Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev unilaterally implemented a Soviet moratorium on testing—had yet to produce a treaty. Kennedy thought:

The conclusion of such a treaty ... would check the spiraling arms race in one of its most dangerous areas. It would place the nuclear powers in a position to deal more effectively with one of the greatest hazards which man faces in 1963, the further spread of nuclear arms.

In pursuit of that goal, Kennedy announced two decisions. The first was that he, Khrushchev, and UK Prime Minister Harold Macmillan had agreed that high-level discussions would soon start in Moscow, “looking toward early agreement on a comprehensive test ban treaty.” Secondly, he announced that the



White House/Cecil Stoughton

President John F. Kennedy calls for a new era of peaceful cooperation among nations in his commencement speech at The American University, June 10, 1963.

United States would no longer conduct nuclear tests in the atmosphere so long as no other nation did. In announcing these two steps, he said:

Such a declaration is no substitute for a formal binding treaty, but I hope it will help us achieve one. [It is not a substitute for disarmament,] but I hope it will help us achieve it.

Genesis of the American University Address

The idea that became Kennedy's “peace speech” may have been sparked by Norman Cousins, editor-in-chief of the *Saturday Review*. According to the account of Glenn Seaborg, Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission (1961–1971), in his 1981 memoir, *Kennedy, Khrushchev and the Test Ban*, Kennedy called Cousins one day on another matter. Cousins' report of this, according to Seaborg, was:

I advocated making a breathtaking offer to the Russians and the president said he would think about it, that he would talk to Ted Sorensen who

might call me. In fact, Sorenson did call me and he and I discussed it further.

Cousins was someone who was in a position to make such a suggestion. The previous December, Khrushchev had sent an angry letter to Kennedy complaining of a misunderstanding between Soviet and American negotiators over how many on-site inspections should be provided for in a test ban treaty. Khrushchev said that the Soviets could agree to two or three inspections per year but Arthur Dean, the American negotiator, told the president that he proposed to the Soviet side eight to ten, which Kennedy was obliged to support in his reply to the Soviet premier.

The depth of Khrushchev's anger was not fully understood in Washington until April 1963, when Khrushchev told Cousins—who was visiting the Soviet Union on other matters—in an interview, how much trouble he went through to get the Council of Ministers to accept three inspections:

They now wanted—not three inspections, or even six. They [the U.S.] wanted eight. And so once again I was made to look foolish. But I can tell you this: It won't happen again.

Sorenson, again as reported by Seaborg, recalled that the drafting of the June 10 speech was very closely held. The official positions of government departments were not solicited.

The president was determined to put forward a fundamentally new emphasis on the peaceful and positive in our relations with the Soviets. He did not want that new policy diluted by the usual threats of destruction, boasts of nuclear stockpiles and lectures on Soviet treachery.

It is doubtful that Kennedy would have taken such an independent course prior to the missile crisis (of October 1962). The enhancement of the president's prestige resulting from his handling of that event was a liberating influence.

The Soviet Response

According to Seaborg, the June 10, 1963 "Peace Speech," as it has become known, at The American University had little impact at home, at least initially, but it had a profound effect in Moscow. In an [Information Report](#) dated June 11, under the Subject heading: "Soviet Reaction to 10 June Speech of President Kennedy 11 June 1963," the CIA reported:

1. The Soviets were favorably surprised by the tenor of President Kennedy's 10 June speech because it reflected a broad progressive approach toward solving current problems. The atmosphere created by this speech is now such that the possibilities of agreeing on a test ban treaty are very good. No chief of state would make such a speech unless he were completely convinced that agreement was probable.

The CIA insisted in that report that the only obstacle to agreement in the past had been Soviet doubts about U.S. sincerity.

If the Soviets were sure of United States sincerity, there would be no problems—including that of inspections—which could not be solved. President Kennedy's speech has gone a long way toward assuaging Soviet doubts of United States sincerity.

2. ... In spite of [some] objections, the Soviets feel that the speech has created an excellent atmosphere. Soviet secretariat employees believe that Premier Khrushchev will make a gesture in response to this speech.

The State Department's Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) reported the next day that *TASS* had reported the speech promptly and that two hours later, *Radio Moscow* reported that the United States, Britain, and the Soviet Union had agreed to hold talks on a nuclear test ban in mid-July 1963. The full text of Kennedy's speech was published in *Izvestiya* June 12. "Moscow commentators welcome the President's



Norman Cousins functioned as a back-channel between JFK and Nikita Khrushchev, and was key in preparing JFK's June 10, 1963 address.

NASA

recognition of the importance of preserving world peace, while deploring some of his 'distortions',” FBIS reported.

On June 15, Khrushchev met with the editors of *Pravda* and *Izvestiya*, the latter of which published his answers to questions. According to a cable from the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, signed by Minister-Counselor John M. McSweeney, Khrushchev’s answers indicated that the Soviets felt that an authoritative response to Kennedy’s speech was necessary “in order (to) counteract impact made by speech abroad and in Soviet Union itself and re-state current Soviet positions before June 18 plenum, July 5 talks with Chinese Communists and mid-July test-ban talks.” McSweeney called Khrushchev’s response “cautious and unforthcoming” and stated that he advanced no new proposals, nor was there a statement “analogous to President’s re need for US to reexamine its attitude towards USSR.”

McSweeney quoted Khrushchev saying the following:

World public and all Soviet people know well that Soviet government has always proceeded in its foreign policy from Leninist principle of peaceful co-existence of states with different social systems.

McSweeney himself added:

This contention sets the tone for answers as a whole. Khrushchev’s reaffirmation of correctness of standard Soviet positions is designed to leave the impression that basic reasons for world tension lies in failure of West and US in particular, to accommodate to Soviet attitudes. [Khrushchev’s response] may reflect hesitancy to make any gesture at this time which would increase Soviet vulnerability to Chinese Communist attacks at forthcoming bilateral meetings.

Soviet leadership is faced with the necessity of holding in check any tendency towards rising



JFK Library

Both the U.S. and the Soviet Union had a deep interest in a treaty to outlaw nuclear tests. Negotiations had been under way since 1958. Here an optimistic President John Kennedy and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev meet in Vienna, May 1961.

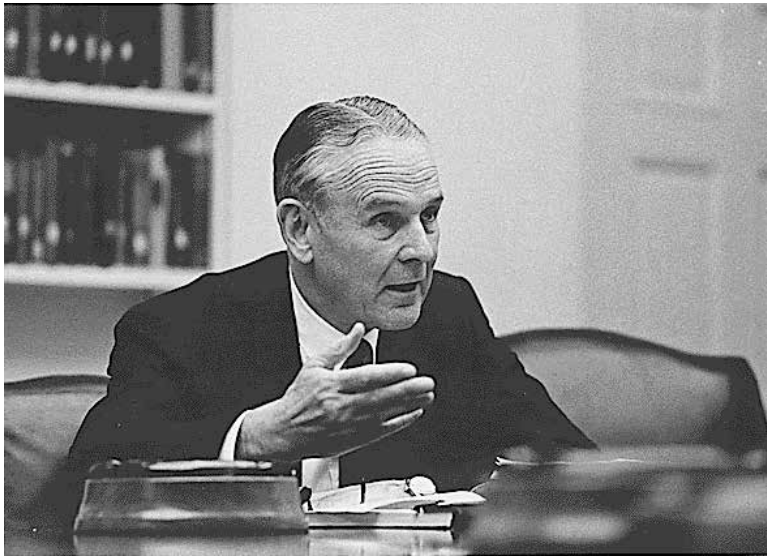
expectations among Soviet populace for improvement in US-Soviet relations at time when leadership is preparing to play on theme of no ideological co-existence in Central Committee Plenum which opens on June 18.

Dealing with Joint Chiefs’ Opposition

Back in Washington, the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency (ACDA) hosted a meeting June 14 to discuss where things stood. The meeting’s Memorandum of Conversation [recorded](#) attendance and discussion by, among others, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, ACDA Director William Foster, the president’s science advisor Jerome Wiesner, Deputy National Security advisor Carl Kaysen, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara accompanied by Assistant Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Maxwell Taylor, CIA Director John McCone, and Atomic Energy Commission Chairman Glenn Seaborg.

Foster told those in attendance that the negotiating situation had changed considerably since the last time the same group had met; a mission to Moscow was now being planned and the draft treaty text was generally agreed on. Rusk told the group that the president felt that “the mission should be made now because this may be our last chance to avoid a larger and more difficult arms race.”

The problem was the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who were scheduled to testify before Sen. John C. Stennis’



Joichi Okamoto

Gen. Maxwell Taylor, as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, opposed a nuclear test ban treaty on tactical and strategic grounds.

Appropriations Subcommittee on Preparedness a few days hence. Taylor summarized the chiefs' comments on the draft treaty:

(1) the Soviets could conduct clandestine tests if the treaty were adopted; (2) the draft treaty did not provide adequate opportunity to fix responsibility for evasion; and (3) the treaty as now drafted was not in the national security interest of the United States.

McNamara added that the Chiefs "believe that the tactical and strategic balance of power might be shifted in favor of the Soviet Union if the present draft treaty were adopted."

McNamara said that he supported the draft treaty because he felt that America "was ahead of the Soviets and that continued testing would produce equality." However, he pointed out, the chiefs disagree, a disagreement which he attributed to the directors of the weapons labs.

[The directors] had made statements concerning the technical facts which made it impossible for the chiefs to take opposing views, since they relied heavily on the lab directors.

McNamara also referred to the [Twining Committee Report](#), delivered to the Air Force Chief of Staff the previous March. A committee chaired by retired Gen.

Nathan F. Twining, including H-bomb designers Dr. Edward Teller and Dr. Stanislaw Ulam, and World War II aviation hero Gen. James "Jimmy" Doolittle (among others), concluded that the premises of a test ban were not valid from a military and scientific standpoint: "A test ban would involve greater risks to the national security than perhaps have been realized." It dismissed assertions of the superiority of U.S. nuclear deterrent forces and claimed that the Soviets might obtain the data they need on American vulnerabilities by a clandestine testing program.

The committee's report said future developments in nuclear explosives technology "might produce important shifts in the balance of military power," though some of those developments were only speculative. It also feared a test ban would threaten the weapons laboratories:

We are not convinced that during a test ban, adequate budget and incentives would in fact be provided to preserve the U.S. capability and readiness to test. On the other hand, we foresee no significant problem for the totalitarian Soviet state to maintain weapons research and test preparedness.

The Twining Committee recommended the Air Force "make clear to higher authority the extent of the military risks inherent in a nuclear test ban."

Teller, in his 2001 *Memoirs: A Twentieth Century Journey in Science and Politics*, reported that in the Spring of 1963 Kennedy, through Wiesner, had invited him to the White House to discuss a potential atmospheric test ban treaty.

In a brief conversation, I stated the most important reason for opposing such a ban: Since the age of missiles began, we had the opportunity to conduct one test series in the atmosphere, which had been done in 1962. [That series] had left us convinced that the amount of knowledge that we needed was far greater than the knowledge that we possessed about how nuclear explosives could be used in ballistic missile defense.

Some of the Soviet testing in 1961 and 1962,

Teller added, appeared to have been aimed at missile defense. He agreed however, that underground testing was better than no testing at all, and it allowed the continued improvement of the deterrent force.

Teller's Soviet counterpart, Dr. Andrei Sakharov, was already engaged in an effort to stop Soviet nuclear testing, particularly after the October 1961 detonation of the 100 megaton (de-rated to 50 megatons) Tsar Bomba. He thought that the super-powerful Tsar Bomba test would end testing, but the opposite happened; the United States resumed testing in April 1962. The turning point for Sakharov came in September 1962 when two tests were scheduled of two warheads that, while similar in design, were actually competing with each other. After trying and failing to stop the tests, Sakharov wrote:

A terrible crime has been committed and I couldn't prevent it! A feeling of impotence, unbearable bitterness, shame and humiliation overcame me. I dropped my face on the table and wept.

Military thinking had won. The more tests, the better. In the Summer of 1963 Sakharov, backed by some like-thinking colleagues, threw his weight behind a partial test ban, which apparently helped influence Khrushchev.¹

Khrushchev Proposes a Limited Test Ban

On July 2, Khrushchev delivered a speech in East Berlin in which he proposed a limited test ban treaty, as reported in the FBIS summary:

The Soviet government is convinced that the early conclusion of an agreement banning all nuclear tests in the atmosphere, in outer space, underwater and underground, will accord with the interests of the peoples. But today, this is ob-



U.S. Dept. of Energy

After Kennedy's death, talks to ban all nuclear testing collapsed, and the world was faced once again with the threat of thermonuclear annihilation.

viously impossible because of the Western Powers' position.

[Therefore] carefully analyzing the obtaining situation, the Soviet Government, prompted by the sentiment of high responsibility for the destinies of peoples, declares that since the Western Powers obstruct the conclusion of an agreement banning all nuclear tests, the Soviet government expresses its willingness to conclude an agreement banning nuclear tests in the atmosphere, in outer space, and underwater.

If now the Western Powers accept this proposal, the question of inspection no longer arises. The Western powers declared that no inspections whatever are needed to check the fulfillment by the states of their commitments to stop nuclear tests in the atmosphere, in outer space, and underwater. Hence, the road to a solution of the problem is open.

Talks to ban all nuclear testing, including underground testing, always collapsed because of Western insistence on verification measures—primarily meaning on-site inspections—which the Soviets rejected as a U.S.-UK effort to gain access to the Soviet program for intelligence purposes.

However, an agreement to end nuclear testing would not stop the arms race or prevent nuclear war, Khrushchev argued:

That is why the Soviet government believes that now at the time of the signing of an agreement

1. *The World of Andrei Sakharov: A Russian Physicist's Path to Freedom*, by Gennady Gorelick, Oxford University Press, 2005.

on the ending of nuclear tests, it is also necessary to take another major step towards easing of international tensions and the strengthening of trust between the states: To sign a non-aggression pact between the two main military blocs—the NATO countries and the Warsaw Pact States.

[The two actions simultaneously] would create a new international atmosphere, more favorable for settling the outstanding problems of our times, including the problem of disarmament.

The FBIS summary suggested two conclusions from Khrushchev's statement: (a) that Khrushchev is offering a three-environment test ban without insisting on a moratorium on underground testing; and (b) he may or may not be insisting that the signing of a test ban agreement be conditioned on the simultaneous signing of a non-aggression pact. The summary says that it was not possible precisely to interpret Khrushchev's language on the non-aggression pact "since we do not have either the Russian text or even a reliable English text"; but that the presumption from his language "is that the Soviet Union would refuse to sign a test ban treaty without a simultaneous signing of a non-aggression pact." Nonetheless, "there would appear to be enough ambiguity to permit Khrushchev freedom of maneuver if it appeared useful in the course of negotiations."

A State Department cable signed by Rusk and sent to the American Embassy in Paris indicated that there were problems with both France and West Germany—with President Charles de Gaulle on both the test ban and the non-aggression pact (NAP); with Germany on the NAP. Rusk's cable said:

We are concerned that Khrushchev's ploy on test ban and possible linkage with NAP could drive French and Germans together and block exploitation of any possibilities which may lie behind Khrushchev's offer.

The Harriman Mission

On July 9, the National Security Council [met](#) to discuss draft instructions for the mission to Moscow to be led by Averell Harriman. Those present included the President, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, Rusk, Harriman, Foster, McNamara, Taylor and Seaborg. Rusk began the discussion on underground tests and said that the U.S. objective was a compre-

hensive test ban treaty, and accepted a three-environment treaty "only as a first step toward achievement of a comprehensive treaty."

A number of complications were also raised during the discussion, including the American proposal for a NATO Multilateral Force (MLF) and whether it was inconsistent with the goal of "non-dissemination" (non-proliferation). Rusk argued that the MLF proposal, rather than spreading nuclear weapons to other powers, "actually means greater control of nuclear weapons and is therefore consistent with our effort to prevent further dissemination of nuclear weapons."

Another complication was the involvement of the British in the test ban negotiations. The British government of Harold Macmillan had been tied to the United States on the question of a test ban since 1958, the start of Khrushchev's testing moratorium. When Kennedy raised the question of how to deal with the British, Bundy "acknowledged that there was considerable suspicion" of British motivation. "He said many believed that Macmillan wanted a tripartite summit conference even if there was very little substance for the three principals to discuss and agree upon." Bundy proposed discussing with the British an arrangement by which only the absolute minimum of information would be released to the press about the negotiations.

From the military side, Taylor reported that the service chiefs had taken the position that a limited test ban, or one with a quota of underground tests, was not in the national interest. Two of them, Gen. Curtis LeMay (Air Force) and Adm. George W. Anderson (Navy), had already expressed their personal views to the Stennis Committee. Taylor proposed that a governmental review be made of the atmospheric test ban treaty to determine if it was in the national interest, and asked that the Principals Committee review the entire proposal—including a review by the service chiefs.

McNamara stressed that the testimony of the chiefs to the Stennis Committee would be viewed as their personal views and expressed opposition to any formal review.

Kennedy agreed that the administration should not ask the Joint Chiefs for their formal position—

because we wished to avoid a statement of their collective judgment becoming public and resulting in press speculation as to differences within the government. [Kennedy] felt that if the Rus-

sians accept our treaty, we will have to fight for it—win, lose or draw.

The next day, Harriman got his instructions:

On the negotiating side, you should seek to negotiate the most comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty possible in accordance with existing guidelines. [Y]ou should canvas, in so far as appears practical, the range of issues involving peace and security which divide us from the Soviets, [paying attention to:] What other acceptable measures of disarmament the Soviets are interested in undertaking; and, what are Soviet intentions in dealing with the problems relating to European security, as raised in Khrushchev's speech of July 2.

On the test ban treaty, the document argues that it is in the national interest because it would “be a significant first step toward the halting of the arms race,” and “it is an indispensable first step towards limitation of the further diffusion of nuclear weapons.” Therefore:

The achievement of a comprehensive treaty outlawing testing in all environments remains our objective. However, Chairman Khrushchev's speech makes it unlikely that we can reach an agreement with the Soviets on a comprehensive treaty at this time.

Therefore, the American side was to seek an agreement banning testing in three environments along the lines of the draft treaty that the United States and UK had proposed on Aug. 27, 1962.

“The achievement of such an agreement should be viewed as a first step towards the achievement of a comprehensive test ban treaty,” the document continued. It instructed Harriman that if the Soviets showed interest, he should initiate technical discussions that may resolve disagreements between the Soviet Union on the one side and the United States and UK on the other, on the need for inspections.

Negotiations Begin in Moscow

On July 15, Harriman, the British negotiator Lord Hailsham, and their delegations met with Khrushchev in Moscow. Harriman opened the meeting by handing a letter to Khrushchev from Kennedy. Khrushchev told the two delegations that he believed in their good inten-

tions and that people are awaiting the results of these meetings because military expenditures “limited their economic resources and thus shortened their lives.”

A lengthy cable sent by the U.S. Embassy in Moscow to Washington reported that Khrushchev said:

We must abandon war as a means of solving disputes and resolve differences by peaceful means. Modern era [is] not one of colonialism, when countries could be seized by means of war. Today, both robbers and those robbed [are] in equal position, since both would be annihilated in nuclear war. Consequently, he (Khrushchev) welcomed good intentions displayed by President and Macmillan.

Khrushchev thanked Harriman for the letter from Kennedy and asked Harriman to convey his gratitude and respect. If no success could be achieved in reaching a comprehensive agreement, then it appeared that there would be no particular difficulties with respect to a three-environment ban, he said, according to the cable.

Khrushchev wasted no time getting to the point: that the Soviets would not agree to any inspection regime. They wanted a comprehensive test ban but on condition that there would be no inspections, and he added that there was no point in arguing about it. The three-environment ban, on the other hand, involved no inspection. If the United States and UK were prepared to sign such a ban, so were the Soviets.

Harriman, in his reply, said that America believed that a three-environment test ban “would be very valuable as it would overcome fears [the] world had of danger to future generations from atmospheric tests if such tests [were] carried out to great extent.” He told Khrushchev that if the Soviet side continued to oppose inspection, the United States was prepared to discuss a three-environment ban. He stressed, as Kennedy had in his letter, that the United States had no espionage intentions regarding inspections.

Khrushchev said that he believed that the United States and UK could sit down with Gromyko and start formulating the main provisions of a treaty, and if there were still problems, they could meet again with Khrushchev, to which both Harriman and Hailsham agreed. The meeting with Gromyko was set for 3:00 p.m. the next day.

Seaborg, in his 1981 memoir, reported that Kennedy replied immediately to Harriman's report on that first meeting with Khrushchev. He called Harriman's

report encouraging and said Harriman was right to leave the French out of the treaty, “though I continue to be prepared to work on the French if Soviets will work on Chinese....”

On July 17, Kennedy issued a short statement to reporters at a [news conference](#) on the progress of the talks:

After three days of talks, we are still hopeful that the participating countries may reach an agreement to end nuclear testing, at least in the environment in which it is agreed that on-the-ground inspection is not required for reasonable security. Negotiations, so far are going forward in a businesslike way ...

Finally, it is clear that these negotiations, if successful, should lead on to wider discussions among other nations. The three negotiating powers constitute the nuclear test ban subcommittee of the Geneva Conference, and if the present negotiations should be successful, it will be important to reach the widest possible agreement on nuclear testing throughout the world....

The treaty was signed on Aug. 5, 1963 in Moscow by Dean Rusk for the U.S., Sir Douglas Home for the UK, and Andrei Gromyko for the USSR. Kennedy stayed in Washington out of fear that if there was a summit to sign the treaty, it would face the same fate in the U.S. Senate as the League of Nations treaty in 1919.

Kennedy Takes Responsibility for Ratification

Kennedy submitted the treaty to the Senate on Aug. 8 and then, according to Seaborg’s account, took personal responsibility for getting it ratified. “Kennedy personally took a leading part in the drive to influence public opinion,” Seaborg writes. Kennedy encouraged the formation of a Citizens’ Committee for a Nuclear Test Ban and personally advised its officers, among whom was Norman Cousins, “on the strategy for an effective campaign.”

As Cousins related, Kennedy “reiterated the need for important business support and suggested a dozen names,” among them James R. Killian and Dr. George B. Kistiakowsky, both of whom had been Science Advisors to President Dwight Eisenhower. Kennedy also “felt that religious figures, farmers, educators, and labor leaders all had key roles to play,” and suggested leaders from each of those categories. Kennedy encouraged letter-writing campaigns while at the same time conveying his assurances to any members of the

Senate who had questions about the treaty.

Seaborg wrote:

In sum, Kennedy threw himself into the ratification of the treaty with every resource available to him. He did so out of a sense of conviction which he probably felt for no other measure sponsored by his administration. Indeed, he confided to his associates that he “would gladly forfeit his reelection, if necessary, for the sake of the test ban treaty.”

The Senate ratified the treaty on Sept. 23, 1963 by a vote of 80–19 and it entered into force on Oct. 10 when the United States, the UK, and USSR certified to each other that they had ratified it. Since then, another 117 countries have either ratified it or acceded to it.

Note on sources: Except for those in published sources, all documents cited in this report are available [online](#) at the website of the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, <https://www.jfklibrary.org>.



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