

Speech by John F. Kennedy on the Soviet Aide Memoire on Germany and Berlin (19 July 1961)

Caption: On 19 July 1961, the US President, John F. Kennedy, criticises the controversial proposals set out in the Soviet aide-mémoire of 4 June 1961 relating to the status of the City of Berlin.

Source: Office of the Federal Register (Ed.). John F. Kennedy, Containing the public messages, speeches and statements of the president : January 20 to December 31, 1961. Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1962. 908 p. (Public Papers of the Presidents). p. 521-523.

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<t1>Statement by the President Concerning the U.S. Reply to the Soviet Government's Aide Memoire on Germany and Berlin (19 July, 1961)</t1>

IN CONSULTATION and full agreement with its British and French allies, and with the benefit of the views of the Federal Republic of Germany, and after consultation with the other member governments of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, the United States on Monday delivered through its Embassy in Moscow its reply to the aide memoire on Germany and Berlin received from the Soviet Government on June 4. Our reply speaks for itself and advances what I believe to be an irrefutable legal, moral and political position. In this statement I should like to convey to the American people and the people of the world the basic issues which underlie the somewhat more formal language of diplomacy.

The Soviet aide memoire is a document which speaks of peace but threatens to disturb it. It speaks of ending the abnormal situation in Germany but insists on making permanent its abnormal division. It refers to the Four Power Alliance of World War II but seeks the unilateral abrogation of the rights of the other three powers. It calls for new international agreements while preparing to violate existing ones. It offers certain assurances while making it plain that its previous assurances are not to be relied upon. It professes concern for the rights of the citizens of West Berlin while seeking to expose them to the immediate or eventual domination of a regime which permits no self-determination. Three simple facts are clear:

(1) Today there is peace in Berlin, in Germany and in Europe. If that peace is destroyed by the unilateral actions of the Soviet Union, its leaders will bear a heavy responsibility before world opinion and history.

(2) Today the people of West Berlin are free. In that sense it is already a free city free to determine its own leaders and free to enjoy the fundamental human rights reaffirmed in the United Nations Charter.

(3) Today the continued presence in West Berlin of the United States, the United Kingdom and France is by clear legal right, arising from war, acknowledged in many agreements signed by the Soviet Union, and strongly supported by the overwhelming majority of the people of that city. Their freedom is dependent upon our exercise of these rights an exercise which is thus a political and moral obligation as well as a legal right. Inasmuch as these rights, including the right of access to Berlin, are not held from the Soviet Government,

they cannot be ended by any unilateral action of the Soviet Union. They cannot be affected by a so-called peace treaty, covering only a part of Germany, with a regime of the Soviet Union's own creation—a regime which is not freely representative of all or any part of Germany, and does not enjoy the confidence of the 17 million East Germans. The steady stream of German refugees from East to West is eloquent testimony to that fact.

The United States has been prepared since the close of the war, and is prepared today, to achieve, in agreement with its World War II allies, a freely negotiated peace treaty covering all of Germany and based on the freely expressed will of all of the German people. We have never suggested that, in violation of international law and earlier Four Power agreements, we might legally negotiate a settlement with only a part of Germany, or without the participation of the other principal World War II allies. We know of no sound reason why the Soviet Government should now believe that the rights of the Western Powers, derived from Nazi Germany's surrender, could be invalidated by such an action on the part of the Soviet Union.

The United States has consistently sought the goal of a just and comprehensive peace treaty for all of Germany since first suggesting in 1946 that a special commission be appointed for this purpose. We still recognize the desirability of change—but it should be a change in the direction of greater, not less, freedom of choice for the people of Germany and Berlin. The Western Peace Plan and the All-Berlin solution proposed by the Western Allies at Geneva in 1959 were constructive, practical offers to obtain this kind of fair settlement in Central Europe. Our objective is not to perpetuate our presence in either Germany or Berlin—our objective is the perpetuation of the peace and freedom of their citizens.

But the Soviet Union has blocked all progress toward the conclusion of a just treaty based on the self-determination of the German people, and has instead repeatedly heightened world tensions over this issue. The Soviet Blockade of Berlin in 1948, the Soviet note of November 27th, 1958, and this most recent Soviet aide memoire of June 4, 1961, have greatly disturbed the tranquility of this area.

The real intent of the June 4 aide memoire is that East Berlin, a part of a city under 4-Power status, would be formally absorbed into the so-called German Democratic Republic while West Berlin, even though called a free city, would lose the protection presently provided by the Western Powers and become subject to the will of a totalitarian regime. Its leader, Herr Ulbricht, has made clear his intention, once this so-called peace treaty is signed, to curb West Berlin's communications with the free world and to suffocate the free

dom it now enjoys.

The area thus newly subjected to Soviet threats of heightened tension poses no danger whatsoever to the peace of the world or to the security of any nation. The world knows that there is no reason for a crisis over Berlin today and that, if one develops, it will be caused by the Soviet Government's attempt to invade the rights of others and manufacture tensions. It is, moreover, misusing the words of freedom and peace. For, as our reply states, freedom and peace are not merely words nor can they be achieved by words or promises alone. They are representative of a state of affairs.

A city does not become free merely by calling it a free city. For a city or a people to be free requires that they be given the opportunity, without economic, political or police pressure, to make their own choice and to live their own lives. The people of West Berlin today have that freedom. It is the objective of our policy that they shall continue to have it.

Peace does not come automatically from a peace treaty. There is peace in Germany today even though the situation is abnormal. A peace treaty that adversely affects the lives and rights of millions will not bring peace with it. A peace treaty that attempts to affect adversely the solemn commitments of three great powers will not bring peace with it. We again urge the Soviet Government to reconsider its course, to return to the path of constructive cooperation it so frequently states it desires, and to work with its World War II allies in concluding a just and enduring settlement of issues remaining from that conflict.

<nbsp>NOTE: The text of the U.S. note in reply to the Soviet aide memoire of June 4 was released by the White House on July 18 together with the text of the three-power agreement of 1944 on the zones of occupation in Germany and the administration of Greater Berlin. </nbsp>