Address given by Dwight D. Eisenhower on the status of Berlin (16 March 1959)

Caption: On 16 March 1959, the US President, Dwight D. Eisenhower, delivers an address in which he considers the question of the status of the City of Berlin and deplores Soviet policy on the former German capital.
Source: United States-Department of State. Documents on Germany 1944-1985. Washington: Department of State, [s.d.]. 1421 p. (Department of State Publication 9446). p. 611-615.

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Report by President Eisenhower to the American People on Berlin and Security in the Free World (16 March 1959)

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My Fellow Americans, tonight I want to talk with you about two subjects:

One is about a city that lies four thousand miles away.

It is West Berlin. In a turbulent world it has been, for a decade, a symbol of freedom. But recently its name has come to symbolize, also, the efforts of Imperialistic Communism to divide the free world, to throw us off balance and to weaken our will for making certain of our collective security.

Next, I shall talk to you about the state of our nation's posture of defense and the free world's capacity to meet the challenges that the Soviets incessantly pose to peace and to our own security.

First, West Berlin.

You have heard much about this city recently, and possibly wondered why American troops are in it at all.

How did we get there in the first place? What responsibilities do we have in connection with it and how did we acquire them?

Why has there developed a situation surrounding this city that poses another of the recurring threats to peace that bear the stamp of Soviet manufacture?

Let's begin with a brief review of recent history.

We first acquired rights and responsibilities in West Berlin as a result of World War II. Even before the war ended, when the defeat and capitulation of Nazi Germany were in sight, the Allied Powers, including the Soviet Union, signed agreements defining the areas of occupation in Germany and Berlin which they would assume.

As a result, Germany and the City of Berlin were each divided into four zones, occupied by American, British, French and Soviet troops, respectively.

Under the wartime agreements I have mentioned, the Western Allies entered into occupation of West Berlin and withdrew our Armies from the Soviet Zone. Accordingly, the boundary of the Soviet Zone, like our presence in Berlin, was established upon the basis of these same agreements.

Also by agreement among the occupying powers, the Western Allies — the United States, the United Kingdom, and France — were guaranteed free access to Berlin.

Here in my office is a map of Germany. The light portion of the map is West Germany — the darker portion is East Germany. The lighter gray lanes are the air corridors to Berlin — and the dotted lines show both the main roads and railroads that give us access to the city. Notice that the City of Berlin is one hundred and ten miles inside East Germany; that is, it is one hundred and ten miles from the nearest boundary of West Germany.

Here is the territory, now in East Germany, that was taken by our Army in World War II and was turned over to the Russians by political agreement made before the end of the War.

Now at the end of World War II our announced purpose and that of our wartime associates was the pacification and eventual unification of Germany under freedom.

We jointly agreed to undertake this task. Ever since that time, the United States has continuously recognized the obligations of the Allied Governments under international law to reach a just peace settlement with Germany and not to prolong the occupation of Germany unnecessarily.

The public record demonstrates clearly that such a settlement has been frustrated only by the Soviets. It quickly became evident that Soviet leaders were not interested in a free unified Germany, and were determined to induce or force the Western Powers to leave Berlin.

Ten years ago, Senator John Foster Dulles, now our great Secretary of State, described the basic purpose of the Soviet government. He said that purpose was, and now I am quoting: “no less than world domination, to be achieved by gaining political power successively in each of the many areas which had been afflicted by war, so that in the end the United States, which was openly called the main enemy, would be isolated and closely encircled.” That is the completion of the quotation.

The current Berlin effort of the Soviets falls within the pattern of basic purpose.

The first instance of unusual pressure, clearly evidencing these purposes, came in 1948 when the Communists imposed a blockade to force the protecting Western troops out of Berlin and to starve the people of that City into submission.

That plan failed. A free people and a dramatic airlift broke the back of the scheme.

In the end the Communists abandoned the blockade and concluded an agreement in 1949 with the Western Powers, reconfirming our right of unrestricted access to the city.

Then, last November, the Soviets announced that they intended to repudiate these solemn obligations. They once more appear to be living by the Communist formula that “Promises are like pie crusts, made to be broken.”

The Soviet Government has also announced its intention to enter into a peace treaty with the East German puppet regime. The making of this treaty, the Soviets assert, will deny our occupation rights and our rights of access. It is, of course, clear that no so-called “peace treaty” between the Soviets and the East German regime can have any moral or legal effect upon our rights.

The Soviet threat has since been repeated several times, accompanied by various and changing suggestions for dealing with the status of the city. Their proposals have included a vague offer to make the Western part of Berlin — though not the Eastern part, which the Soviets control — a so-called “free city.”

It is by no means clear what West Berlin would be free from, except perhaps from freedom itself. It would not be free from the ever present danger of Communist domination. No one, certainly not the two million West Berliners, can ignore the cold fact that Berlin is surrounded by many divisions of Soviet and Eastern German troops and by territory governed by authorities dedicated to eliminating freedom from the area.

Now a matter of principle — the United States cannot accept the asserted right of any government to break, by itself, solemn agreements to which we, with others, are parties. But in the Berlin situation, both free people and principle are at stake.

What, then, are the fundamental choices we have in this situation?

First, of course, there is the choice which the Soviet rulers themselves would like us to make. They hope that we can be frightened into abdicating our rights — which are indeed responsibilities — to help establish a just and peaceful solution to the German problem — rights which American and Allied soldiers purchased with their lives.

We have no intention of forgetting our rights or of deserting a free people. Soviet rulers should remember

that free men have, before this, died for so-called “scraps of paper” which represented duty and honor and freedom.

The shirking of our responsibilities would solve no problems for us. First, it would mean the end of all hopes for a Germany under a government of German choosing. It would raise among our friends the most serious doubts about the validity of all the international agreements and commitments we have made with them in every quarter of the globe. One result would be to undermine the mutual confidence upon which our entire system of collective security is founded.

This, the Soviets would greet as a great victory over the West.

Obviously, this choice is unacceptable to us.

The second choice which the Soviets have compelled us to face, is the possibility of war.

Certainly, the American and Western peoples do not want war. The whole world knows this. Global conflict under modern conditions could mean the destruction of civilization. The Soviet rulers, themselves, are well aware of this fact.

But all history has taught us the grim lesson that no nation has ever been successful in avoiding the terrors of war by refusing to defend its rights — by attempting to placate aggression.

Whatever risk of armed conflict may be inherent in the present Berlin situation, it was deliberately created by the Soviet rulers.

Moreover, the justice of our position is attested by the fact that it is ardently supported with virtual unanimity by the people of West Berlin.

The risk of war is minimized if we stand firm. War would become more likely if we gave way and encouraged a rule of terrorism rather than a rule of law and order. Indeed, this is the core of the peace policy which we are striving to carry out around the world. In that policy is found the world’s best hope for peace.

Now our final choice is negotiation, even while we continue to provide for our security against every threat. We are seeking meaningful negotiation at this moment. The United States and its allies stand ready to talk with Soviet representatives at any time and under any circumstances which offer prospects of worth-while results.

We have no selfish material aims in view. We seek no domination over others — only a just peace for the world and particularly, in this instance, for the people most involved.

We are ready to consider all proposals which may help to reassure and will take into account the European peoples most concerned.

We are willing to listen to new ideas and are prepared to present others. We will do everything within our power to bring about serious negotiations and to make these negotiations meaningful.

Let us remind ourselves once again of what we cannot do.

We cannot try to purchase peace by forsaking two million free people of Berlin.

We cannot agree to any permanent and compulsory division of the German nation, which would leave Central Europe a perpetual powder mill, even though we are ready to discuss with all affected nations any reasonable methods for its eventual unification.

We cannot recognize the asserted right of any nation to dishonor its international agreements whenever it

chooses. If we should accept such a contention the whole process of negotiations would become a barren mockery.

We must not, by weakness or irresolution, increase the risk of war.

Finally, we cannot, merely for the sake of demonstrating so-called “flexibility” accept any agreement or arrangement which would undermine the security of the United States and its Allies.

The Soviet note of March 2nd appears to be a move toward negotiation on an improved basis. We would never negotiate under a dictated time limit or agenda, or on other unreasonable terms. We are, with our Allies, however, in view of the changed tone of the Soviet note, concerting a reply to that note.

It is my hope that thereby all of us can reach agreement with the Soviets on an early meeting at the level of Foreign Ministers.

Assuming developments that justify a summer meeting at the Summit, the United States would be ready to participate in that further effort.

Our position, then, is this: We will not retreat one inch from our duty. We shall continue to exercise our right of peaceful passage to and from West Berlin. We will not be the first to breach the peace; it is the Soviets who threaten the use of force to interfere with such free passage. We are ready to participate fully in every sincere effort at negotiation that will respect the existing rights of all and their opportunity to live in peace.

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