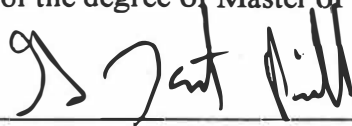


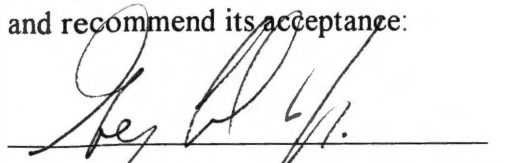
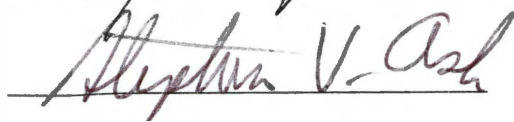
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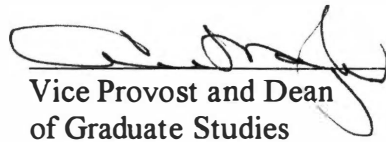


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Crazy Like a Fox:
Historians' Perceptions of
General Lucius D. Clay in the 1961 Berlin Crisis

A Thesis Presented for the Master of Arts Degree
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Abstract

This essay examines how historians have perceived the role of Gen. Lucius Clay in the 1961 Berlin Crisis. It analyzes fourteen secondary sources to determine how they portray General Clay and why they present him as they do. It begins by briefly recounting the events leading up to the Berlin Crisis and the primary incidents during 1961. As much as possible, this version has been completed using the documentary evidence. Once the facts have been relayed, the essay delves into the content analysis of these fourteen sources. Finally, the essay argues that the historians who portray Clay in a more reckless light present a more valid view than those who assert that his actions were justified and that though action may have been necessary, the steps General Clay took were dangerously provocative.

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List of Abbreviations

CFM	Council of Foreign Ministers
EAC	European Advisory Committee
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany)
FRUS	Foreign Relations of the United States (publication)
GDR	German Democratic Republic (East Germany)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
U.S.	United States
U.S.S.R.	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
<u>Vopos</u>	<u>Volkspolizei</u> (People's Police)

Chapter One – Introduction

“One of the most dangerous confrontations of the Cold War occurred in late October 1961 when, for the first and only time, U.S. and Soviet tanks squared off against each other The world came closer than ever to a nuclear-age equivalent of the Wild West showdown at the OK Corral.”¹ This is how Raymond Garthoff describes the Checkpoint Charlie incident. He believes the incident and, specifically, the actions taken by Gen. Lucius Clay brought the United States and the Soviet Union to the brink of war, and a number of Cold War historians share this view. Not all scholars portray General Clay’s efforts during the Checkpoint Charlie incident and its related events in the Berlin Crisis as Garthoff does. Some historians portray Clay as the hero. This essay will explore these varying interpretations of General Clay and the 1961 Berlin Crisis to determine why these historians developed their views of Clay as they did and discern which portrayal of Clay is more valid.

As World War II began drawing to a close in 1944, the soon-to-be victorious Allied Powers – the Soviet Union, the United States, and Great Britain – outlined military occupation plans for Germany. They divided Germany into four zones: the Soviet Union would control the eastern section, and the western portion would consist of three zones, the U.S., Great Britain, and France each controlling one of the zones. Berlin, which lay

¹ Raymond Garthoff, “Berlin 1961: The Record Corrected,” Foreign Policy (Fall 1991), 142.

deep in the Soviet sector, would also be apportioned in this manner. The Allies intended this division to be temporary, but it would remain Germany's reality for decades.²

In the years following World War II, ideological and economic differences between the Western Allies and the Communist Soviet Union gave birth to the Cold War. The Allies disagreed on reparation agreements and unification terms for Germany, and both the Soviets and the West feared a unified Germany under the control of the other power. The Western Allies began to consolidate their zones and integrate western Germany into Western Europe. In 1948 the Soviets cut off traffic between western Germany and western Berlin, which forced the Americans, led by Gen. Lucius Clay, and their allies to airlift supplies to the stranded Berliners. The next year east and west Germany created their own governments, becoming the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) respectively. Both states gained more sovereignty from their assigned occupied powers over the next few years.³

By 1958 nearly four million East Germans had fled to the West since the end of the war. Most of these were young, skilled workers, which led to a severe decline in production and other economic problems for the east. Many of the refugees traveled

² U.S. Department of State, Documents on Germany, 1944-1985, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1985), 1-3, 6-11.

³ Ibid., 117-23, 135-39, 221, 257, 306-09. For further discussion of the European context of the Cold War, see Lynn Etheridge Davis, The Cold War Begins: Soviet-American Conflict over Eastern Europe, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974); John Lewis Gaddis, Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); Melvyn Leffler, A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992); Carolyn Eisenberg, Drawing the Line: The American Decision to Divide Germany, 1944-49, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Frank Mayer, Adenauer and Kennedy: A Study in German-American Relations, 1961-63, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996).

through Berlin, and Walter Ulbricht, head of the Communist Party in East Germany, began to pressure Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev for permission to close the border. Khrushchev refused and instead issued a deadline to the Western powers: sign a peace treaty with both German states and end all occupation of Berlin in six months. If they refused to comply, the Soviet Union would transfer all its authority in Berlin to the GDR. If the Western allies refused to acknowledge the GDR's sovereignty in Berlin, the Soviet Union would be forced to defend the GDR's rights – militarily if necessary.⁴

Khrushchev eased his pressure on the West after making a personal connection with President Dwight Eisenhower at Camp David in September 1959. He then renewed the deadline after unproductive talks with President John Kennedy at the Vienna Conference in June 1961. Meanwhile, terrified East Germans continued to flee to West Germany through Berlin in search of better living conditions. That month alone 20,000 people left, and in July 30,000 more fled.⁵

In August 1961 the East German Communists erected the Berlin Wall to stop the flow of refugees fleeing to the West by way of Berlin. The people of West Germany and West Berlin became greatly distressed, and their morale plummeted. They expected the Americans, who still occupied Berlin, to prevent the Communists from taking such measures. To reassure the Germans and prove that the United States had not forgotten them, President John Kennedy sent Vice President Lyndon Johnson and Gen. Lucius

⁴ Honore Catudal, Kennedy and the Berlin Wall Crisis: A Case Study in U.S. Decision Making, (Berlin: Berlin-Verlag, 1980), 48; Documents on Germany, 1944-1985, 542-46.

⁵ Documents on Germany, 1944-1985, 676-83, 684-85; U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States, The Berlin Crisis, 1961-1963, (Washington, D.C., 1994), (hereafter cited as FRUS), 95, 97-98; Catudal, Kennedy and the Berlin Wall Crisis, 184-85.

Clay to Berlin. General Clay was a hero to the West Berliners because he oversaw the 1948-49 Berlin airlift, which supplied West Berlin with food and coal during the Soviet-imposed blockade.⁶

Clay's initial trip to Berlin at the end of August was a great success. He and Johnson restored some of the Berliners' confidence in American commitment. To preserve and, if possible, increase this morale, Kennedy sent Clay back to Berlin as his special representative. Clay returned to Berlin once again as a symbol of American commitment, to demonstrate American resolve and determination to protect the freedom of West Berlin.⁷

As General Clay's first step in cementing Berlin morale, he ordered U.S. forces to patrol the autobahn, which ran across East Germany from West Berlin to West Germany. Earlier that month the East German police began harassing U.S. and other allied personnel traveling on that road. The Soviets protested Clay's action and blocked the patrols. Clay responded by sending a convoy of military vehicles to replace the patrols, and the East Germans soon ended the harassment.⁸

Clay's next step to boost West Berlin's morale concerned the village of Steinstucken. Although a small strip of East German territory separated them, Steinstucken was part of

⁶ Documents on Germany 1944-1985, 752, 763, 773-77; Howard Trivers, Three Crises in American Foreign Affairs and a Continuing Revolution, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 31; Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate, Documents on Germany, 1944-1961, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1961), 781; FRUS, The Berlin Crisis, 1961-1963, 333. For further discussion of the reaction and appreciation of the Berliners for the United States, see Thomas Parrish, Berlin in the Balance, 1945-1949, (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1998), 210, 255-58, 299-300.

⁷ Documents on Germany 1944-1985, 752, 763.

⁸ Jean Edward Smith, Lucius D. Clay: An American Life, (New York, 1990), 655.

West Berlin. East German police's harassment of the villagers only intensified after the wall's construction. Clay ordered two companies of troops to enter the village to protect it from the East Germans. Gen. Bruce Clarke, commander of U.S. forces in Europe, discovered Clay's scheme and aborted the mission. Undeterred, Clay flew by helicopter to the village and rescued some East Berlin refugees who fled to Steinstucken after the border closed. Some of the East German Volkspolizei (Vopos or People's Police) turned their guns on the helicopter but fired no shots.⁹

The most potentially dangerous situation General Clay faced in Berlin came with the tank standoff between American and Soviet forces at the Friedrichstrasse crossing or Checkpoint Charlie. On Sunday October 22, the East German Vopos refused to allow Allan Lightner, head of the U.S. mission in Berlin, to travel into East Berlin without presenting identification, even though his vehicle carried a U.S. occupation license plate, which had previously served as identification enough. When informed of the situation, Clay ordered four U.S. M-48 tanks to the border crossing and a military escort for Lightner's car. When attempting to cross with his military escort, Lightner proceeded unimpeded. After a discussion between the American and Soviet political advisers, in which Soviet Major Lazerev apologized and assured the American political adviser Howard Trivers, who was in charge of the Eastern Affairs Section in the U.S. Mission in Berlin, that the Vopos had failed to clear their actions with the Soviets, Lightner crossed the border once more – this time without need of a military attendants.¹⁰

⁹ Norman Gelb, The Berlin Wall: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and a Showdown in the Heart of Europe, (New York: Random House, Inc., 1986), 248-49.

¹⁰ FRUS, The Berlin Crisis, 1961-1963, 524.

The scene repeated on October 25 when General Clay attempted to send another allied vehicle across the border. The morning after the first incident, the East German government issued a decree, stating that all allied personnel not wearing a uniform would have to present identification. This time the Soviets asserted that the East Germans did nothing wrong in this action and that the U.S. would have to comply. When the Vopos stopped the American vehicle, Clay sent ten tanks and more armed guards to the crossing. Accompanied by military personnel, the vehicle encountered no opposition.¹¹

Soviet and American representatives met once again but failed to reach an agreement. On Friday the Soviets brought ten tanks of their own to the crossing in response to another of Clay's probes, which Clay took as a sign that the Soviets were in charge of the situation on the eastern side and would not let the East Germans provoke a bigger crisis. Clay ordered the ten remaining U.S. tanks in Berlin to the checkpoint, and the Soviets matched them exactly. The next morning the Soviet tanks began to withdraw, and Clay soon followed suit, believing he had successfully demonstrated U.S. and allied commitment to Berlin.¹²

With these three incidents – the autobahn patrols, Steinstucken, and Checkpoint Charlie – General Clay took actions that some of his contemporaries and later historians labeled as reckless and very dangerous. Clay, however, believed that those steps were necessary and that the United States needed an immediate response of force to prevent a larger risk of war. He feared the Soviets might push the United States into war unless the

¹¹ Gelb, The Berlin Wall, 252; Catudal, Kennedy and the Berlin Wall Crisis, 139-45, 165; FRUS, The Berlin Crisis, 1961-1963, 537.

¹² FRUS, The Berlin Crisis, 1961-1963, 537-39; Smith, Lucius D. Clay, 661.

U.S. forces made it “clearly evident” that they had “reached the danger point.” He also had another motive for wanting quick U.S. action. “The reason I took these actions was to restore Berlin morale,” Clay later stated. “Not that I expected these actions in themselves to achieve any miracles. But I wanted the people of Berlin to know that we weren’t afraid, that we were willing to prove that we were not afraid by taking these actions.”¹³

Clay believed it was vital to American Cold War interests for the people of West Germany and, especially, West Berlin to believe in American commitment. The United States had promised to protect the freedom of the democratic West Berlin, which sat squarely in the heart of Communist East Germany. This was indeed a promise the United States needed to keep in order to preserve confidence in democracy throughout the world. How to keep that promise – where, when, and in what manner to defend West Berliners and allied rights – is where Washington officials and those in Berlin, including General Clay, differed in their views.

This essay will argue that General Clay was reckless in his attempts to protect West Berliners and preserve Western rights. In his efforts to demonstrate U.S. military strength and its courage to stand up to the Soviets, General Clay went beyond the role assigned to him by Kennedy. With the Checkpoint Charlie incident in particular, he chose a fight that Kennedy and his administration never wanted. They had little concern for Western access to East Berlin. Clay also provoked dangerous conflicts over these issues he believed to be so important with the measures he took to demonstrate U.S.

¹³ FRUS, The Berlin Crisis, 1961-1963, 511; Smith, Lucius D. Clay, 656.

commitment and strength. The manner in which Clay wanted to prove his point often pushed the situation closer to war than was really necessary for a successful resolution.

The historians in this study differ in their views of whether General Clay was right or reckless during the Berlin Crisis. Some of these opinions are based on their personal experiences. A number of the historians were involved in the Berlin Crisis. John Ausland, who wrote Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Berlin-Cuba Crisis, 1961-1964 (1996), served on the Berlin Task Force during the Kennedy administration. His discussion of General Clay and the events comes mainly from his own recollections. The same is true for Theodore Sorensen in Kennedy (1965). He draws from his experience as “special counsel” to President John Kennedy. Howard Trivers actively participated in the Checkpoint Charlie incident, negotiating with his Soviet counterpart. He recounts these exchanges and other details in Three Crises in American Foreign Affairs and a Continuing Revolution (1972). Geoffrey McDermott played a role similar to that of Trivers. In Berlin: Success of a Mission? (1963), McDermott discusses his experience as the British Minister in Berlin.

Two other authors also participated in government during the Berlin Crisis. William Smyser served as an assistant to Clay in Berlin. He, however, does not rely merely on his memories. He thoroughly researches documents, including recently released Soviet and East German sources, and conducts interviews for From Yalta to Berlin: The Cold War Struggle Over Germany (1999). Raymond Garthoff served in the State Department in 1961, but the crucial sources for his 1991 article, “Berlin 1961: The Record Corrected,” were interviews conducted by a Russian television station of former Soviet officials.

Because these authors were involved with the Berlin Crisis, they may have a perspective different from scholars and observers who were not involved. They may have had an agenda in writing their accounts, a point they wanted to prove. This, however, could be said of even the most highly trained historian. While it is important to recognize the possibility of biases in these interpretations, that does not discount the story they have to tell, nor does it make them any less valuable for this study.

Four other works in this study that have the potential for being biased are biographies. Sorensen would also fit into this category with his examination of Kennedy's presidency. Richard Reeves also recounts Kennedy's term in President Kennedy: Profile of Power (1993). John Gearson provides a non-American look at the crisis with his work on the British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, Harold Macmillan and the Berlin Wall Crisis, 1958-1962: The Limits of Interests and Force (1998). As expected in a study of one man's role in a specific crisis, one of the authors provides a biography of General Clay. Jean Smith profiles General Clay in Lucius D. Clay: An American Life (1990).

The remaining works in this study are strictly historical accounts. Michael Beschloss discusses Kennedy's relationship with Khrushchev in The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960-1963 (1991). Peter Wyden focuses on the Berlin Crisis in Wall: The Inside Story of Divided Berlin (1989). Norman Gelb does this as well in The Berlin Wall: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and a Showdown in the Heart of Europe (1986). Before he wrote a biography of Clay, Smith published The Defense of Berlin (1963). Eleanor Lansing Dulles examines American policy before and after the Berlin Wall in The Wall: A Tragedy in Three Acts (1972). Curtis Cate wrote The Ides of August: The Berlin Wall Crisis, 1961 (1978).

These fourteen accounts of General Clay and the 1961 Berlin Crisis are analyzed in this study. The first chapter is a content analysis of these fourteen works, examining what these historians say about Clay and the individual incidents, how they say it, and why. The final chapter argues that the negative portrayal of Clay is more valid than the positive portrayal because General Clay pushed the bounds of his prescribed role in Berlin and risked dangerous confrontations to prove his points about Western occupation rights in Berlin in 1961.

Chapter Two – The Interpretations: How Historians Perceived Those Events

When it comes to Gen. Lucius Clay's involvement in the 1961 Berlin Crisis, historians disagree on how positive a role he played. Some scholars portray Clay in a very negative light. They argue that he caused more problems than he solved and risked war with the Soviet Union over minor issues. Other historians draw the opposite conclusion. They believe Clay made the right decisions when the Soviets and GDR created conflict. They assert that the stands Clay took in Berlin were of the utmost significance – indeed the entire Cold War may have hinged on the outcome of these vital events. This chapter explores these differing interpretations in order to determine why historians have portrayed General Clay as they have.

Historians with a negative opinion of Clay discuss the complications caused by his presence in Berlin. John Ausland, who served on the Berlin Task Force during the Kennedy administration, asserts in Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Berlin-Cuba Crisis 1961-1964 that Clay made the situation in Berlin “more difficult.” Although Ausland recognized the need for a symbol such as Clay to demonstrate U.S. commitment and understood Kennedy's position, he argues that Kennedy sending Clay as his “personal representative” confused matters of responsibility and superiority. The command structure was already complex enough. Ausland describes it, stating:

The senior American in Berlin was Major General Albert Watson, the commandant. Watson reported in his political capacity to Ambassador Walter Dowling in Bonn and in his military capacity to General Bruce Clarke, commander of the United States army in Europe, with headquarters in Heidelberg. Clarke, in turn, reported to General Lauris Norstad, United States commander in chief in Europe and supreme allied commander for Europe. The United States, United Kingdom, and France had also given Norstad special responsibilities regarding contingencies that might arise

regarding Berlin. That accounted for only the military side of the house. There was also a State Department Mission in Berlin, which was headed by Allan Lightner. Technically, Lightner reported both to General Watson and to Ambassador Dowling in Bonn. In addition, however, he communicated directly with the State Department.¹⁴

In addition to confounding the process of giving and receiving orders, Clay's arrival soon brought confusion over policy. Ausland argues that Clay's approach to the Soviets and the Berlin Crisis differed from his commander-in-chief. "Clay believed in action backed by power, and Kennedy believed in a dialogue backed by power," Ausland states. Clay remained convinced that the United States needed to be strong in its actions because the Soviets would understand and respect – or, better yet, fear – that type of behavior. Kennedy still worried about war by miscalculation and escalation. Clay also felt that Americans in Berlin had little need of coordinating their policies and actions with their allies. According to Ausland, Clay "maintained that, if the United States led, the allies would follow." In Ausland's account, Clay is more of a headache than a real danger.¹⁵

In Kennedy, Theodore Sorensen recounts the presidency of John F. Kennedy from his experience as "special counsel" to the president. He asserts that General Clay's actions only worsened the tension over the Berlin Crisis. Sorensen presents Clay as seen by many of his contemporaries in Washington – mainly, difficult.¹⁶

Sorensen goes a bit further than Ausland who maintained that Clay "complicated" matters in Berlin. Sorensen asserts that Clay was "a constant spur to Allied effort" and

¹⁴ John Ausland, Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Berlin-Cuba Crisis 1961-1964, (Boston: Scandinavian University Press, 1996), 36.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

¹⁶ Theodore Sorensen, Kennedy, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1965), 595.

“something of an alarmist in his private cables.” He states that Clay sent Kennedy telegrams in which he hinted that “he might resign unless his requests were granted.” He also argues that Kennedy grew frustrated “with Clay’s failure to distinguish our ‘vital rights’ in West Berlin from our grievances in East Berlin.” Sorensen admits, however, that Kennedy appreciated the difficult position in which he had placed Clay, especially considering the general was a Republican. Kennedy also “fully understood the General’s tendency at times to act without waiting for unanimity in his instructions from Washington, General Norstad and Allied representations in Berlin.” In Sorensen’s account, Clay’s tendency to be a problem outweighed his value as a “beloved symbol.”¹⁷

Like Sorensen, Michael Beschloss mentions in The Crisis Years that Clay threatened to resign a number of times. He also discusses National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy’s feelings about Clay, how Bundy found Clay “difficult.” Beschless asserts that because Clay could be so difficult to handle, Kennedy consented to Clay’s plan during the Checkpoint Charlie incident only because he felt “reluctant to provoke the General.”¹⁸

Peter Wyden also expresses in Wall the opinions of White House staffers who, he argues, “feared the general’s aggressive ways.” Wyden pays special attention to the concerns of “the steely Mac Bundy,” who warned Kennedy that he should try to avoid another conflict like the one between President Harry Truman and Gen. Douglas MacArthur. Clay also had to contend with the other American generals in Europe.

¹⁷ Sorensen, Kennedy, 595.

¹⁸ Michael Beschloss, The Crisis Years: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960-1963, (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 333.

Wyden asserts that the generals viewed Clay as a “cocky hybrid.” They no longer saw him as one of their own. He had adopted civilian ways.¹⁹

Wyden’s source for the American generals’ opinions of Clay appear to have come from his own communication with General Clarke. If this is the case, then Wyden accepts Clarke as speaking for all the American generals in Europe without providing any other evidence that they all shared Clarke’s assessment of Clay and the situation. Just a few paragraphs later, Wyden argues that “the fiercest resistance against [Clay’s] private agenda came from his erstwhile cronies in the United States military establishment.” He then discusses General Clarke countermanding Clay’s orders for a “practice wall” and troops marching into Steinstucken, but he offers no other examples of these “cronies” opposing Clay. The only other general mentioned is Watson, to whom Clay gave his orders, but Wyden provides no evidence that Watson disagreed with Clay’s measures.²⁰

Not only does Wyden portray Clay as “difficult,” but he also presents Clay as a lone cowboy-like figure with his own agenda. He argues that Kennedy sent Clay to Berlin to boost morale and that Clay deviated from that order in favor of his own wishes. “Clay decided that his prime mission was to slap down the Soviets,” Wyden states.²¹

¹⁹ Peter Wyden, Wall: The Inside Story of Divided Berlin, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 264.

²⁰ Wyden, Wall, 264-65, 698. Wyden’s notes on his sources do not clearly show what information came from which source. He does not use endnotes or footnotes but lists the page numbers and the last two words of a paragraph, making it difficult to determine the corresponding sources for the information other than direct quotations. This could be due to the fact that Wyden’s work appears to have been written for a more general audience rather than very scholarly examination.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 265.

Wyden provides no clear source on how he determined what Clay really thought about his mission. It appears as though Wyden may have developed his opinion from his communication with General Clarke and his interpretation of other secondary sources he cites, those works by Norman Gelb and Honore Catudal discussed later in this essay. Wyden does not, however, cite Clay's papers or any conversation or interview with the general on what Clay believed. Wyden presents his opinion of Clay's motivation as fact without providing any real evidence to substantiate his claim that he understood the workings of General Clay's mind.²²

Richard Reeves shares Wyden's view that Clay had his own agenda in Berlin. According to Reeves, Clay's efforts to force the Soviets to respect Western rights made many officials in Washington nervous. They worried Kennedy made a grave mistake by sending Clay to such a precarious situation in Berlin. Reeves argues that "some thought Kennedy had unwillingly and unwittingly put the question of war and peace into the hands of a man he barely knew. Clay was taking hard-line chances with the peace of the world, willing to risk most anything to crush the Soviets."²³

Norman Gelb makes this point as well, stating that Clay was a "wild card." He argues that Clay went to Berlin with a mistaken idea of his purpose. Kennedy intended his return to be more of a symbolic gesture, but Clay believed Kennedy sent him abroad to whip the Berlin mission into shape. Gelb quotes ambassadors, members of the State

²² Wyden, Wall, 698.

²³ Richard Reeves, President Kennedy: Profile of Power, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 250-51.

Department, and other Washington officials who worried that Clay would worsen an already tense situation with the Soviets, a situation Washington had been trying to ease.²⁴

Gelb asserts that Clay overstepped his bounds in Berlin and caused potentially deadly problems for Washington and the Berlin mission. In Gelb's view, the issues with which Clay concerned himself mattered only to Clay. Clay's presence in Berlin only worsened matters and made the situation even more dangerous. Gelb argues that "the White House and the State Department had been trying to fix on a way to signal Moscow that the United States, while standing firm, wanted to tone down the level tension in Berlin. . . . Yet here was Clay stirring things up."²⁵

British historian John Gearson argues in Harold Macmillan and the Berlin Wall Crisis, 1958-1962 that Clay only worsened the tension of the Berlin Crisis. He states that Clay "could be abrasive" and that Macmillan strongly disliked the general. He quotes Macmillan who stated: "He seems to me a public danger. He was always an ass: now he is an embittered ass." Macmillan wanted to ask Kennedy to recall Clay, but his advisors suggested a less direct approach. Macmillan "expressed British concerns about Clay to the new U.S. ambassador in London, David Bruce . . . to no avail . . . and the retired general remained in Berlin and periodically irritated the British and French in the city."²⁶

Historians who view Clay in a more positive light see Clay's actions as necessary. Clay was not the problem, they argue, rather the fault lay with Washington. In one of the

²⁴ Norman Gelb, The Berlin Wall: Kennedy, Khrushchev, and a Showdown in the Heart of Europe, (New York: Random House, Inc., 1986), 246-47.

²⁵ Gelb, The Berlin Wall, 250.

²⁶ John Gearson, Harold Macmillan and the Berlin Wall Crisis, 1958-1962: The Limits of Interests and Force, (London: Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1998), 193.

first published historical accounts of the October incident, The Defense of Berlin, Jean Edward Smith's argues that Clay had to take control of the Berlin situation because Washington was indecisive. He asserts that the further an official was from Berlin, whether in Washington or London, the more anxious that person became; those people who were in Berlin and witnessed events firsthand remained calm.²⁷

Smith argues that Clay firmly believed the United States needed to assert itself in the face of a Communist threat, just as he had concluded in 1948 during the Berlin Blockade. He remained convinced that the only way to save allied prestige was to force the Communists to back down. He felt assured that the Soviets and the rest of the world would interpret the United States's refusal to meet the challenge as surrender.²⁸

Smith blames Washington for the Communist attempts to infringe upon allied rights. Even prior to the building of the wall, the East Germans tried to push the West out of Berlin, and they succeeded in increments and probably would have accomplished their goal. Fortunately (in Smith's eyes) for the West, Kennedy sent General Clay to Berlin, and he prevented the Communists from destroying the city's four-power status. Smith chastises Washington for its "timidity" and failure to recognize the necessity of Clay's decisions. He states that Washington was "extremely jittery" and that even Pentagon officials participated in "anguished hand-wringing." Smith argues that only Clay's determination prevented the United States from giving in to East German demand.²⁹

²⁷ Jean Edward Smith, The Defense of Berlin, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1963).

²⁸ Smith, The Defense of Berlin, 321.

²⁹ Ibid., 322-24.

Eleanor Lansing Dulles argues in The Wall: A Tragedy in Three Acts (1972) that the United States mishandled events of the Berlin Crisis after the construction of the Berlin Wall. She maintains that it damaged the United States's image in Europe. Dulles argues that America's "slow, hesitant" reaction to the Berlin Wall greatly hurt American credibility and West German and Berlin morale. For the first time since 1948, the West ceded a piece of territory, East Berlin, to the Communists. She states the exact moment of this cessation remains questionable. It could be July 25 when Kennedy announced that the United States would protect only West Berlin or August 13 when the West allowed the wall to remain standing. In any case, according to Dulles, the Communists learned from these incidents. They realized there was room to maneuver on the Berlin issue. If they took the initiative and made a bold move, there was a good chance the U.S. might acquiesce as they had on August 13. After the West in effect gave the GDR the right to put up the wall and manage the affairs of East Berlin, East German authorities soon began testing and probing "to see how far they could push their new found authority." In Dulles's view, General Clay managed to salvage some of that prestige.³⁰

Howard Trivers asserts in Three Crises in American Foreign Affairs and a Continuing Revolution that the Soviets provoked many of the crises of the Kennedy years because of their low estimation of Kennedy and his administration in light of the Bay of Pigs fiasco and Kennedy's poor performance at Vienna. Clay's efforts convinced the Soviets to back off from confrontations in Berlin. Trivers argues that officials in Washington made the U.S. mission in Berlin much more difficult than it should have been. He felt Washington

³⁰ Eleanor Lansing Dulles, The Wall: A Tragedy in Three Acts, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1972), 83.

took too long in responding to the Berlin Wall and their reaction was too weak. The Berlin Mission urged “deterrent countermeasures,” but the administration ignored their recommendations. Trivers does not enumerate any examples of these countermeasures. He discusses the “tit-for-tat” diplomacy and how “deterrent countermeasures” would go a step beyond that “to deter the Communists from taking further actions which might lead to a dangerous confrontation.” Then he asserts that no action was taken because many government officials believed the wall would ease the situation. He states, “It was exceedingly difficult to make the Kennedy administration see beyond its abstract preconceptions and come to understand the actual situation in West Berlin.”³¹

In his biography of Clay, Lucius D. Clay: An American Life, Jean Smith asserts that the Berlin situation was very precarious. “An immediate show of force was required to restore confidence in American leadership,” Smith contends. “The entire Western position in Germany – the fruits of 15 years of hard work against bitter odds – threatened to come unraveled.” Smith believes that Clay was the only man who could accomplish this task. Smith demonstrates this idea when discussing Clay’s trip to Berlin with Vice President Johnson. Smith states: “Clay stood in the background. Then the Berliners caught sight of him, and the cheering became even greater. Ordinary citizens looked at one another and nodded knowingly. General Clay would not be here, they seemed to say, unless everything was going to be all right.”³²

³¹ Howard Trivers, Three Crises in American Foreign Affairs and a Continuing Revolution, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972), 39, 31.

³² Jean Edward Smith, Lucius D. Clay: An American Life, (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1990), 642, 645.

Smith contends that officials in Washington made Clay's job very difficult. He quotes Clay who asserted that he tried to go through the regular chain of command in the State Department, but they kept referring him to the president. Clay stated: "I always tried to go through [Secretary of State Dean] Rusk. And Rusk almost invariably would say, 'Well, I agree with you, but you call the President and tell him' Whenever something serious occurred, no one wanted to make a decision. They all wanted me to talk to the President." Smith implies that these Washington officials were too timid to make a decision without considering that their reluctance might be due to the ambiguous nature of Clay's appointment. He was the president's "special representative." Kennedy never outlined where Clay fell in the diplomatic or military chain of command. Perhaps these officials simply were not sure he needed to clear his decisions with them before speaking with the president.³³

Also, according to Attorney General Robert Kennedy, after the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion in April 1961, President Kennedy was much less willing to trust other people's opinions. "What ultimately came out of this," Robert Kennedy said, "was that [President Kennedy] never substituted anybody else's judgment for his own. The second think is that, whenever a problem or question came up, he went into the facts minutely."³⁴

Smith never really offers any possible explanations for Washington's behavior. Instead he discusses how it presented a problem for Clay because he worried Kennedy would become aggravated. Clay states: "It's fine to say that you have the right [to talk

³³ Smith, Lucius D. Clay, 654.

³⁴ Edwin Guthman and Jeffrey Shulman, Robert Kennedy: In His Own Words, (New York: Bantam Books), 1988, 247.

directly to the president]. But you don't utilize the right, or you soon would outwear your welcome. It had to be a pretty serious matter before I called the President."³⁵

The president, according to Smith, viewed Clay differently than many members in the State and Defense Departments. They worried Clay would complicate matters in Berlin and worsen the already tense situation. Smith stresses that Kennedy, on the other hand, had every confidence in Clay. They had an understanding. "Kennedy admired Clay's advocacy and decisiveness: his ability to move swiftly through bureaucratic resistance," Smith asserts. "Clay appreciated the President's willingness to take responsibility and make tough decisions." It is unclear how Smith knows what Kennedy thought of Clay. He provides no citations of statements or interviews from Kennedy or anyone close to him. It may be based upon how Clay believed Kennedy felt about him.³⁶

William R. Smyser presents a similarly positive view of Clay in From Yalta to Berlin: The Cold War Struggle over Germany. He asserts that Clay realized the wall was just one more pressure point in the Berlin Crisis, but many in Washington believed the wall ended the crisis. Clay believed the Communists would continue to move against allied rights and that the U.S. must stop them. In Smyser's view, Clay correctly surmised that the Soviets worried about escalation as much as, or more than, the United States. This concern prevented any danger of war over a confrontation in Berlin. This realization separated Clay and the Washington officials. Smyser suggests that Clay understood the Soviets much better than the State or Defense Departments did.³⁷

³⁵ Smith, Lucius D. Clay, 654.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 642.

³⁷ William R. Smyser, From Yalta to Berlin: The Cold War Struggle over Germany, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

Smyser asserts that Clay's experience with the Soviets after World War II prepared him for a return in 1961. He had a unique perspective and understood how the Soviets and Germans viewed American actions, especially their responses to Communist provocation. In Smyser's telling, Clay recognized the damage to West Berlin morale that resulted from the United States standing by and doing nothing while East German police shot desperate refugees trying to flee. Smyser agrees with Clay that if this continued much longer, the West Berliners would "begin to recognize who was in charge."³⁸

Smyser argues that Clay understood Khrushchev and the Soviets better than did Kennedy's advisers and, therefore, knew the proper way to deal with them. Clay remained confident that Khrushchev wanted a war even less than Kennedy did and would do everything in his power to prevent causing one. Clay decided that in order for the United States to make Khrushchev fear escalation, it must become unpredictable. The United States needed to act more forcefully than merely sending protest notes. Smyser accepts Clay's interpretation, stating that Clay realized that "if Khrushchev believed that he and Ulbricht could control the temperature of the Berlin Crisis, he would keep it bubbling. But if Khrushchev feared it boiling over, he would turn off the heat."³⁹

Smyser also addresses a topic that many of the historians who portrayed Clay negatively discuss: his "threats" to resign. In Smyser's telling, these "threats" become merely "hints" and were quite justified. Smyser quotes a letter written by Clay to President Kennedy in which Clay states that he had no desire to harm Kennedy's administration and if Kennedy felt Clay was no longer useful, he would leave Berlin at

³⁸ Smyser, From Yalta to Berlin, 168.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 170.

once. Clay had very particular ideas about what actions were necessary to restore West Berlin morale. According to Smyser, if Washington continued to undermine Clay's efforts, morale would never improve and Clay's presence in Berlin indeed served no purpose. He might as well go home.⁴⁰

In his Berlin: Success of a Mission?, Geoffrey McDermott, who served as the British Minister in Berlin from July 1961 to June 1962, shares Clay's view that the West needed to take action against the GDR's harassment. He argues that "the lack of any effective reaction from the West to the wall's construction allowed the East Germans to become "cock-a-hoop." Their success in building the wall inspired the Germans to begin "to indulge in everything from pinpricks like tossing tear gas bombs over the Wall to the most brutal outrages against their fellow-citizens who tried to escape to freedom." He states that General Clay was right in giving the East Germans "a jolt" and in trying to "expose the futility of the official Soviet line" that East Berlin served as the capital of an "independent GDR." McDermott asserts that Clay also correctly surmised "the Russians were not prepared to go to war over ... Berlin."⁴¹

One of the incidents Clay used to demonstrate allied commitment was the autobahn patrols. However, of the negative-portrayal American historians, only Gelb discusses the resumption of the patrols along the autobahn. Gelb merely mentions Clay's orders and tells nothing of the Soviets' reaction or how Washington later ended the patrols against Clay's advisement. This is curious because that example would have provided further

⁴⁰ Smyser, From Yalta to Berlin, 172.

⁴¹ Geoffrey McDermott, Berlin: Success of a Mission?, (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1963), 43-44.

evidence for Gelb's argument that Washington wanted to ease tension between the U.S. and the Soviet Union while Clay provoked conflict.⁴²

The only other negative-portrayal historian to discuss the autobahn patrols is Gearson, who writes about Macmillan. Gearson asserts that "Macmillan had come to accept the need to insist on core Western rights in Berlin," but "questions such as the de facto recognition of the [GDR] . . . seemed less important to him and represented concessions easily given in return for a Berlin settlement." The American tendency to act unilaterally without informing their allies particularly upset the British. Gearson specifically mentions the armed convoys along the autobahn, which "the British consistently criticized" as being "provocative."⁴³

The "positive-portrayal" historians mention the patrols more often than their negative counterparts. Smith first broaches the subject in The Defense of Berlin. He asserts that Clay ordered the patrols to stop East German interference with American traffic. He quotes Clay: "We are in Berlin by right of victory and we propose to maintain the right of access on the ground." Smith states that Clay succeeded in ending the harassment but that Washington remained unconvinced. According to Smith, the lack of support from Washington persuaded Soviet Marshal Koniev to demand the patrols cease, and Washington complied. Smith argues that with this action, "another chance for a tactical victory was surrendered."⁴⁴

⁴² Gelb, The Berlin Wall, 248.

⁴³ Gearson, Harold Macmillan and the Berlin Wall Crisis, 1958-1962, 192-94.

⁴⁴ Smith, The Defense of Berlin, 312-13, 315.

Curtis Cate asserts in The Ides of August that Kennedy himself encouraged the Soviets to protest the patrols in a September 25 speech. Kennedy never mentioned the Berlin Wall nor even hinted “that certain fundamental Four-Power guarantees had been violated by its construction.” Cate argues that the West Berliners and West Germans felt betrayed and that the Soviets believed they had found a weakness they could exploit. In Cate’s view, Kennedy’s speech “emboldened” the Soviets, convincing them that Washington would yield to their demands, and Washington promptly proved them correct. “What [Clay] had achieved . . . was destroyed at one stroke,” Cate states. “He was back to square 1.”⁴⁵

Smith also portrays Washington officials negatively for undermining Clay’s decisions and authority in his biography of Clay. Wanting to present Clays’ point of view, Smith asks him if he believed the autobahn access to Berlin was in danger. Clay replied: “It very definitely was . . . I think [sending convoys along the route] was a damn foolish thing to stop.” According to Smith, Washington never realized the significance of actions such as patrols or the importance of proving to the Berliners that the United States was not afraid to stand up to the Communists.⁴⁶

Smyser argues that Clay’s efforts to stop the harassment of American vehicles by East Germans were important for a number of reasons. Firstly, if the Vopos continued to get away with that type of behavior, they would significantly injure the Americans’ image. Smyser asserts that when the Vopos stopped American cars, “other travelers

⁴⁵ Curtis Cate, The Ides of August: The Berlin Wall Crisis, 1961, (New York: M. Evans & Company, Inc., 1978), 471-72.

⁴⁶ Smith, Lucius D. Clay, 656.

[along the autobahn], including Berliners, saw how the Vopos could bully Americans.”

According to Smyser this would cause West Germans and other Europeans to question that if the United States was too weak to stand up to the East Germans, how could it pose enough of a threat to deter Soviet activity, to contain the spread of communism? In Smyser’s view, therefore, the U.S. needed to continue the patrols.⁴⁷

Yet Smyser never considers that perhaps the East Germans and Soviets might have had legitimate concerns or cause to stop and check the vehicles. If the West intended to mount an attack on the Communists, perhaps beginning with an assault on the wall, it would make sense that the Americans might transport weapons or equipment from West Germany to West Berlin along the autobahn. Whether or not the U.S. and its allies actually had such plans is less relevant than if the Communists believed it to be possible. If Smyser admits that the Soviets and East Germans might have been acting out of a sense of genuine concern, then he cannot argue that the Vopos were simply trying to bully the Americans and that their demands were unreasonable. This, in turn, would make Clay’s military patrols and convoys seem less necessary and more dangerous and provocative, as many of the “negative-portrayal” historians argue.

Secondly, Smyser asserts that the Soviets may have felt relieved to see the United States stop the vexation. They even may have welcomed it because they distrusted GDR leader Ulbricht and worried about him moving against the other occupying powers. He discusses documents released by the Soviets after Germany’s reunification that support Clay’s views. Smyser states that these documents show that the Soviets worried about

⁴⁷ Smyser, From Yalta to Berlin, 169.

the “trigger-happy Vopos” and the trouble they might cause. He never mentions, however, which specific documents support his arguments about the conflicts between the Soviets and the GDR. He cites a work by another author, Bruce W. Manning, who examined these Soviet documents and presented them at a conference in a paper titled “The Berlin Crisis of 1961 from the Perspective of the Soviet General Staff.”⁴⁸

While rather silent on the issue of autobahn patrols, the “negative-portrayal” historians often cite Steinstucken as an example of Clay overstepping his bounds on a trivial matter. They view Clay’s actions there as evidence of his relentless drive against the Soviets. Wyden finds little significance in Clay’s efforts in Steinstucken. He discusses it only in a footnote, referring to the area as “an outlying flyspeck previously unknown even to most Berliners.” He mentions the work on this incident by Honore Catudal, expressing his surprise that it was worthy of that extensive an examination. He states, “Remarkably, an entire book celebrates the charade over the soul of this hamlet.”⁴⁹

Reeves provides more of a discussion of the event. In Reeves’s portrayal, Clay went to Steinstucken more to bring attention to himself than to boost morale. He states: “General Clay had arrived back in Berlin late in September. In case there was anyone who did not notice, one of the first things he had done was try to drive into an enclave called Steinstucken He stepped out of the copter and announced that a contingent of United States Military Police would be stationed in the enclave” (emphasis mine).⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Smyser, From Yalta to Berlin, 169, 171, 436. Earlier in the chapter, Smyser cites Hope Harrison’s work for the Cold War International History Project, Ulbricht and the Concrete “Rose”: New Archival Evidence on the Dynamics of Soviet-East German Relations and the Berlin Crisis, 1958-1961.

⁴⁹ Wyden, Wall, 265.

⁵⁰ Reeves, President Kennedy, 249.

Gelb's interpretation of the Steinstucken incident is similar to Wyden's. He presents the view of Washington officials who wanted to improve relations with the Soviets and worried that Clay would ruin their chances for success by blowing issues out of proportion. Gelb states that Clay was "stirring things up over an insignificant bit of territory nobody had ever heard of before."⁵¹

Of the "negative-portrayal" historians, the least negative, Ausland, presents a rather favorable interpretation of the Steinstucken incident. He believes Clay took the right steps. Ausland asserts, "Thus, a problem that had vexed US officials for years was settled by a simple action, and one can only wonder why it had not been taken before."⁵²

Ausland's view of the incident falls in line with the "positive-portrayal" historians who argue that Clay made the right decision by acting in Steinstucken. In Defense of Berlin, Smith points out that Steinstucken was technically a part of the American sector of Berlin, though no American official had visited the area in ten years. "In the face of the latest Communist measures, many of its residents had given up hope," Smith states. In Smith's telling of the event, Clay's venture into Steinstucken "demonstrated U.S. resolve," and "Berlin's morale began to revive." Smith appears to share Clay's opinion that incidents like Steinstucken, far from being trivial, "would restore Allied prestige in the divided city if exploited properly."⁵³

Cate describes the reaction of the grateful villagers when Clay arrived – the woman who ran to embrace the general, the crowd that gathered to escort him to his meeting, and

⁵¹ Gelb, The Berlin Wall, 250.

⁵² Ausland, Kennedy, Khrushchev, 37.

⁵³ Smith, The Defense of Berlin, 309-10.

the restaurant owner who rushed over with his finest wine. Cate states that Clay believed the U.S. needed to act because the presence of East German soldiers violated Berlin's Four-Power agreements, which banned both East and West German soldiers from the capital. "This was not something Uncle Sam could meekly accept without a catastrophic loss of face," Cate asserts.⁵⁴

Smyser also presents the situation in terms of American humiliation. He mentions an East German refugee who had fled to Steinstucken and how the Vopos threatened to enter the area and seize him even though it was American occupation territory. He asserts, "Clay believed that neither the U.S. government nor Kennedy himself could live down the humiliation of having the GDR seize a refugee who had sought American protection."⁵⁵

The issue often discussed in conjunction with the Steinstucken incident is the existence of a "practice wall." There is as yet no American documentary proof of this wall. Historians who argue that Clay ordered it to be built rely on secondary sources or personal interviews with those involved. The source cited most often is Honore Catudal's Kennedy and the Berlin Wall Crisis. Catudal spoke with General Watson, and the general discussed being caught between General Clarke and General Clay over the issue of the wall and Steinstucken. Watson apparently confirmed the practice wall's existence and that Clay wanted to "punch" through to Steinstucken, though Catudal never quotes Watson directly on this subject. Catudal does, however, use the exact words of General Clarke. Clarke told Catudal that he "happened to go to Berlin" and Watson

⁵⁴ Cate, The Ides of August, 468-70.

⁵⁵ Smyser, From Yalta to Berlin, 169.

informed him of the pending “interesting exercise at Steinstucken.” Watson then stated that General Clay gave him the order to send the troops into Steinstucken. Clarke immediately ordered the troops sent back to their barracks.⁵⁶

Beschloss cites this work by Catudal, as well as a television interview with Valentin Falin, Communist Party adviser. Falin stated in that interview that the Soviets had learned of plans for American tank officers “to destroy the Berlin Wall.” Beschloss argues that the Soviets believed Clay wanted to attack the wall and that Clay ordered walls to be set up in a forest so that the troops could knock them down. Beschloss asserts that this action was a dangerous provocation. He quotes Falin, stating: “As [Falin] recalled, had there been a move against the Wall, Soviet tanks would have opened fire, bringing the United States and Soviet Union ‘closer to the third world war than ever Had the tank duel started then in Berlin – and everything was running toward it – the events most probably would have gone beyond any possibility of control.’”⁵⁷

Wyden uses this “practice wall” as an example of Clay deviating from his assigned morale-boosting mission to “slap down the Soviets.” He states that General Clarke, who countermanded the practice-wall order and refused to allow Clay to send American troops into Steinstucken, served as “the fiercest resistance against [Clay’s] private agenda.” Wyden also cites Catudal, as well as Gelb. Reeves mentions the practice wall and General Clarke’s reaction as well. He, too, cites Catudal, along with Cate and an article by Raymond Garthoff.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Honore M. Catudal, Kennedy and the Berlin Wall Crisis: A Case Study in United States Decision Making, (Berlin: Berlin-Verlag, 1980), 133-34.

⁵⁷ Beschloss, The Crisis Years, 335.

⁵⁸ Wyden, Wall, 265; Reeves, President Kennedy, 249.

In his discussion of the practice wall, Gelb argues that General Watson happily complied with Clay's order because many West Berliners faulted him for allowing the construction of the Berlin Wall. He quotes Watson who stated: "Why blame me; I didn't build that blasted Wall!" Gelb, however, provides no clear source for either piece of information. He may have spoken with General Watson, but he does not attribute this quotation to any interview with the general.⁵⁹

Of the "negative-portrayal" historians, Raymond Garthoff provides the most detailed account of the practice wall. He quotes General Clarke, with whom he corresponded, and referenced interviews with two retired Soviet military intelligence officers, as well as Falin. The retired intelligence officers stated that the Soviet military intelligence managed to obtain pictures of the practice wall, which supported the reports they had received that the Americans planned to tear down the wall. One reason why no American documentation of this practice wall exists may be because Clarke never reported the incident to Washington. According to Garthoff, "no one in Washington was fully aware of the project, much less knew that Clay had actually built a section of wall and tested specially configured bulldozer tanks against it."⁶⁰

For the most part, the "positive-portrayal" historians refrain from mentioning the practice wall. Those that do, however, attempt to prove that it was merely a rumor. James O'Donnell, Clay's press officer, informed Cate that a number of U.S. officers were "out to get Clay." Cate concludes that "the report must have come from some officer on

⁵⁹ Gelb, The Berlin Wall, 249.

⁶⁰ Raymond Garthoff, "Berlin 1961: The Record Corrected," Foreign Policy (1991), 147-48.

General Watson's staff who wished Clay no good, for there was not a word of truth in it."

Cate states that Clarke learned this fact when he went to Berlin, but the trip did little to reassure Clarke. Cate quotes Clay who told him that he had no memory of Clarke telling him to "keep your cotton-picking fingers off my men," though he had no doubt Clarke felt that way. Clay assured Cate that had Clarke actually said that to him, "there would have been an immediate showdown."⁶¹

Although Smith never asks Clay directly about the practice wall in his biography, Smith addresses the issue in a roundabout way. Smith asks Clay if he ever recommended tearing down the wall, and Clay replied that he had not. Clay believed that the allies had their chance to do so only immediately after its construction, but the United States hesitated too long. By the time Clay arrived in September, he realized that attacking the wall would lead to an armed conflict, which he wanted to avoid as well. Smith simply accepts this statement and moves on to another topic.⁶²

The last incident of the 1961 Berlin Crisis came in October with the tank confrontation at Checkpoint Charlie. The "negative-portrayal" historians blame General Clay for pushing the United States and the Soviet Union to the brink of war over, once again, a minor issue – presenting allied identification papers to the Vopos. The "positive-portrayal" historians argue that Clay's actions were necessary to reassert American-occupation rights. These historians tend to "downplay" the danger of the situation in favor of the significance of what they perceive to be Clay's accomplishments.

⁶¹ Cate, The Ides of August, 527-28.

⁶² Smith, Lucius D. Clay, 664.

Of the “negative-portrayal” historians, Ausland presents a rather ambiguous version of the incident. No war or fighting erupted, and even if it had, Ausland asserts that the United States “probably” could have “contained” the conflict. Yet Ausland never forgets that the United States could have lost control of the situation very quickly. “It is not easy to evaluate the outcome of this test of wills,” he states. “From one point of view, both sides were fortunate that the tanks did not fire at each other, since no one can say with certainty how much explosive lay at the other end of the fuse. American officials in Berlin believed that the conflict would have been contained. While they were probably right, who can say for certain?” The words he chooses serve to remind the reader that although the conflict ended peacefully, it could have very easily resulted in the exchange of firepower.⁶³

Beschloss, on the other hand, describes the incident in a sensational fashion. In trying to convey the existing tension of the situation, he uses quotations intended to convince the reader that total war was only a heartbeat away. He states: “This was the first time in history that American and Soviet tanks had ever confronted each other. The United States tank commander, Lt. Col. Thomas Tyre, feared an expected event that would touch off open military conflict with the Russians, ‘such as a nervous soldier discharging his weapon’ or ‘some tanker stepping accidentally on his accelerator leading to a runaway tank.’”⁶⁴

He quotes Lightner to demonstrate further the danger of the situation. Beschloss suggests that Clay increased the potential for trouble when he ordered the troops to be

⁶³ Ausland, Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Berlin-Cuba Crisis 1961-1964, 41.

⁶⁴ Beschloss, The Crisis Years, 334.

armed with rifles when escorting Lightner's car through the checkpoint. He states, "As Lightner recalled, if the Vopos had tried to stop [the armed escort of the car] 'by shooting one of us, we would have had to kill all of them. . . . All hell would have broken loose.'" With the use of his quotations, Beschloss attempts to demonstrate General Clay's recklessness. Beschloss describes the Checkpoint Charlie incident as a potentially deadly, certainly volatile situation brought on by General Clay's dangerously confrontational behavior.⁶⁵

Like Beschloss, Wyden tries to make clear the heavy tension of those few days in Berlin for the reader. Wanting to ensure the reader grasps the deadly seriousness of the situation, he refers to it as the "defused inflammable tank incident." He begins by stating that the opening of a CBS reporter's broadcast "was a heart stopper." In describing the scene in Berlin, Wyden says that "the incendiary nature of the tableau was unmistakable and trouble could start from East or West."⁶⁶

Wyden also uses the accounts of reporters to demonstrate that others at the time believed the situation to be just as dire as Wyden portrays it. Wyden asserts that "[CBS reporter Dan] Schorr thought World War III might be close at hand, and so did such other seasoned eyewitnesses as [Sydney] Gruson of the [New York] Times." Wyden quotes Gruson, who said, "I always thought that when push came to shove, the U.S. and the Russians would not fight, but Clay was running an intense, high-stake game. An accident was always possible."⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Beschloss, The Crisis Years, 333.

⁶⁶ Wyden, Wall, 266, 260, 262.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 262.

Wyden argues that Clay had his own mission, and the worst example of this behavior occurs with the Checkpoint Charlie incident when, as Wyden states, “Clay’s personal crusade of brinkmanship picked up momentum on the night of Sunday, October 22.” Wyden argues that Clay deliberately disobeyed the State Department who advised Clay to “go slow.” Clay appealed his case for action to the president who gave his permission. Wyden states that officials in Washington were “incensed over Clay’s ‘melodramatizing.’” According to Wyden, Clay had little to do with preventing the situation from erupting into war. That honor belonged to Kennedy who was really the one in charge. Wyden argues that Kennedy’s appeal to Khrushchev, who ordered the withdrawal of the Soviet tanks to avoid further conflict, ended the confrontation. In Wyden’s telling, Clay put America’s hand in the fire, and Kennedy pulled it out.⁶⁸

Much like Wyden, Reeves discusses the tank incident with Clay as a dangerous troublemaker and Kennedy as the reasonable hero. According to Reeves, when Kennedy later assured Clay that while others in Washington may have lost their nerve, he retained his, Kennedy based his confidence on his own relationship with Khrushchev. “If Kennedy was in fact less nervous than those around him,” Reeves argues, “it was because he believed he had finally established one-on-one contact with Khrushchev.” Reeves credits this relationship for ending the crisis. Kennedy communicated with Khrushchev through back channels, and both men agreed to pull back their tanks.⁶⁹

In Gelb’s version of the tank incident, Clay’s showdown with the Soviets was unnecessary and dangerous. Gelb calls it “an undignified border squabble.” Kennedy

⁶⁸ Wyden, Wall, 266.

⁶⁹ Reeves, President Kennedy, 251.

and the State Department never would have bothered with the situation had Clay not had other plans. Gelb asserts that Kennedy supported Clay only because he feared provoking the general. The crisis ended when Washington and the Soviets had had enough and wanted to put an end to the situation. Clay's efforts had little to do with the final resolution. He also discusses General Norstad's feelings to remind the reader that the situation could have very easily moved in a direction for which Clay was unprepared. He states: "The question was, After you bring our few tanks to the Wall, what do you do next if the Soviets either do not show up or do show up and just stay there?"⁷⁰

Raymond Garthoff presents the Checkpoint Charlie incident as incredibly dangerous. He focuses solely on the "practice wall" and the threat it posed to the Soviets and the East Germans. In light of Soviet fears of Western espionage, Garthoff argues, the GDR's demands for Lightner's identification "seem reasonable." Clay then escalates the crisis when calling for the tanks, thereby bringing the United States and Soviet Union closer to war quite unnecessarily. Garthoff assigns blame for the tank incident to Clay for constructing the "practice wall" initially and then worsening the situation by protesting the identification requests with such military force.⁷¹

These historians present the view from Washington, and Gearson provides the London interpretation of the Checkpoint Charlie incident. As Gearson tells the story, the issue arose over the GDR's demand to inspect allied personnel's identification. "Clay . . . decided to adopt a hard line," he states. "The relatively minor question of passes now began to develop into a major trial of strength." Clay's actions "dismayed" the British,

⁷⁰ Gelb, *The Berlin Wall*, 253-54, 257.

⁷¹ Garthoff, "Berlin 1961: The Record Corrected," 143-44.

and they immediately wanted to know “if Clay was acting largely independently or whether the president backed his policy.” As with the accounts of Beschloss and Reeves, the crisis ended because of the clear-headed Kennedy. In this case, Kennedy allegedly promised to be more flexible in negotiations on the Berlin issue in exchange for the withdrawal of Soviet tanks. Once more, a historian portrays Clay as a dangerous man who risked war over a minor issue and pushed the West into a difficult position from which it needed to be rescued by the wise President Kennedy.⁷²

In the versions of historians such as Smith, Clay’s efforts to reassert Western rights and four-power control were essential to U.S. goals in Berlin. When the situation with Lightner at the border erupted on October 22, according to Smith, Clay needed to act quickly to prevent “an impending crisis.” Smith shares Clay’s view on the importance of presenting identification to the East Germans. “The East German demand . . . was extremely significant,” Smith states. “It was another Communist attempt to end the few remaining vestiges of four-power control.”⁷³

Unfortunately, in Smith’s view, for the United States’ position, its ally Great Britain disagreed with Clay. Smith asserts that this hurt the U.S. mission. When entering East Berlin that week, British officials readily complied with the GDR’s order and presented their identification. With this act, according to Smith, the Soviets “discerned a crack in the Western ranks.” They refused to back down and denied Watson’s protest. The United States would have to comply with the GDR’s regulations.⁷⁴

⁷² Gearson, Harold Macmillan and the Berlin Wall Crisis, 1958-1962, 193.

⁷³ Smith, The Defense of Berlin, 321.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 322.

Once Smith recounts the events of the Checkpoint Charlie incident and presents his view that Clay knew all along the proper course for the United States to take, he then discusses the significant outcomes of the incident. In Smith's view, the tank crisis demonstrated many important points. The United States destroyed a crucial Communist argument by exposing Ulbricht as merely Moscow's puppet. The GDR could no longer claim to be sovereign, nor could even the Soviets trust them. The Americans also revealed that Soviet threats to sign a separate peace treaty with the GDR had little meaning. Once again, the United States demonstrated that the East would back down when confronted by a show of determination. Most importantly, Smith argues, Clay regained some of the prestige the United States lost with building of the Berlin Wall. He restored the morale of the West Berliners and West Germans and temporarily stayed the wave of Communist infringements upon allied rights.⁷⁵

Once Smith argues the tremendous value of Clay's maneuvers, he discusses those who disagreed with Clay's actions. Immediately after the crisis ended, members of the Kennedy administration began to criticize Clay's handling of the situation. The expression of "official" disapproval of Clay only increased as time passed. Most British officials shared this view, even going so far as to tell Soviet officials that the U.S. would soon recall General Clay. Smith states that Washington and London's effort to distance themselves from Clay's conduct threatened to undermine all that Clay accomplished. Soon after Clay's disparagement, East German authorities began detaining members of the U.S. mission to Berlin as well as U.S. army vehicles. Clay, despite the attacks

⁷⁵ Smith, The Defense of Berlin, 323.

received from Washington, refused to acquiesce to East German pretensions. Smith states that “when the Communists saw that Clay was not leaving, they soon desisted from further encroachments.”⁷⁶

In Smith’s account, Clay is the hero who must defeat the enemy, while also fighting against those who should have been supporting him. In his descriptions, Smith paints these Washington and London dissenters as cowards who were “completely out of touch with the daily situation in Berlin.” He compares the opposition Clay faced in the Checkpoint Charlie incident to that of the Berlin blockade and airlift. Smith states, “The risks seemed to multiply the further one moved from the scene of action.” NATO members, London, Washington, and especially those who favored negotiation with the Soviets believed Clay went to the brink of war “over an essentially minor issue.” He states that “had the United States backed away from the confrontation at Checkpoint Charlie, a crisis of morale similar to that which occurred in August would have ensued. In such an event, it is unlikely that our position in Berlin could have been held.”⁷⁷

According to Smith, the United States needed to stand up to East Germans and stop the harassment of allied officials. The United States would have lost its valuable position in Berlin if the Communists had succeeded in forcing the United States to comply with East German demands. Dulles shares Smith’s view of the Checkpoint Charlie incident. She criticizes Washington for not supporting Clay because they feared a showdown. She

⁷⁶ Smith, The Defense of Berlin, 324-25.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 323-24.

asserts that because officials in Washington failed to support Clay in his attempts to stop Communist encroachments on allied rights “the crisis of August continued.”⁷⁸

Clay’s determination to resist the Communists partially reversed the United States’ negative image, according to Dulles. Clay forced the Soviets to assume their role once again and restore quadripartite control of Berlin. She asserts that while some people outside of Berlin failed to realize the significance of Clay’s achievement, “the experts, aware of the Four Power legal agreements, knew of the significance of the Soviet position in the city” and what the return of Soviet tanks to the border represented. Dulles asserts the incident also demonstrated to the world the United States’s willingness to act and may have convinced Khrushchev to withdraw his peace treaty ultimatum.⁷⁹

Dulles, however supplies no real evidence to support her claims. She discusses no newspaper or journal articles on any change in the U.S. image. She does not identify the “Americans [who concluded] that this confrontation was an important move in forcing the Soviets to reassert their role” or the “experts [who]...knew of the significance of the Soviet position in the city.” Writing this work in 1971, she uses interviews and conversations with people who had been involved in the Berlin Crisis to reconstruct the events. But she chose not to name her sources in most cases in order “to avoid embarrassment to those who are still involved in these problems or who have explored with me controversial issues involving friends and associates.” By not naming her

⁷⁸ Dulles, The Wall, 84.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 90, 84.

sources or citing documents, Dulles weakens her argument that Clay's actions had a positive impact.⁸⁰

Trivers agrees with Dulles on the necessity of confronting the East Germans at Checkpoint Charlie. He states that if Clay had not been in Berlin after the initial confrontation on Sunday evening, October 22, "the American military and civilian authorities in Berlin would have been obliged to crawl back ignominiously from the strong position taken on Sunday evening." Trivers argues that Washington so feared upsetting the delicate peace in Berlin, they wanted to avoid any situation that could lead to a serious confrontation. Trivers also asserts that many Washington officials "doubtless regarded the issue as too picayune for a show of force." Trivers shares Clay's view that if the United States wanted to maintain its credibility with the Communists, it must not tolerate East German pretensions.⁸¹

Trivers was in Berlin at the time of the incident, and in addition to sharing Clay's adamancy of the confrontation's importance, Trivers also worried little about the incident getting out of control. He states in his book that "there was little likelihood of war" from Checkpoint Charlie incident. Trivers expressed his views to the British political adviser Keith Matthews when he called Trivers, demanding to know what the American thought they were doing. Trivers said that he told Matthews:

There was no reason for concern. The East Germans with the Soviet approval had been denying us the right of the free movement of our vehicles into East Berlin. In order demonstratively to assert our rights, we had brought up tanks and used military police escorts. We had a fine group of well-controlled officers and men at Friedrichstrasse. There was no likelihood that our men would initiate any shooting, and there was likewise manifest restraint on the other side. Besides, Gen. Clay had

⁸⁰ Dulles, The Wall, 84, 90, xiii.

⁸¹ Trivers, Three Crises, 25, 43-44.

accomplished his purpose when the Soviet tanks moved down to the East Berlin Friedrichstrasse crossing. Gen. Clay had wanted to force the Soviets to acknowledge Soviet authority and responsibility in East Berlin. When the Soviet tanks appeared, the fiction of East German responsibility for the denial of our access to East Berlin was destroyed and Soviet responsibility proven. The point having been made, we anticipated that the American tanks would soon be withdrawn.⁸²

Although General Clay's methods concerned Washington and London, Trivers insists that it brought about a number of "decidedly beneficial" outcomes. It increased the West Berliners' morale. He states that "they believed that [Clay's] forceful action] was the only language the Communists understood, and it encouraged them to keep faith in American assurances of their security against Communist attacks." Clay may have also convinced the Soviets it would be foolhardy to provoke another situation in Berlin. Trivers asserts that the Soviets most likely "regarded Gen. Clay as a 'dangerous' man – no greater compliment could be paid to him." Trivers, however, cites no news reports or polls to demonstrate the improvement in Berliners' morale or the Soviets' perceptions of General Clay. He apparently relies on his own recollection and observations during that time. He furnishes no proof, other than his own assurances, that the West Berliners really believed that force "was the only language the Communists understood" or that they found the use of it encouraging.⁸³

Cate asserts that the real responsibility for the Checkpoint Charlie incident lay with Washington. Cate suggests that by failing to follow in Clay's strong determination, Washington paved the way for more Communist encroachments. "Growing more cocky with each passing day, the East Germans now decided to humiliate the Western Allies

⁸² Trivers, Three Crises, 40, 50.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

even further by forcing them to show their identity papers when entering the Soviet sector – something the Allies had never had to do before.” Despite the lack of support from Washington, Clay insisted that the Communists not be allowed to succeed. Cate, sharing Clay’s viewpoint, believes in the importance of stopping the East Germans. He states, “Thus, by 11:00 p.m. on [October 22], the U.S. Commandant, inspired and directed by General Clay, had made it clear to the East Germans that the Americans were not going to be deprived of one additional right as one of the occupying powers simply to suit Walter Ulbricht’s whim.”⁸⁴

In Cate’s account, there was little danger of war. Clay quickly realized the opportunity present to expose GDR sovereignty as a lie and devised a plan. Cate suggests that Clay knew just how far he could go without risking war, and he set out to prove his objective. General Clay refused to cancel the military escorts after he found out that Wednesday’s meetings between American and Soviet representatives accomplished nothing. “He was pleased to learn that the Russians were beginning to get worried,” Cate states. “This was exactly what he wanted.”⁸⁵

Cate further demonstrates the situation’s lack of serious danger by discussing incidents of levity. He states, “Although it had seemed a scary business to people living hundreds or thousands of miles away, to observers on the spot this muzzle-to-muzzle confrontation had even had its comic moments.” Cate then tells of an incident in which a U.S. tank gunner nervously fingered his machine gun at the moment a helicopter flew

⁸⁴ Cate, The Ides of August, 476, 479.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 481-82.

overhead. An East German captain ran to a Reuters correspondent and yelled at him to get out of the way because the Americans were shooting.⁸⁶

In his biography of Clay, Smith presents Clay's view of the event. Smith quotes Clay who believed that acquiescing to East German demands during the Checkpoint Charlie incident for identification undermined the United States legal authority in Berlin, which the allies based on the quadripartite status of the city. Clay stated:

The East Germans were trying to insist that they had the right to inspect the identity papers of Allied personnel going to East Berlin. This was a direct violation of all the agreements that had established the quadripartite status of Berlin. Since 1945, members of the Occupation forces could move freely throughout all of Berlin. If we had permitted the East Germans to interfere with this, it would have really destroyed West Berlin morale. Because we would have been letting the East Germans, not the Russians, exercise the sovereignty over Berlin that we claimed resided in the four powers.⁸⁷

After the initial incident on Sunday evening with Lightner, Clay believed that the United States must "force the Russians to show up and take responsibility." Since August the Soviets had maintained that the GDR constructed the wall and that the Soviets did nothing. The Soviets further argued that the four-power status of Berlin no longer existed. Once the Soviets brought forth their tanks, however, they dispelled that assertion. Smith quotes Clay who stated: "As soon as [the Soviet tanks arrived], I was no longer concerned. The Russians were in charge. We were not going to have to deal with the East Germans. And that was the whole purpose."⁸⁸

Smith asserts that the confrontation was quite a success for Clay and "an exercise well done." He mentions Washington and London's displeasure at Clay's actions, but

⁸⁶ Cate, *The Ides of August*, 486.

⁸⁷ Smith, *Lucius D. Clay*, 659.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 660.

“Clay had punctured the myth of East German sovereignty over East Berlin.” Smith argues that although Clay made Washington nervous, “those in Berlin rejoiced that he was there.” Smith quotes Howard Trivers in saying that had Clay not been in Berlin, the United States and its allies would have surrendered their rights to the city by giving into East German demands. Once again, Clay is portrayed as the knowing hero who saves the ungrateful Washington from its own ineptness.⁸⁹

By discussing Clay’s intentions and insight into the Soviet mind, Smyser argues that little threat of danger existed from the Checkpoint Charlie incident. In Smyser’s account of the situation, Ulbricht felt frustrated because the Soviet Congress supported Khrushchev’s less confrontational policies on the Berlin issue, and he wanted to take definitive action to show American impotence in the face of Communist aggression. The introduction of American tanks by Clay turned up the intensity of the confrontation. The Soviets realized they had to block the U.S. tanks from going through the checkpoint or else “authorize the East Germans to do so.” Smyser asserts that the latter was out of the question because the Soviets “knew that having Ulbricht confront U.S. tanks would add to the unpredictability of an already explosive situation.”⁹⁰

The Soviets had to bring up their own tanks, and Clay felt relieved when they did for it meant they were taking responsibility for Berlin. Smyser states that Clay believed the arrival of the Soviet tanks “eliminated any chance that Ulbricht might provoke a real

⁸⁹ Smith, Lucius D. Clay, 661.

⁹⁰ Smyser, From Yalta to Berlin, 173-74.

crisis.” Smyser asserts that Clay viewed “the Soviet tanks as a sign that the Soviets did not trust Ulbricht and wanted to take over when the risks grew too high.”⁹¹

Smyser contends that the Soviets and Kennedy each learned a valuable lesson from the Checkpoint Charlie incident. Now that they had seen what Ulbricht would do with too much freedom to act, the Soviets realized they needed to restrain Ulbricht and the sovereignty of the GDR for the time being. As for Kennedy, Smyser argues that he discovered his advisers were wrong when they told him he had to avoid confrontation “because the Soviets would always escalate to the point of war.” There existed some room to maneuver. According to Smyser, Kennedy owed this discovery to Clay, and he appreciated the general’s efforts. In Smyser’s telling, Kennedy realized what later historians such as Smith and even Smyser himself would argue – that Clay understood the situation in Berlin better than anyone else. He knew what actions the U.S. needed to take to restore faith in Americans again and just how far to push the Soviets without provoking a very dangerous confrontation.⁹²

In his discussion of the events of October, McDermott discusses the “powerful boost” Clay’s arrival gave to West Berlin morale. He asserts that “in the eight months [Clay] spent in the city he did a job for the morale of the Berliners which no one else could have done.” Even though many in London expressed their great displeasure about the incident, McDermott maintains that Clay did what he needed to do. Clay accomplished this task as best as could be expected, and, in doing so, he succeeded in his larger goal of restoring West Berlin morale. McDermott states:

⁹¹ Smyser, From Yalta to Berlin, 175.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 176-77.

The Americans, who had made their point with force, were criticised by some faint hearts for playing an unnecessarily dangerous game. They were also criticised for not consulting their allies in advance. My view, which I expressed to General Al Watson, was that it was a successful operation, well executed if a little dangerous, and that they had kept us pretty well informed considering its warlike nature and the consequent need for all speed and secrecy. The West Berliners were delighted to see the initiative taken, for once, by the West, and regarded the whole affair as a salutary thwack in the teeth for the communists.⁹³

In their attempts to prove Clay conducted himself properly, many of these “positive-portrayal” historians, particularly Smith and Dulles, present Washington and London officials as weak. They were too concerned about the Soviets to take the necessary forceful actions. These historians fail to probe deeper, to determine the origins behind their concerns. Was it just that these officials feared confrontation with the Soviets? If the Checkpoint Charlie incident was so important, why could Washington not see that? These historians never answer those questions, nor do they really attempt to do so.

The examination of the events of the 1961 Berlin Crisis demonstrates a clear dichotomy of opinion about General Clay. Historians who believe the incidents to be very dangerous and bringing the United States and the Soviet Union to the brink of war view Clay as a “wild card” who was, or made the Berlin situation, “difficult.”⁹⁴ Historians who feel the situation required such decisive action describe Clay in positive terms and argue that Washington made Clay’s job difficult.⁹⁵ Now that this correlation has been

⁹³ McDermott, Berlin, 45-46.

⁹⁴ Ausland, Kennedy and Khrushchev, 36; Beschloss, The Crisis Years, 333; Wyden, Wall, 264; and Gelb, The Berlin Wall, 247; these works all use the term “difficult.” Gelb uses the term “wild card” on p. 245, and Sorensen, Kennedy, says that Clay was an “alarmist” on p. 595.

⁹⁵ Smith, The Defense of Berlin, 321, discusses Washington’s indecisiveness; Dulles, The Wall, 84-85, asserts that Washington reacted too slowly to the wall and worsened the crisis; Trivers, Three Crises, 39-40, argues that Washington ignored their recommendations for countermeasures; Cate, The Ides of August, 467, states that Clay

demonstrated, the task at hand must be to determine where these negative and positive views of Clay originate. Why do these historians view Clay as they do?

The secondary sources these historians used may have affected how they viewed General Clay and the events in Berlin. Cate, who views Clay favorably, uses Trivers's work and those of Smith. As demonstrated earlier, Trivers agrees with Clay on many aspects of his Berlin policies, and much of the information in both of Smith's accounts comes from interviews with Clay. It is quite possible that Trivers and Smith's positive portrayals influenced Cate and account for his depiction of Clay. The same holds true for Smyser, who also references Smith as well as Cate. Both Cate and Smyser interviewed Clay as well. These two examples certainly support the theory that sources account for a historian's perceptions.

Two other examples, however, discount this source theory. Reeves takes information from Cate, Trivers, and Smith to explain the incident in his account. Despite the positive evaluation of Clay in these works, Reeves portrays the opposite view of Clay. In fact, Reeves discusses Washington officials who believed Clay would continue in his Berlin quest until he crushed the Soviets, but he never provides the reader with opinions from officials who supported Clay. Trivers argues that he, too, believed the United States needed to act forcefully and quickly to deter the Communists from any further encroachments on allied rights. Reeves cites Trivers but refrains from quoting the former political adviser on that matter. Gelb also uses Cate and Trivers without sharing their

had to work in "impossible conditions;" and Smith, Lucius D. Clay, 653, 656, discusses Clay's difficulties with having to go through channels and the canceling of his patrols.

approval of Clay. Reeves and Gelb clearly disprove the theory that historians' perceptions of General Clay can be traced to their secondary sources.⁹⁶

The other works in this study confirm the near irrelevance of secondary source usage in accounting for this dichotomy of opinion. Some use their own recollections to tell the story (Ausland, Sorensen, and Trivers). Others rely on their interviews with government officials involved in the crisis (Beschloss, Dulles, Smith, and Gelb). As expected, the authors also use documents and newspaper accounts. Some other factor must account for these differing views.

Perhaps Smith's assertion in The Defense of Berlin explains this correlation. He states that during the Checkpoint Charlie incident that "the risks seemed to multiply the further one moved from the scene of action."⁹⁷ It could be that the focus of the authors' stories determines their conception of Clay and the incident. This certainly proves to be the case with Trivers and Smith. Trivers was in Berlin and participated in discussions with the Soviets as they walked along the border crossing. Smith's biography of Clay obviously focuses on Clay in Berlin. His earlier book, The Defense of Berlin, also keeps its focus on events in Berlin. Cate also focuses on Berlin; the discussions in Washington provoked by the crisis remain the secondary story. Dulles discusses American policy as it applies to German issues, so her story rests squarely in Berlin. She gains her information from those who were on the scene during the crisis. Smyser sets out to tell the complete story of Germany in the Cold War. Like Cate, he focuses on events in

⁹⁶ Reeves, President Kennedy, 250-51. Beschloss, The Crisis Years, and Wyden, Wall, present this one-sided view as well.

⁹⁷ Smith, The Defense of Berlin, 323.

Berlin with the repercussions in Washington being of secondary importance. All of the “positive portrayal” historians center their story in Berlin. They quote sources who were in Berlin at the time and faced the situation first-hand daily. They follow Smith’s assertion that closer to the scene of action the dangers seemed few.

The “negative portrayal” historians also confirm Smith’s theory. These accounts focus on Washington. Reeves’s biography of President Kennedy naturally tells the story from the White House’s perspectives. Sorensen does this as well. He provides his recollections of events in Kennedy’s presidency because he served in the administration. He was in Washington and interacted daily with member of the State Department and others who disliked Clay. Their opinions easily could have affected Sorensen’s own. Wyden and Gelb also focus on Washington, giving voice to the various State Department members and White House and Pentagon officials who worried about Clay complicating the Berlin situation. They both directly quote National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy who found Clay “difficult.” Beschloss’s work examining Kennedy’s relationship with Khrushchev and how that affected the Cold War. He discusses events like the Charlie Checkpoint incident mainly in the context of that relationship, so he focuses most often on Washington. He also mentions Bundy’s opinion of Clay and his “threats” to resign. By viewing the Checkpoint Charlie incident through the eyes of the Washington officials who worried that any confrontation would lead to nuclear war, these historians came to share the officials’ perspectives on Clay and Berlin. Consequently, the authors viewed Clay as “difficult” and a “wild card” out for his own agenda and the incident as a barely averted catastrophe.

The examination of these works corroborates Smith's assertion that officials in Washington and London – and the historians who cite them – found the events in Berlin riskier than did those who were on the scene. Why would that be? One might naturally think that people in Berlin would be more concerned about these incidents escalating because they would be the ones in danger if war broke out. Perhaps people like Trivers and McDermott believed it was worth the risk. More than anything, they believed, the United States needed to reassert allied rights, stand up to the Soviets and the GDR, and restore the morale of the West Berliners and the West Germans. They believed Berlin to be the pivotal point of contention in the Cold War.

Officials in Washington, on the other hand, had to manage a number of crises during Kennedy's administration. Berlin was only one of the many "hot spots" in the Cold War. Vietnam, Laos, and other areas in Southeast Asia took up much of the time and energy of the State Department members, as did China. Communism closer to American shores in Cuba and Latin America was another great concern. They were also trying to negotiate an agreement with the Soviet Union for a nuclear test ban treaty. In regard to the Berlin Crisis, Washington also had to contend with the wishes and frustrations of France, Great Britain, and West Germany. Kennedy and the State Department were committed to containing the spread of communism all over the world, not just in Europe.

Washington had many communist fires to put out, and when conflict erupted in Berlin, it increased the tension between the U.S. and its allies, as well as with the Soviet Union. France and Great Britain protested that the U.S. Mission in Berlin failed to consult with them during the Checkpoint Charlie incident. Reasserting American rights in Berlin at the expense of the Soviet Union's ally, the GDR, would certainly hinder

negotiations with the Soviets. Also, whenever these incidents in Berlin arose, it took the officials' attentions away from these other concerns to focus on making sure the situation in Berlin did not escalate further. It may not be that Washington believed Berlin to be unimportant, rather they viewed it as one of many significant areas of concern.

This theory, that perception of General Clay was based on perspective of Berlin in the Cold War, explains why Ausland and Garthoff do not fit the earlier model. Ausland served on the Berlin Task force and presents the story from the perspective of an official in Berlin. In his account, Clay's arrival made the Task Force's work "more difficult," but he attributes that to the different approaches taken by Clay and Kennedy. Clay favored action, and Kennedy preferred to conduct a dialogue. Ausland makes no attempt to portray Clay as reckless or dangerous – he simply complicated the already complex situation. He was in Berlin and, therefore, may have believed in the priority of the Berlin situation, which was why he does not portray Clay as reckless. He understood Clay's thinking and may have agreed with the necessity of his actions.⁹⁸

Garthoff focuses his story on Berlin, but he presents a very negative view of Clay. Garthoff served in the State Department during 1961, undoubtedly working with many of the Washington officials who disliked and distrusted Clay. Not surprisingly, Garthoff's account has little positive to say about General Clay. He focuses on the danger Clay presented with his "practice wall."

The British accounts in this study, McDermott and Gearson, also suggest that interpretation of General Clay and the Berlin Crisis depends on one's perspective on the

⁹⁸ Ausland, Kennedy, Khrushchev, 36, 30-31.

importance of Berlin in the Cold War. Further analysis outside the scope of this study, however, is needed in order to determine whether non-American accounts of the Checkpoint Charlie incident follow the pattern established in this study.

As this study has shown, historians' perceptions of General Clay and his role in the 1961 Berlin Crisis depend on how much importance they place on Berlin in the Cold War. Historians who view Berlin as the central concern of the Cold War find that the Communist threat to American rights and West Berliners' morale was so great as to necessitate Clay's measures. Historians who see Berlin as only one of many crises do not believe that Clay needed to take the steps that he did and, therefore, argue that his actions needlessly risked provoking war. The next chapter argues that the latter view is more valid. Even though General Clay needed at times to stand up to Soviet and East German encroachments on Western allied rights, the manner in which Clay attempted to prove his point often unnecessarily risked making the situation much worse.

Chapter Three – Which Interpretation Is More Valid

The historians discussed in this study often seem so convinced of the accuracy of their picture of General Clay that they never really address the issues brought up by other scholars. Wyden asserts that Clay went into Berlin with his own agenda, “to slap down the Soviets,” but he never really entertains the idea that perhaps, as historians such as Smyser argue, part of boosting Berliners’ morale meant demonstrating U.S. strength and making the Soviets adhere to their legal agreements. Smyser, in turn, along with Trivers and Smith, believe so strongly that Clay was right about the necessity for action that they assume he must have been right in the steps he took. They tend to gloss over the more provocative of Clay’s actions, such as the “practice wall” or his initial plans for Steinstucken. It is as if they never considered that Clay could have been both a little right and reckless, perhaps in fear that to admit any legitimacy in the other argument would negate their own. In any case, by addressing only part of the question, neither side provides the definitive answer on General Clay and the Berlin Crisis.

This is not to suggest that this essay is the complete and final answer to the Clay in Berlin question. Admittedly, with a couple of exceptions, this study has examined only the Americanist perspectives of those incidences. To truly determine how right or reckless Clay was, one would need to take into account the reactions of all the people involved, including the Germans and the Soviets. To accomplish this, one must study the Cold War documents of the Soviet Union and the GDR. Incorporating these sources would provide more information on how they interpreted Clay’s actions and their reasoning behind their own actions. Without exploring these issues, any study on

Checkpoint Charlie and its related events will be constrained in its ability to provide the definitive word on General Clay's return to Berlin.

This chapter addresses the issues raised by historians on both sides in exploring whether General Clay was right in his actions in the Berlin Crisis. Did, as the "negative-portrayal" historians claim, Clay recklessly and needlessly push the United States to the brink of war over Berlin in 1961? Or did he, as the "positive-portrayal" historians assert, merely fulfill the role assigned to him by President Kennedy in an attempt to bolster the morale of the West Berliners and prove U.S. determination? By examining all of the evidence presented by the historians in this study, this essay argues that General Clay's actions in Berlin were – if not unnecessary – extreme and needlessly dangerous.

The first step in deciding whether General Clay was right or reckless is determining what Clay's mission was and whether or he overstepped the bounds of his assignment. The "negative-portrayal" historians certainly believe he did so. They assert President Kennedy sent Clay to Berlin as a symbolic gesture, never intending for Clay to actually do anything, but Clay had other ideas. Wyden states: "The President had dispatched him to buck up the Berliners; Clay decided that his prime mission was to slap down the Soviets."⁹⁹

In order to verify that Wyden is correct and that Kennedy sent Clay to Berlin only to signify U.S. commitment without taking any real steps to demonstrate it, one must study Kennedy's words on the matter. Unfortunately, Kennedy died before he could give any thoughtful commentary on many of the events and issues of his presidency. Historians,

⁹⁹ Wyden, Wall, 265.

therefore, have only his presidential papers and the few recorded statements made during his administration, such as his announcement appointing Clay as his “personal representative in Berlin with the rank of Ambassador,” which tells little about Clay’s actual duties. Kennedy stated:

While this appointment will not change the existing responsibilities of our military and diplomatic officers in Germany and Berlin, General Clay will be in close touch with such men as Ambassador Dowling in Bonn, and General Watson, our Berlin Commandant, and the appointment adds to our resources of judgement and action by placing in a most important city an American in whom the Secretary of State and I have unusual confidence.¹⁰⁰

From this statement, one could easily agree with the “negative-portrayal” historians and decide that Kennedy intended Clay’s mission to be a symbolic one, particularly with the phrase “this appointment will not change the existing responsibilities of our military and diplomatic responsibilities.”

One could also infer, however, that the statement “the appointment adds to our resources of judgement and action” meant that Clay could advise Ambassador Dowling and General Watson if the Soviets precipitated a crisis. Indeed, one could make the argument that was what Clay did. The harassment by East Germans of allied vehicles along the autobahn and the residents of Steinstucken began shortly after Clay began his official duties in Berlin on September 15. Also the Vopos caused the conflict at Checkpoint Charlie, one might assert, because they refused to accept the U.S. occupation license plates on Lightner’s vehicle as sufficient identification when previously they had. Clay did not created these problems, rather he worked to solve them. His taking action in these cases appears to follow the mandate of his mission as outlined by Kennedy.

¹⁰⁰ Documents on Germany, 1944-1985, 786-87.

The manner in which he attempted to ease these situations, however, might have been out of line. In all three incidents, Clay gave orders not advice. Kennedy was very vague about Clay's specific duties and his role. He never stated directly that Clay had the right to give orders, but did Clay's title as the president's "personal representative" and as a "resource of judgement and action" imply that he could? Clay clearly believed that it did, but the ambiguity of Kennedy's statement provides no real answer.

Regardless of whether Kennedy intended for Clay to be able to dictate U.S. action in Berlin, Clay did just that. Once in Berlin, General Clay took steps he believed were necessary to fulfill his continuing goal of revitalizing West Berlin morale and serve as President Kennedy's "personal representative." In addition to the military convoys he sent to patrol the autobahn, Clay ordered U.S. forces to delay Soviet car coming into West Berlin if they harassed Americans going into East Berlin. Clay asserted that he intended for this step "to prove that our presence in Berlin was something between the United States and the Russians – not the East Germans." Then after he rescued some East German refugees who had fled to Steinstucken, which was part of West Berlin though it was separated by a strip of East German territory, Clay stationed a few U.S. Military Police officers in the area to deter the Vopos from harassing more villagers.¹⁰¹

In both of these incidents, Clay decided on a course of action and issued orders with little to no discussion. In Smith's biography of Clay, the general discussed his attempts to respect the political chain of command by first contacting the secretary of state who would then refer him to the president. This does not appear to be the case with the

¹⁰¹ Smith, Lucius D. Clay, 655.

military aspect of his role. This is partly Kennedy's fault for not clearly outlining Clay's place in the chain of command. General Clay arrived in Berlin not really knowing to whom, if anyone, he reported. Clay, however, never tried to answer that question. He appears to have believed he answered only to the president. He never cleared or even discussed his decisions on the autobahn patrols, Steinstucken, or Checkpoint Charlie with General Clarke, commander of the U.S. army in Europe, or General Norstad, the U.S. commander in chief in Europe and supreme allied commander for Europe.

Even though with the Checkpoint Charlie incident, Clay insisted that the Soviets reassert their role in the four-power control of Berlin, Clay apparently did not feel a strong need to respect that four-power control where it concerned the Western Allies. The United States was not alone in Berlin, but Clay worried little about upsetting Great Britain and France because he believed that West Berliners cared only about what the Americans did. By making his own decisions about what actions were appropriate, Clay upset the chain of command in Europe and risked creating a great deal of chaos in a situation that called for stability.¹⁰²

As Kennedy's "personal representative in Berlin," Clay's actions should correspond with the policies set by Kennedy and his administrators. Put simply, did the steps Clay took to restore the Berliners' morale fall in line with Kennedy's earlier statements and actions regarding the Berlin Crisis? Answering this question is the next step in determining whether Clay was right in his Berlin decision-making.

¹⁰² FRUS, The Berlin Crisis, 1961-1963, 510.

President Kennedy endured many crises domestic and foreign during his tenure in office, and the first time he really addressed the issue of Berlin was the Vienna Conference with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in June 1961. When their talks turned to the issue of Berlin, Khrushchev again discussed a peace treaty with East Germany, which would end U.S. occupation rights, and set another six-month deadline as he had with President Dwight Eisenhower. Kennedy told Khrushchev the Soviets were free to do as they wished as long as they refrained from threatening allied occupation rights in West Berlin. Khrushchev found this unacceptable, informing Kennedy that “the USSR would never, under any conditions, accept US rights in West Berlin after a peace treaty had been signed.” He said that the Soviets would defend the GDR if the U.S. violated its borders, stating that “force would be met by force” and that war was up to the United States. The Soviets would be signing a peace treaty with East Germany in December, which would force the allies out of Berlin. The next month Kennedy released a statement, which outlined his three essential issues on the Berlin question: the freedom of West Berlin, allied rights in West Berlin, and Western access to West Berlin. Kennedy asserted that that U.S. would defend these rights by force if necessary, but he said nothing about rights to all of Berlin, merely West Berlin.¹⁰³

The erection of the wall in August to cut off the refugee flow did nothing to threaten the people of West Berlin, allied occupation of West Berlin, or Western access to West Berlin. As such, Kennedy and the other Western powers decided that the wall required no immediate action on their part and, with their leak plugged, the Soviets and the GDR

¹⁰³ Reeves, President Kennedy, 156-74; FRUS, The Berlin Crisis, 1961-1963, 95, 97-98; Documents on Germany, 1944-1985, 760-62.

would take no further action. In a meeting of the Berlin Steering Group on August 15, Rusk asserted “that while the border closing was a most serious matter . . . it would make a Berlin settlement easier.” Those present at the meeting agreed that the wall was not a “shooting issue,” rather the problem was “essentially one of propaganda.” In private, Kennedy said: “This is the end of the Berlin Crisis. The other side panicked – not us. We’re not going to do anything new because there is no alternative except war. It’s all over, they’re not going to overrun Berlin.”¹⁰⁴

Clearly then, President Kennedy wanted measures taken in Berlin only when Western rights were violated. The harassment of allied vehicles along the autobahn certainly qualifies, as it threatened the right of Western access to West Berlin. Indeed in a letter to the general written in early October after incidents on the autobahn. Kennedy agreed with Clay that Americans needed “to be prompt and energetic” in their responses to any harassment of U.S. access to Berlin, “to avoid misunderstanding, and to prevent the hardening of a new status quo.”¹⁰⁵

Clay’s efforts in Steinstucken also fulfill Kennedy’s requirements for action. Even though the area of Steinstucken was separated from greater West Berlin by a small strip of East German land, it was still considered part of West Berlin. The people of Steinstucken, therefore, merited the supporting defensive action of the United States

¹⁰⁴ FRUS, The Berlin Crisis, 1961-1963, 334. Those present at the meeting were Secretary of State Rusk, the Secretaries of Defense, Commerce, and Agriculture, the Under Secretary of Treasury Fowler, Robert Kennedy, CIA Director Allen Dulles, Deputy Director Wilson of the USIA, Chairman Lyman Lemnitzer of the JCS, Assistant Secretary of State Foy Kohler, General Maxwell Taylor, and McGeorge Bundy; Reeves, President Kennedy, 211-12.

¹⁰⁵ FRUS, The Berlin Crisis, 1961-1963, 486.

because they were West Berliners, and the Vopos threatened their freedom. On July 25, 1961, President Kennedy swore to maintain American commitment to West Berlin, stating: “We must meet our oft-stated pledge to the free peoples of West Berlin – and maintain our rights and their safety, even in the face of force – in order to maintain the confidence of other free peoples in our word and our resolve. The strength of the alliance on which our security depends is dependent in turn on our willingness to meet our commitments to them.” The United States promised to protect the people of West Berlin, and that meant all of West Berlin – including a little place with only 50 people.¹⁰⁶

The Checkpoint Charlie incident, on the other hand, violates the guidelines Kennedy set on what issues for which the U.S. would and would not fight. At that point in his administration, Kennedy had expressed no concern for allied occupation rights in East Berlin, only West Berlin. In fact, less than two weeks prior to this incident, Kennedy had warned Clay in a letter against actions that could quickly escalate. Kennedy wrote:

[A]n almost instantaneous resort to force may not be easy to agree with our allies, and may in fact not be in our own interest. It is not clear that we should deliberately embark on a series of actions on the ground that would quickly fail if the Soviets chose to use their full conventional capability, thus facing us very quickly with the choice between defeat and escalation...to [using] nuclear weapons.¹⁰⁷

Indeed, when Kennedy learned the morning after the initial incident of the confrontation at the border, he was far from pleased. He complained that he had not sent Lightner to Berlin “to go to the opera.” One of the “positive-portrayal” historians Howard Trivers disagreed with Kennedy. He asserted:

¹⁰⁶ Documents on Germany, 1944-1985, 764.

¹⁰⁷ FRUS, The Berlin Crisis, 1961-1963, 485.

It was and had been for years standing practice for the Allied military and civilian authorities to show their presence in East Berlin by attendance at the opera, theater, art exhibitions, city tours, etc; after the Wall it was believed particularly important so far as the East Berliners were concerned to maintain this policy. General Clay advised Washington in strong terms that the East German pretensions must not be tolerated and that we had to meet the issue head-on if we were to maintain our position in Berlin and our credibility with the Communists.¹⁰⁸

Throughout his discussion of the Berlin Crisis, Trivers argues that Washington officials simply did not understand the reality and precariousness of the everyday situation in Berlin. He states: “It was exceedingly difficult to make the Kennedy administration see beyond its abstract preconceptions and come to understand the actual situation in West Berlin.” Smith concurs with his assessment, stating that these officials were “completely out of touch with the daily situation in Berlin.” Smith goes even further, giving the impression that many in Washington were cowards. He chastises them for their “timidity” and states: “Washington, of course, was extremely jittery.”¹⁰⁹

There could be another reason why these Washington officials preferred not to take action in Berlin other than merely being afraid or not grasping the urgency of the situation in Berlin. Perhaps they better understood what many in Berlin did not – the issues for which Americans back home would be willing to fight. McGeorge Bundy, Kennedy’s National Security Advisor, makes this point in his work on the Berlin Crisis. He quotes Kennedy’s response when asked whether he could or should have prevented the wall: “Eastern Berlin and East Germany have been under the control of the Soviet Union, really, since 1947 and ’48.” Bundy then carries the explanation further, stating:

¹⁰⁸ Trivers, Three Crises, 44.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 39, 31; Smith, Defense of Berlin, 322-23.

What [Kennedy] did not add, although it was clear in his mind both before and after the wall went up, was that he should not use American military strength, conventional or nuclear, to challenge that Soviet control. He understood that legally Berlin was a single occupied city, and also that the circulation of citizens throughout Berlin had been accepted throughout the postwar years. But these realities, important as they must be to Berliners, were not matters for which he could ask Americans or their allies to fight.¹¹⁰

Even though the U.S. Mission in Berlin had a legal right to enter East Berlin freely and with no restrictions from the GDR, enforcing that right becomes much more difficult if the American people fail to understand or care about this provision. Bundy admits that “the stakes in West Berlin were real and great” and “that strong and visible preparations were required.” But such action requires support from the people, and “no such measures could be taken without setting before the American people a cause to which they could rally. The freedom of more than two million people reliant on American determination was such a cause. Freedom of circulation in an already divided city was not.”¹¹¹

Furthermore, the East Germans were not preventing allied officials from entering East Berlin, but merely requiring them to present identification to prove they were actually with the occupational forces. During the Cold War fear of espionage ran strong on both sides. According to Khrushchev, American U-2 planes had flown into Soviet territory a number of times, but the Soviets had been unable to shoot down the planes. The Soviets protested these flights, but the United States denied they took place. Khrushchev grew increasingly frustrated, and when Soviet forces shot down an American U-2 spy plane flying over Soviet territory in the spring of 1960, Khrushchev seized the opportunity to

¹¹⁰ McGeorge Bundy, Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First 50 Years, (New York: Random House, 1988), 367.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 369.

expose the American government in a lie. When Khrushchev informed the world that the Soviet Union had the plane, which had been shot down in Soviet space, the U.S. stated that the plane accidentally strayed from its course. Then Khrushchev played his trump card. He announced that the Soviets had captured the plane's pilot who gave the Soviets the details about his route and mission.¹¹²

The Warsaw Pact also expressed concern about Western spies in the wake of the Berlin Wall, in part as justification for its erection. They issued a statement, blaming the GDR's economic difficulties and internal political problems on the subversive activities of the West. The West's spies had provoked disturbances and incited the East Germans.¹¹³

The Soviets and East German Communists grew even more worried upon receiving reports, as well as photographic evidence, that General Clay intended to knock down the Berlin Wall. Marshal Ivan Konev, Clay's Soviet counterpart, told Khrushchev that "he had learned through intelligence channels on what day and at what hour the Western powers were going to begin their actions against us. They were preparing bulldozers to break down our border installations [the Wall]. The bulldozers would be followed by tanks and wave after wave of jeeps with infantrymen."¹¹⁴

In light of past espionage and Soviet evidence of Clay's plans, the East German request for identification appears legitimate, not an unjustified violation of allied rights.

¹¹² Nikita Khrushchev, Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974), 446-47.

¹¹³ Documents on Germany 1944-1985, 773-77.

¹¹⁴ Raymond Garthoff, "Berlin 1961: The Record Corrected," Foreign Policy (1991), 148.

Though, again, this was not an allied right for which Kennedy was willing to fight. Kennedy's focus lay with preserving allied occupation rights in West Berlin – not East. The actions of Kennedy's administration following the tank crisis demonstrate that Kennedy disapproved of the stand Clay took at Checkpoint Charlie. Before the tanks even began to withdraw, Rusk instructed American civilians to refrain from entering East Berlin for a time. While Kennedy expressed his appreciation to Clay for what he accomplished, Kennedy's advisers assured the Soviets that Clay had acted without authorization. British Prime Minister Macmillan sent word to the Soviet embassy in East Berlin that the Americans would soon remove Clay.¹¹⁵

The question arises, then, that if Kennedy disagreed with the stand Clay was taking at Checkpoint Charlie, why did he not override the general during the standoff? Beschloss asserts that Kennedy backed General Clay only because he feared provoking him. A recent article by Mark Haefele throws some doubt on the accuracy of this statement. Haefele argues that President Kennedy was very concerned with world opinion and used polling information from the U.S. Information Agency to gauge perception of the U.S. in the eyes of the world. Haefele contends that Kennedy worried particularly about the Soviets being perceived as militarily stronger than the U.S., stating "American weakness anywhere in the world, on any issue, might be the factor that tipped world opinion toward a belief that communism was ultimately going to be the more durable system." That being the case, it could be that Kennedy supported Clay during the crisis not because he was afraid of the trouble the general might cause but because he did not want the world to

¹¹⁵ FRUS, The Berlin Crisis, 1961-1963, 545; Gelb, The Berlin Wall, 257.

perceive the U.S. as retreating from a strong stance. Now that the U.S. was in this standoff with the Soviets, they could not back down and appear to give in to GDR demands. Yet if Clay had not used such a large show of U.S. military strength, the United States would not have been in that position in the first place.¹¹⁶

During his tenure as President Kennedy's "personal representative in Berlin," Gen. Lucius Clay took some measures that skewed from the direction set by Kennedy in regard to Berlin. The issue of identification at border crossings was not one for which Kennedy was prepared to use force. The harassment of allied vehicles and West Berliners were concerns that required a response by the U.S. However, just because the incidents along the autobahn and Steinstücken necessitated action does not mean that General Clay took the correct ones. Even though Clay's efforts may have been justified, he risked confrontations that could have easily become dangerous and deadly.

It was not enough for General Clay to have an armed convoy of military vehicles patrolling the autobahn to prevent the harassment of Americans traveling along the route. He went a step further with retaliatory action, ordering U.S. forces to delay Soviet cars coming into West Berlin if they harassed Americans going into East Berlin. Clay asserted that he intended for this step "to prove that our presence in Berlin was something between the United States and the Russians – not the East Germans." Soviet general Ivan Konev ordered Ulbricht to stop the harassment entirely because – according to Smyser – he did not want the freedom of his own soldiers threatened.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Mark Haefele, "John F. Kennedy, USIA, and World Public Opinion." Diplomatic History 25 (Winter 2001), 63-84.

¹¹⁷ Smith, Lucius D. Clay, 655; Smyser, From Yalta to Berlin, 169.

Although preserving American access rights was a necessary stand to take, proving a point about U.S.-Soviet occupation rights was a rather risky venture. In this instance, Konev did back down in order to preserve the peace, but the situation could have easily gone the other way. Fearing Western espionage or an attack on the wall, the Soviets and East Germans might have felt entirely justified in their behavior toward travelers into East Berlin. Believing themselves entitled to protect East Berlin, they might have seen Clay's act as an unnecessary provocation and taken their own stand against further encroachments by the United States. During the Cold War, it was a slippery slope from protecting one's rights to provoking a major conflict.

General Clay tried to push the envelope again with Steinstucken. His initial plan to provide assistance to the threatened villagers involved sending two companies of U.S. troops into the area. They would have to make their way through the barrier erected by the East Germans. Any movement against the Berlin Wall would have been interpreted as an act of war. Valentin Falin, later the Soviet Ambassador to Bonn, made this point clear when discussing the "practice wall." He stated that the Soviets would have retaliated for any move on the wall, which would have pushed the U.S. and Soviet Union "closer to the third world war than ever...the events most probably would have gone beyond any possibility of control."¹¹⁸

When Gen. Bruce Clarke, commander of U.S. forces in Europe, discovered this combustible plan of Clay's for Steinstucken as well as the "practice wall," he immediately put a stop to it, forcing Clay to devise an alternate scheme. Clay decided to

¹¹⁸ Gelb, *The Berlin Wall*, 248-49; Beschloss, *The Crisis Years*, 335.

go to Steinstucken himself, arriving by helicopter and stationing three military police personnel there upon his exit. This was a much more suitable course of action. It established an American presence in the area and demonstrated U.S. commitment to West Berlin – all of West Berlin. Clay's measures accomplished both of these goals without threatening the wall or the Communists' right to protect it. Had his imprudent act not been tempered by Clarke's countermands, General Clay might very well have sent U.S. troops into Steinstucken with the proverbial guns blazing, sparking off a potentially deadly clash between the two world superpowers.¹¹⁹

No one stopped General Clay in his endeavors at Checkpoint Charlie as Clarke did with Steinstucken. He gave the orders; no one usurped his commands. He had the support of President Kennedy with whom he spoke by telephone. He told Kennedy that the United States would lose its credibility throughout the entire world if it "backed down in the face of East German pretensions." Although no war came from Clay's standoff with the Soviets, the very real danger for hostilities existed with U.S. and Soviet tanks lined up on either side of the Berlin Wall. General Clay willingly risked turning the Cold War hot in order to prove his point about Soviet control of East Germany and U.S. occupation rights in East Berlin – an issue to which President Kennedy never expressed his commitment.¹²⁰

The "positive-portrayal" historians such as Smith and Smyser assert that Clay was justified in his actions because he proved that the Soviets were really in charge of East Germany and that GDR claims of autonomy were lies. Dulles asserts that while some

¹¹⁹ Gelb, *The Berlin Wall*, 248-49.

¹²⁰ Reeves, *President Kennedy*, 249.

people outside of Berlin failed to realize the significance of Clay's achievement, "the experts, aware of the Four Power legal agreements, knew of the significance of the Soviet position in the city" and what the return of Soviet tanks to the border represented. These historians agree with Clay when he stated:

To the outside world it looked like a very exciting thing: ten Russian tanks on one side of the Wall and a hundred yards away on the American side ten American tanks laid up, all with their guns pointing directly at one another. But these were Russian tanks, not East German tanks. It was obvious that the Russians did not trust the East Germans in this situation. As soon as they did that, I was no longer concerned. The Russians had come out of hiding, and I was sure they were not going to do anything. But we had proved our point. The Russians were in charge. We were not going to have to deal with the East Germans. And that was the whole purpose.¹²¹

The arrival of the Soviet tanks, however, did not necessarily prove that the Soviets were in charge of East Germany. Khrushchev told Kennedy at the Vienna Conference that the Soviets would defend the GDR if the U.S. violated its borders, stating that "force would be met by force." With U.S. tanks with bulldozer attachments on the front of the equipment stationed directly in front of the Berlin Wall, it could have easily appeared as though the U.S. intended to make a move against the wall and the GDR. The Soviets had every right to defend an ally in that situation, whether they controlled the city or not.¹²²

Although Kennedy may have never openly confronted Clay during the tank crisis, he may have worked behind the scenes to diffuse the situation. Foreshadowing their secret deal to end the Cuban Missile Crisis, Kennedy and Khrushchev appear to have communicated through back channels to withdraw the tanks. In his memoirs, Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament, Khrushchev states that he ordered the

¹²¹ Dulles, The Wall, 90, 84; Smith, Lucius D. Clay, 660.

¹²² FRUS, The Berlin Crisis, 1961-1963, 95, 97-98.

Soviet tanks back to allow the Americans to save face, confident that the gesture would soon be returned. Reeves, Wyden, and Garthoff assert that this conviction came from assurances from President Kennedy that the U.S. tanks would indeed pull back. Once again, if cooler heads than that belonging to General Clay had not prevailed, a dangerous confrontation might have erupted in Berlin.¹²³

The last step in determining whether General Clay was right or reckless in 1961 is to examine the aftermath of Clay's actions. Despite the strong stance taken by Clay with the autobahn patrols, Washington discontinued them. Even though Clay believed "it was a damn foolish thing to stop," no cataclysm befell the United States for this action. The Communists did not shut down the autobahn or some similar deed. The U.S. made its point, accomplished its task. There existed no need for further patrols.¹²⁴

Washington back-pedaled from Clay's strong actions almost immediately after the Checkpoint Charlie incident in an effort to fix the damage they believed he might have done to Soviet-American relations. Washington and London made it clear to the Soviets that they considered Clay more of a renegade than the true representation of Kennedy's policies in Berlin. They were not willing to go to the same lengths to fight for the same cause as Clay. Despite the concessions made, the Soviets did not push the matter, did not renew their call for a peace treaty. The U.S. did not lose its position in the eyes of the world. West Berliners did not flee the city for fear of Communist action.

¹²³ Khrushchev, Khrushchev Remembers, 459-60; Reeves, President Kennedy, 251; Wyden, Wall, 266; Garthoff, "Berlin 1961: The Record Corrected," 143-44.

¹²⁴ Smith, Lucius D. Clay, 656.

West Berlin, in fact, enjoyed a boom in its economy. In late January 1962 U.S. News & World Report presented the story of Berlin's success. Industrial production was rising, up 42 percent since 1958, the year Khrushchev first began his ultimatums. There was a surge of new houses, factories, and workers, and many of the doctors, dentists, and shopkeepers who had fled to West Germany in August had returned to the city. The article stated: "Bankers and investment houses report that there has been no significant flight of capital from West Berlin since the building of the wall." West Berliners had a great deal of confidence in their city's future, and General Clay had played a large role in encouraging that progress. The West Berlin Bierstubern gave Clay the most credit for the West Berliners' boost in morale following the Checkpoint Charlie incident. After the tank crisis, however, Clay's days in Berlin were numbered.¹²⁵

In April 1962 President Kennedy recalled his special representative from Berlin. Although many West Berliners were upset and refused to believe the news was true – some even going so far as to accuse "innocent [newspaper] venders of making money on 'damned lies,'" they stayed in Berlin. No great mass of people rushed to safer territory in West Germany. They still believed they were safe in Berlin. Clay was an important symbol to the West Berliners, yes, but they did not fear that U.S. commitment to Berlin would leave with the general.¹²⁶

General Clay's recall was only one of the concessions made by the U.S. that spring. The U.S. was willing "to renegotiate on 'access routes' as a distinct and separate problem

¹²⁵ Berlin Now: Life with the Wall," U.S. News & World Report 52 (29 January 1962), 68-69; "Better Now," Time (17 November 1961), 23.

¹²⁶ Joseph Wechsberg, "Letter from Berlin," New Yorker (26 May 1962), 115-16.

from the political future of Germany” when before they insisted on treating them as the same issue. The U.S. would also give East Germany some “de facto control over allied traffic,” accepting that “East Germany would have to take part in any international control.” If the Soviets were willing to accept these terms, there were even more concessions the U.S. would consider making.¹²⁷

Through it all, West Berliners remained in the city. Although they may have hated the violence of the GDR against its own people and worried in later months that the U.S. would too readily accept the permanent separation of East and West Germany, they never fled in fear of advancing Communist aggression. The concessions the U.S. made in Clay’s absence never allowed the Soviets and East Germans to succeed in pushing the Western allies out of the city so that the Communists might overrun it. Many of the “positive-portrayal” historians present General Clay as the lone figure willing to stand up to the Soviets to prove U.S. commitment to Berlin. Smith and Dulles argue that Washington officials were indecisive and even fearful of upsetting the Soviets. Trivers and Smyser, both of whom served in Berlin in 1961-62, assert that the administration never really understood the gravity of the situation and the precariousness of the U.S. position in Berlin as Clay did. Also having been stationed in Berlin, British Minister Geoffrey McDermott argues that the United States had to stand up to Communist bullying attempts and encroachments on the West’s position in Berlin, and General Clay was the only one who recognized this problem and took action to solve it. These historians all suggest that without Clay the U.S. Mission in Berlin would have fallen apart

¹²⁷ “Change in Berlin,” Newsweek 59 (23 April 1962), 31-32.

and surrendered to Soviet and East German demands, and the U.S. would appear as weak and cowardly nation in the eyes of the world. Yet this disastrous fate never came to be once Washington recalled Clay.

It is true that Clay may have indeed worried and even frightened the Communists enough to convince them to ease their pressure on the West. Newsweek reported that upon hearing of Clay's imminent departure, "the Communists were jubilant. 'Clay has flown away...' gloated East Berlin's Neus Deutschland." By stepping over his bounds, Clay may have even served an unexpected purpose for Kennedy by intimidating the Communists. Yet if Clay was the only one keeping the Communists in line, as some of the "positive-portrayal" historians suggest, then it would follow that the Communists would continue and even increase their encroachments on Western rights once Clay left Berlin. This would seem even more likely in light of how the U.S. government backed off of the strong positions taken by Clay – ending the autobahn patrols, General Clarke destroying the practice wall and refusing Clay the troops for his initial Steinstucken mission, and ordering Americans in Berlin to refrain from travel in East Berlin after the tank crisis. Yet Communist aggression against West Berlin and Western rights, for the most part, remained in check. In mid-February 1962, the Soviets harassed U.S. air traffic over Berlin in an apparent attempt to garner acceptance for Soviets sharing the air space with American planes. General Clay, in his typical fashion of trying to push the situation farther than it needed to go, wanted fighter planes to accompany American planes

traveling over Berlin. Instead, the U.S. ignored the harassment, and it soon ended with no incidents of violence.¹²⁸

One could argue that the Soviets eased their pressure on Berlin because of their plan to deploy nuclear missiles in Cuba. Khrushchev was merely biding his time until he could approach the negotiating table with a much better position. That possibility is highly probable. However, though not widely known in the U.S. at the time, President Kennedy ended the Cuban Missile Crisis by making a secret deal with Khrushchev to remove U.S. missiles from Turkey. In public Kennedy presented himself similarly to General Clay – he was standing up to Soviet encroachments, forcing Khrushchev to surrender. In reality, Kennedy made concessions to keep the peace. The world did not end, and the Cold War continued on in the same stalemate for many more years.¹²⁹

Just like with the Cuban Missile Crisis, the U.S. needed to take a stand against Soviet encroachments in Berlin. Kennedy could not allow the Soviets to place missiles so near U.S. soil, and the U.S. Mission in Berlin could not let the Communists harass autobahn travelers or Steinstucken villagers. The U.S. had made a commitment to the people of West Berlin and needed to defend them as well as Western occupation rights. There is a difference between standing up against an aggressive power and intentionally provoking a dangerous conflict. Kennedy could have ordered U.S. forces to attack the missile sites and destroy them. He chose instead to issue a blockade and, later, to make a deal.

¹²⁸ “Change in Berlin,” 31-32; Bailey, “The Gentle Erosion of Berlin,” 18-19.

¹²⁹ Robert F. Kennedy, Thirteen Days (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1969), 108-09.

When Gen. Lucius Clay arrived in Berlin in 1961, he had a duty to boost the morale of West Berliners and demonstrate U.S. commitment to the city's people. Some of the steps he took to prove that determination were necessary – ending the harassment of autobahn travelers, protecting the people of Steinstücken. Other measures went beyond what the administration was willing to defend – building a “practice wall,” storming through East German territory to the small enclave beyond, lining up tanks and using military escorts to allow allied travelers into East Berlin without having to show identification. Clay had good intentions and may have been right in the stands that he took, but the manner in which he carried them out was often more aggressive than called for by the situation. Consequently, the “negative-portrayal” historians’ perception of Clay is more valid. Even when General Clay was right, he was still reckless.

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