Ch. 5 The Berlin Blockade Crisis of 1948-1949

The Berlin Blockade Crisis of 1948-1949, best known for the Berlin Airlift, marked the escalation of the Cold War to the level of tension that characterized the subsequent decades, shredding whatever remained of the bonds between the Allied Powers and the illusion that a cooperative world order was possible between them. This chapter takes up the challenge of explaining critical aspects of this crisis.

The chapter is structured as a competition between two broad perspectives on crises, the conventional wisdom and an alternative predicated on the relationship between red line characteristics, *faits accomplis*, and outcomes. As discussed in Chapter Three, the conventional wisdom emphasizes first and foremost two classic structural determinants of advantage in crisis: relative power and relative interest in the stakes. It explains crisis strategy primarily in terms of signaling, with each side striving to convince the other of their willingness to fight (i.e., of their high level of interest in the stakes). The theory of red lines and *faits accomplis* developed in Chapter Two, in contrast, explains crisis actions and outcomes in terms of what states can get away with unilaterally taking. Because strong red lines are the key to deterring these *faits accomplis*, four weaknesses in red lines – arbitrariness, imprecision, incompleteness, and unverifiability – function as powerful determinants of the course of crisis. This chapter will focus on the two that shaped this case: arbitrariness and incompleteness.

This chapter adopts the unique observable implications approach to case studies described in Chapter One. Rather than structure the entire case in the form of a chronological narrative, this approach requires identifying the specific facts within the case that can only be plausibly explained by one particular theory, and not by rival theories. Equally important are the certain observable implications. Certain observable implications are facts that must be observed in the case for a particular theory not to be discredited. The intent of the unique (and certain) observable implications approach is to isolate and fully evaluate the most informative pieces of information within the case rather than risk their getting buried within a traditional historical narrative structured chronologically.

Why, for instance, did the Western Powers believe that forcing transport aircraft through to Berlin would succeed, whereas attempting to force through a convoy of trucks and armed vehicles would end in disaster? Both actions would have the same strategic effect of undermining the Soviet blockade. The military balance was the same either way. Yet, one was believed to be likely to succeed and the other was seen by most in Washington as likely to start a war. Some American policymakers even feared that a truck convoy might cross the border successfully only to be trapped in an impossible position when surrounded by Soviet forces and obstacles that it could only penetrate by attacking. The Soviets could destroy bridges both ahead and behind of the convoy, leaving it trapped in a humiliating
position. It is difficult to make sense of this seemingly bizarre scenario except through an understanding of crisis that emphasizes unilateral actions designed to push as far as possible without violating strong red lines, in this case the use of force.

Neither side was willing to fire on the other, but neither was eager to back down. The result was that each side worked around the strengths of the other’s red line to the extent possible. The Soviet Union did so first by blocking transit corridors in its own zone rather than assaulting directly. Rather than try to push through these obstructions, the Western Powers responded by bypassing these obstacles through the skies, where the Soviets would have to fire first to stop them. The cut-off convoy scenario contemplated at length in Washington merely takes this dancing around firing first to its logical extreme. The airlift-vs.-convoy decision was the most significant strategy debate on the Western side of the crisis, and as I will explain, it hinged on an appreciation of strong red lines.

One important limitation of the following analysis is the lack of information on the Soviet side; the evidence regarding the Soviets consists largely of detailed accounts of what American policymakers believed to be true about Soviet thought processes. I deal with this problem not by assuming American perceptions were accurate, but rather by limiting the analysis of the Soviets to explaining American perceptions of likely Soviet actions. These perceptions turn out to provide some of the most informative observable implications within the case.

The chapter is arranged in three parts. Part I provides a minimalist historical overview of the Berlin Blockade Crisis. It does not try to summarize all of the details that will be utilized in later sections, but rather merely to provide the basic framework with which a reader who is relatively unfamiliar with this case can understand the remainder of the chapter. Part II portrays the case with two competing and starkly different narratives, one drawing on the theory of red lines and faits accomplis developed in Chapter Two and another rooted in the conventional wisdom as laid out in Chapter Three. This part of the chapter serves to clarify the differences between these two perspectives on crisis and to underscore how much what I will refer to as “red lines theory” as a shorthand can potentially explain about the Berlin Blockade Crisis. Part III, the majority of the chapter, tests both red lines theory and key elements of the conventional wisdom by identifying and evaluating the unique observable implications and certain observable implications of these theories.

Part I: Historical Overview

The defeat of Nazi Germany in the Second World War left Germany divided into four zones by the occupying powers: Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States. Although each power took charge of managing affairs in its own zone, the intent was to govern Germany jointly and cooperatively. Berlin, despite its location at the center of the Soviet Zone in Eastern Germany, was

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1 I credit the coining of this term to Barry Posen. I use it not to imply that I have created an entirely new theory, but rather merely because of the need for a concise term to refer to the ideas in Chapter Two.
similarly divided into four sectors, one per occupying power. This arrangement was fraught with difficulties from the start. As the Cold War intensified, the situation began to deteriorate.

At a conference in London in February, 1948, the three Western Powers agreed to the fusion of their three zones in Western Germany and the gradual formation of a new, pro-Western German state. An important step in this direction was the creation of a new, separate currency for Western Germany. This “West Mark” would solve the problem that a joint currency partially controlled and printed by the Soviets was susceptible to many forms of economic manipulation and uncontrolled inflation. The Soviets, with the damage wrought by German armies still fresh in their minds, vehemently objected to these developments towards a capitalist West German state.

Against this backdrop, Soviet Marshal Sokolovsky walked out of the Allied Control Council governing Germany on March 20th, 1948. The first new Soviet restrictions on train traffic between the Western Sectors of Berlin and the Western Zones of Germany began on April 1st. These restrictions led to the “Little Lift,” a modest initial airlift intended only to supply the Western garrisons in Berlin, approximately 5,000 American forces, 5,000 additional Americans, and 10,000 British and French personnel. Supplying the more than two million German civilians of the Western Sectors was another matter entirely.\(^2\)

By the end of June, 1948, the Soviets had withdrawn from the Kommandatura council governing Berlin and severed all road, rail, and river (barge) access to Berlin. In response, the United States and the United Kingdom initiated “Operation Vittles” and “Operation Plainfare” (respectively) to supply the entire population of the three Western Sectors. At first the airlift relied mainly on the C-47 Skytrain and fell well short of the quantities of food and coal needed to supply the Western Sectors. Most of the tonnage lifted into Berlin consisted of coal, not food. Over time, improved procedures, a new airfield in Berlin (Tegel), and hundreds of new C-54 Skymasters turned the tide. At its peak day on Easter, 1949, the airlift brought 12,941 tons on 1,398 flights into Berlin, considerably more than double the daily minimum requirement.\(^3\)

Despite the gravity of the situation, the morale of the citizens of the Western Sectors of Berlin remained high. The continuing symbolism of the airlift contributed, as did the widely-publicized

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dropping of candy via parachute to children in the Western Sectors. A common joke in Berlin went: “Things could be worse. Imagine what life would be like if the Americans were running the blockade and the Soviets were attempting to supply us.”

The Berlin Blockade Crisis lasted nearly a year, and consisted of more than just the airlift. There were a number of armed standoffs within the city itself. The existing city government disintegrated and was replaced by two separate city governments claiming control over the whole city but in reality controlling only their own side. Efforts to supply Berlin by train failed at the border, and the option to dispatch an armed convoy to do so was discussed at great length but repeatedly rejected. The Western Powers eventually imposed a “counter-blockade” in the form of economic sanctions against trade with the Soviet Zone in September of 1948.

Negotiations at many levels took place throughout the crisis: in Moscow with Stalin directly, in Berlin among the military governors, and even in the United Nations with third-party mediation. None of these negotiations led anywhere. Instead, the Soviet Union eventually accepted that the airlift’s ability to supply the Western Sectors indefinitely meant that the blockade had failed. This led to an offer to end the blockade in exchange for a lifting of the counter-blockade and a conference of foreign ministers, which both sides understood to be negligible concessions by the Western Powers. The Soviet Union terminated the Berlin Blockade on May 12, 1949.

The Berlin Blockade Crisis ended in a victory for the Western Powers. The Soviet Union failed to achieve its main goals: disrupting the London Conference arrangements for a unified state in Western Germany, acquiring the Western Sectors of Berlin outright, or acquiring de facto control of those sectors in the form of near-total economic authority over them. What led to this outcome? What explains the tactics adopted during the crisis by each side?

**Part II: Two Narratives of the Berlin Crisis**

Part II presents two alternative narratives for the strategies, actions, and outcome of the Berlin Blockade Crisis. The conventional wisdom offers a compelling story that plausibly explains many facets of the crisis in terms of relative power, relative interest, and signaling resolve. In the next section, I lay out an alternative narrative based on the theory of red lines and faits accomplis developed in Chapter Two. Through this lens, the crisis can be understood as a competition in locating weaknesses in the other side’s red lines and implementing faits accomplis to exploit them. Part II establishes the plausibility of these two frameworks for understanding crises and lays the groundwork for the theory testing in Part III.

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4 Haydock, *City under Siege*, p. 249.
6 The airlift would continue to build up a reserve of supplies until it was phased out starting on August 1st, 1949. Miller, *To Save a City*, pp. 181-184.
The Conventional Wisdom Narrative

The story of the Berlin Crisis can be told in the form of the clash of the two sides’ relative power and relative interest, along with their efforts to signal their resolve to the other side. There is no shortage of rhetoric supporting this view. According to Secretary of State Marshall, “The struggle is still in its political phase and anything which tends to reduce the will to resist in the Western democracies is a loss to us and a gain to the Soviets.” Colonel Frank Howley, commander of the American garrison in Berlin, described the prospects for succeeding with forcing an armored convoy through to Berlin as follows, “Our chances will increase as the willingness of the American people to fight increases, and as our rearmament progresses.” At the level of crisis behavior, this story holds that the Western Powers cultivated a perception of resolve through signals such as the forward deployment of nuclear-capable B-29s to England and the airlift. The Soviets, in turn, did so with actions such as buzzing Western transport aircraft, aggressive actions in Berlin, and the blockade itself. Within these parameters, the conventional wisdom offers a plausible narrative for the course and outcome of the crisis.

The process of evaluating the power and interests of both sides never ceased throughout the crisis, and policymakers saw these considerations as highly significant. The American military was keenly sensitive to what it saw as the dangerous imbalance of conventional power in Europe in favor of the Soviet Union, often finding surprisingly little comfort in the U.S. nuclear monopoly. The superiority of Soviet ground forces in Europe was never in doubt. The United States had only a few divisions in continental Europe, and these forces were dispersed in order to carry out the occupation. Still recovering from World War II and without any contribution from Western Germany, the continental European allies were also unready for war. The United States retained only one well-trained air group in theater. It was equipped with antiquated P-47s, although another group of F-80 jet fighters was deployed during the crisis itself.

Secretary of State Marshall deliberately avoided public statements revealing American military weakness in order to bolster the U.S. bargaining position with regard to Berlin. In a memorandum to Secretary of Defense Forrestal, Marshall requested that the Defense Department not make public the current figures on the military balance in Europe and the projected number of weeks it would take the Red Army to reach the Pyrenees Mountains. He was concerned about “disheartening” the Europeans. The Army drew up plans for this withdrawal to the Pyrenees “based on the concept of retaining a foothold in Western Europe.” The U.S. Embassy in Moscow released an annual assessment of Soviet

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7 “Marshall to Forrestal” March 23, 1948 [FRUS]. Note: FRUS hereafter refers to documents available from the State Department’s Foreign Relations of the United States series.
8 Haydock, City under Siege, p. 255.
10 Shlaim, The United States and the Berlin Blockade, p. 183.
11 “Marshall to Forrestal” March 23, 1948 [FRUS].
intentions – ironically, on April 1st of each year – and the 1948 assessment made clear the American belief that the Red Army could seize continental Europe and hold it for at least two years.\textsuperscript{13}

Nonetheless, an the 1949 edition of this assessment, written shortly before the end of the crisis, found some reason for optimism,

While the Soviet Army is probably capable of overrunning continental Europe with the exception of Spain and Portugal and of occupying strategic areas in the Near East, the Kremlin is presumably aware of the difficult transport, logistical and other problems which would result from such an attempt and doubtless realizes it would be military folly.\textsuperscript{14}

Despite the expectation that the Red Army would initially sweep across continental Europe, the general view in Washington was that the war would ultimately go badly for the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{15} This conclusion was usually justified in terms of the superior military potential of the United States and the difficulties of occupying so much hostile territory. Both the United States and the United Kingdom prepared for mobilization in case the situation continued to worsen.\textsuperscript{16} Left generally unsaid was the expectation that the use of atomic weapons against Soviet industrial centers would tilt the longer-term balance further in favor of the Western Powers.

Western policymakers almost universally believed that capitulating to Soviet pressure in Berlin would embolden the Soviets into seizing or demanding further gains, and these fear was often expressed in reputational terms. Analogies to Munich were commonplace.\textsuperscript{17} Clay stated on April 10th, “We have lost Czechoslovakia. Norway is threatened. We retreat from Berlin. When Berlin falls, western Germany will be next. If we mean ... to hold Europe against communism, we must not budge.”\textsuperscript{18} And on another occasion, “We must say, ... ‘this far you may go and no further.’ There is no middle ground which is not appeasement.”\textsuperscript{19} His counterpart Robert Murphy, the top State Department official in Germany, put it as follows,

[The western presence in Berlin] became a symbol of resistance to eastern expansionism. It is unquestionably an index of our prestige in central and eastern Europe. As far as Germany is concerned, it is a test of US ability in Europe. If we docilely withdraw now, Germany and other

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{13} Joint Intelligence Committee, American Embassy, Moscow, “Soviet Intentions,” April 1, 1948 [FRUS].
\bibitem{14} Joint Intelligence Committee, American Embassy, Moscow, “Soviet Intentions,” April 5, 1949 [FRUS].
\bibitem{15} “Kohler to Marshall,” September 28, 1948 [FRUS].
\bibitem{16} “Douglas to Marshall, July 26, 1948 [FRUS].
\bibitem{17} E.g., see the following memorandum which described a draft British communique as “redolent with appeasement.” “Marshall to Douglas,” Washington, July 21, 1948 [FRUS].
\bibitem{18} Lucius D. Clay, \textit{Decision in Germany} (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1950), p. 361. This quotation is likely a paraphrase, albeit a fairly accurate one, of what he said at the time.
\bibitem{19} These sorts of statements fit both the conventional wisdom and red lines theory. As such, they are not unique observable implications. Shlaim, \textit{The United States and the Berlin Blockade}, p. 125.
\end{thebibliography}
Europeans would conclude that our retreat from western Germany is just a question of time. US position in Europe would be gravely weakened, and like a cat on a sloping tin roof.\textsuperscript{20}

The U.S. Ambassador to the United Kingdom, Lewis Douglas, felt much the same in analyzing the option of withdrawing from Berlin under duress:

“\textit{We can abandon Berlin. The effect of this course of action, would, I think, be a calamity of the first order. Western European confidence in us, in the light of our repeated statements that we intend to remain in Berlin, would be so shattered that we would, with reasonable expectancy, progressively lose Western Germany, if not Western Europe."}\textsuperscript{21}

The concern lay both with Soviet perceptions of Western weakness and European perceptions of American unreliability. These statements were the rule, not the exception.

The Berlin Blockade Crisis has also been viewed as offering several prototypical examples of crisis signaling. Most well-known was the U.S. decision, at Britain’s request, to deploy two squadrons of nuclear capable B-29 bombers to the United Kingdom. This has been regarded as perhaps the most notable action taken in the crisis, and as an unmistakable signal of resolve. Speaking more generally about the situation, the U.S. Ambassador to the United Kingdom (Douglas) said, “\textit{Any evidence of softness on our part may, at this particular juncture when there is evidence of Soviet irresolution, react to our serious disadvantage.}”\textsuperscript{22}

Certain provocative actions taken by the Soviets in the air corridors, such as buzzing C-54s and firing near them, as well as increasingly assertive actions in Berlin itself fit the mold of a strategy to signal resolve via brinkmanship. The blockade and airlift can themselves be cast in these terms. By 1949, American policymakers became convinced that the Soviets were building their foreign policy around a “peace offensive/war scare” propaganda strategy in which they trumpeted their peaceful intentions while ensuring tensions remained high in an effort to place the onus for those tensions on the United States.\textsuperscript{23}

The rhetoric and discussions among American policymakers evince a clear concern both for signaling resolve, for brinksmanship, and for probing resolve. President Truman wrote in his memoirs,

Our position in Berlin was precarious. If we wished to remain there, we would have to make a show of strength. But there was always the risk that Russian reaction might lead to war. We had to face the possibility that Russia might deliberately choose to make Berlin the pretext for

\textsuperscript{20} “Murphy to Marshall,” June 26, 1948 [FRUS].
\textsuperscript{22} “Douglas to Marshall,” June 30, 1948 [FRUS].
war, but a more immediate danger was the risk of a trigger-happy Russian pilot or hotheaded Communist tank commander might create an incident that could ignite the powder keg.\(^{24}\)

Notably, despite the focus on signaling resolve in the academic literature on crisis bargaining, probing the other side’s resolve appears to be comparably important, at least in this case.

The emphasis placed on the structural variables and strategies expected by the conventional wisdom continued throughout the crisis. Even after the crisis subsided, Secretary of State Acheson wrote that “our real protection against [the renewal of] the blockade is our own and Western European strength we all understand that [the NATO alliance is] more important than Russian promises.”\(^{25}\) A CIA analysis written for the Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) meeting following the lifting of the blockade described the situation even more bluntly,

In the context of the global power situation, the real issue before the CFM is not the settlement of Germany, but the long-term control of German power.... None of the parties to the negotiations, including the unrepresented Germans, will overlook the long-term question of who is going to control German potential and thus hold the balance of power in Europe.\(^{26}\)

Several of the textbook examples of crisis signaling come from the Berlin Blockade Crisis, the B-29 deployment most notable among them. By standing firm against Soviet pressure, maintaining the airlift, and sending additional signals of resolve where possible, the conventional wisdom offers a \textit{prima facie} plausible explanation for why the Western Powers prevailed in the crisis.

\textbf{The Red Lines and Faits Accomplis Narrative}

Red lines theory offers the framework for a starkly different account of the Berlin Blockade Crisis. Facing a red line protecting Berlin from direct seizure by force, the Soviet Union exploited the incompleteness of that red line by interposing its forces and other barriers into the transit corridors. Absent the airlift, this blockade would have left the Western Powers with a stark choice between risking war by transgressing the focal point of assaulting Soviet forces or backing down (more on this in later sections). Until the blockade, this choice had lain with on the Soviet side. However, the new Soviet red line denying Western land access to Berlin was also incomplete; it was susceptible to flanking by air. In the sky, it was again the Soviet Union which had to cross the firing-on-forces focal point first, an action which carried with it an unacceptable and credible threat of escalation to war. In this crisis, each side played out its unilateral options which exploited vulnerabilities in the other side’s red lines, i.e., skirting

\(^{24}\) Cited in Shlaim, \textit{The United States and the Berlin Blockade}, p.12.

\(^{25}\) “Acheson to the Acting Secretary of State,” June 19, 1949 [FRUS].

the firing-on-forces focal point, while demonstrating great reluctance to transgress the main focal points underlying them. Both sides were willing to fight if key focal points (strong red lines) were crossed even as neither was unconditionally willing to fight for Berlin. Neither side ever convinced the other that they were willing to fight to get their way on Berlin, and neither side focused its efforts on trying to do so.

Strong red lines rest on focal points that encapsulate many units of value into one larger whole that states can more credibly threaten to defend. Like many crises, the two pivotal focal points in the Berlin Blockade Crisis were geographic borders and the use of force. Geographically, Berlin’s isolation reduced the strength of the Western red line in its defense by injecting a degree of arbitrariness. Focal points matter through an “if not here, where?” logic. In this case, one might have hoped to abandon the Berlin exclave and hold the line at the zonal border. In that sense, Berlin was potentially outside the focal point arising from the division between Eastern and Western Germany, and so it was more vulnerable to seizure than any piece of the Western Zones. The Western Powers had reason to worry about their precarious position in Berlin. Chapter Four underscored this point. U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union Walter Bedell Smith evinced a clear sensitivity to red line characteristics in saying,

As to the likelihood of war, there is a real possibility of it in the Berlin situation. If we had no exposed salient like that, but instead a firm continuous line around our zone – a line which the Russians could not cross without the onus of direct aggression, there would be relatively less likelihood of war...\(^{27}\)

Perhaps for that reason, the firing-on-forces focal point proved to be more potent than geographic borders in deterring advances by the other side. This focal point, though not without certain attendant ambiguities, was generally understood to be specific to politically directed force used against opposing forces. Acts of violent crime by servicemen or the deliberate killing of Germans did not meet these criteria. Nor did just any Soviet-caused Western deaths. The airlift cost 72 lives, 31 of them American, some in plane crashes attributable to the Soviet blockade.\(^{28}\) Yet these deaths held far different meaning and far less chance of provoking immediate escalation than fatalities during a politically-sanctioned violent confrontation. Western troops, not geography, underlay the Western red line in Berlin.

The Berlin Blockade Crisis began with a gradual series of \textit{fait accomplis}. The question is which ones. From the Western perspective, it began with the Soviets interposing their forces to sever the rail, road, and river lines of supply to and from Berlin. From the Soviet perspective, the crisis began earlier in 1948 with the gradual implementation of the so-called “London Conference arrangements,” a series of incremental and unilateral moves to merge the three Western Zones into a sovereign state in Western Germany. One early, important step was the creation of a separate currency for the Western Zones.

\(^{27}\) “Minutes of the 286\textsuperscript{th} Policy Planning Staff Meeting” [State Department], September 28, 1948 [FRUS].

\(^{28}\) Tunner, \textit{Over the Hump}, p. 218.
and it was the implementation of this currency reform as a *fait accompli* that triggered the blockade.\(^{29}\) Although U.S. policymakers saw a negotiated solution to the currency issue as achievable, they decided to implement the measures as a *fait accompli* to ensure complete control and progress toward a government in Western Germany.\(^{30}\) As *Pravda* wrote on April 1\(^{st}\), 1948, “The division of Germany has become an accomplished fact.”

Vulnerable red lines offer a compelling explanation for these *faits accomplis*. The Soviet Union lacked one standout focal point on which to entrench a deterrent effort against a state in Western Germany. Possibilities included formal tri-zonal merger, the ratification of a constitution, and a formal sovereignty-engendering termination of the occupation. The availability of multiple focal points means no single line truly possesses the if-not-here-where quality of an ideal red line. However, the larger problem for the Soviets was that this focal point did not encapsulate enough value. Geography and firing on forces each touched on an interest that extended far beyond Germany; both sides would be willing to fight than allow one predation after another against their territory or forces. The same could not be said of the Soviet red lines to deter a Western German state.

The problem with the Western red line protecting Berlin from direct seizure was its incompleteness. In the transit corridors on land the Soviets could unilaterally interpose their forces, flip rail switches under their control, block roads, and by other nonviolent means render the continued supply of the Western Sectors of Berlin impossible. In part by interposing their forces, the Soviets were able to deter the Western Powers from driving through to Berlin on land or using force to open those land supply routes. Limiting their actions to barring access through their own territory allowed the Soviets to flank the incomplete red line against direct assault. One slight deviation from the theory (the sort which tends to happen when theory meets reality) is that the blockade, although a unilateral imposition, did not achieve Soviet objectives directly. It relied on eventual shortages and the prospect of starvation to succeed.

Nonetheless, the blockade was a unilateral move which flanked the Western red line protecting their sectors of Berlin which immediately gave the Soviet Union the upper hand in the crisis. U.S. Ambassador to the United Kingdom Lewis Douglas wrote in a telegram to the State Department, “I am sure you will agree that we should, if possible, avoid a situation where we are forced, say, to withdraw from Berlin or use an armed convoy to remain there.”\(^{32}\) The Soviet strategy was to create such a situation, and for a time they seemed to have done so. Army Chief of Staff Bradley put it as follows, “At present with our passenger trains completely stopped, Russians in effect have won the first round.”\(^{33}\)

\(^{29}\) American analysts concurred with this view: Division of Research on Europe [State Department], “Soviet Intentions in Berlin,” April 27, 1948.

\(^{30}\) Therefore, the Western Powers underwent currency negotiations with less than good faith. “Wisner to Lovett,” March 10, 1948 [FRUS].

\(^{31}\) Division of Research on Europe [State Department], “Soviet Intentions in Berlin,” April 27, 1948.


\(^{33}\) Teleconference TT-9341 [Clay, Bradley], April 10, 1948, [Clay Papers].
The blockade was implemented using salami tactics. It began with a demand for additional identification checks and inspections on traffic into Berlin. Clay, like other Westerners, saw these actions as “the first of a series of restrictive measures designed to drive us from Berlin.”34 Army Chief of Staff Omar Bradley asked, “Will not Russian restrictions be added one by one which eventually would make our position untenable unless we ourselves were prepared to threaten or actually start a war to remove these restrictions.”35 Western policymakers assumed from the first restrictions that a “creeping blockade” was underway, with the alternative belief that the Soviets only intended a marginal change in the transit procedures all but disregarded from the beginning.36 This suspicion appears to have been warranted.37

A CIA intelligence estimate from the beginning of the crisis describes the Soviet strategy as a series of progressive steps to push the West out of Berlin, consolidate a communist state in East Germany, and then woo the rest of Germany to seek to join it. The estimate concluded, “Although each of these successive steps involves the risk of war in the event of miscalculation of Western resistance or of unforeseen circumstances, each move on the program could be implemented without the application of military force if adroitly made.”38 Equally significant is that none of these moves required convincing the West via signaling that the Soviet Union was willing to fight if its demands went unfulfilled.

In response to the Soviet blockade, the Western Powers relied primarily on a strikingly analogous flanking measure, the airlift. To stop trucks or trains, the Soviets could interpose barriers and forces that left the Western Powers with the decision to violate the firing-on-forces focal point or relent. To stop the airlift, in contrast, the Soviets would have needed to fire on or otherwise attack Western aircraft, thereby crossing the use-of-force focal point. The Soviet red line barring access to the traditional routes to Berlin was therefore incomplete, effective on land but vulnerable to being circumvented in the skies.39

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34 Shlaim, The United States and the Berlin Blockade, p. 122.
35 Teleconference TT-9341 (Clay, Bradley), April 10, 1948 [Clay Papers].
36 Ibid., pp. 112, 136; “Acheson to the Acting Secretary of State,” June 5, 1949 [FRUS]; Lucius D. Clay, Decision in Germany (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1950), pp. 358-362; Miller, To Save a City, p. 27.
39 As discussed in Chapter Two, red line incompleteness is not entirely distinct from the other three red line characteristics (which are entirely distinct from each other). Incompleteness serves to address the problem of multiple red lines set by the same actor at one time. When a red line is incomplete, states can and usually do set an auxiliary red line to cover that gap. The incompleteness problem is therefore related to the degree to which this auxiliary red line is vulnerable, which flows from any of the other three red line characteristics. As a result, the vulnerability in the Soviet red line can be described in two ways that sound different but are the same from the standpoint of red lines theory: 1) The Soviet red line denying land access to Berlin was incomplete in that it neglected the skies: 2) The Soviet red line denying Western resupply of Berlin was arbitrary in the skies where it lacked the support of the firing-on-forces focal point.
The airlift flanked this incomplete red line. Due to the logistical constraints on it, the airlift was not itself a singlefait accompli, but rather a continuing series of small ones in the form of individual C-47s and C-54s. The Soviets could issue threats and demands regarding restrictions on the airlift, and they did so. But, in the end this cheap talk was dismissed because the Soviets would have needed to fire first, and the West did not believe they were willing to start a war by crossing that focal point. As Lucius Clay, the U.S. Military Governor of Germany, wrote early in the crisis, “Overflight privileges have been constantly under discussion at Soviet insistence but only actual interference possible would be overt attack. Airport is in our sector and flights could be stopped only by Soviet use of force.”40 Once the airlift proved capable of sustaining Western Berlin indefinitely, the advantage was back to the Western side.

Extensive negotiations between the Soviet Union and the Western Powers took place at many points in the Berlin Crisis, but the resolution of the Berlin Crisis did not occur through negotiation. Instead, each side implemented thefaits accomplis that they believed they could impose without provoking an intolerably escalatory response from other side, and from there the chips fell where they may. Once the failure of their unilateral moves became clear, the Soviets ultimately approached the Americans and conveyed their willingness to abandon their efforts and end the crisis in exchange for very little. Secretary of State Dean Acheson saw this as a general characteristic of Soviet foreign policy,

The Soviet authorities are not moved to agreement by negotiation – that is, by a series of mutual concessions calculated to move parties desiring agreement closer to an acceptable one. Theirs is a more primitive form of political method. They cling stubbornly to a position, hoping to force an opponent to accept it. When and if action by the opponent demonstrates the Soviet position to be untenable, they hastily abandon it…41

The irony of this description of Soviet policy is that the United States behaved no differently; the United States prevailed in the Berlin Blockade Crisis by using a strategy precisely along these lines.

**Part III: Theory-Testing**

Part III evaluates the most important observable implications found within the case and uses them to test both red lines theory and the conventional wisdom. It begins by mapping the interests of the two sides of the crisis against their willingness to fight across a variety of foreseen contingencies, highlighting the surprisingly poor extent to which greater interest successfully predicts greater willingness to fight. This section makes clear why this case is puzzling for the conventional wisdom; red lines theory helps to fill in the blanks. The next two sections proceed from this basis to evaluate the most significant unique observable implications for red lines theory by examining what Western policymakers expected would happen if they used various policy options at their disposal. Why was an

40 “Clay to Bradley,” April 2, 1948 [Clay Papers].
41 Shlaim, The United States and the Berlin Blockade, p. 303.
airlift seen as so superior to an armed convoy, and a truck convoy in turn to a train? Both the perceived outcomes and the reasoning behind them shed a great deal of light on the considerations which shaped the actions of Western policymakers. Subsequently, the discussion turns to explaining the outcomes of the major incidents which took place in Berlin itself, and the role of red lines therein.

The analysis then shifts towards testing the conventional wisdom, with sections exposing serious problems with claims that the American deployment of nuclear-capable bombers to Britain and Soviet harassment measures such as buzzing the airlift were in fact strong signals of resolve. The following section then asks when and why perceptions did change during the crisis, if these traditional signaling strategies failed to make much difference. Finally, the chapter explores two further certain observable implications which appear to be unmet. The conventional wisdom has difficulty explaining why the Soviets failed to wait for their unexpected nuclear test and the leverage it could provide before ending the crisis. Red lines theory struggles to explain why the Soviets failed to use certain passive interference measures at their disposal, such as jamming electronic communications important to operating the airlift in poor weather. The overall weight of the evidence suggests that red lines theory can explain a great deal about the case, including some key details that fly in the face of what the conventional wisdom would expect.

National Interests and the Perceived Willingness to Fight: A Puzzle

This section examines the relationship between the national interests at stake for both sides and the contingencies that would lead each side to go to war. This analysis serves three purposes: 1) it tests the explanatory power of interests as a determinant of crisis outcomes in an unusual way, 2) it reveals the empirical puzzle that a theory of red lines can explain, and 3) it lays the groundwork for the discussion of the most significant unique observable implications in the case.

THE SOVIET UNION

The United States held clear and consistent perceptions of how much the Soviet Union valued the major issues in play and of how likely the Soviet Union would be to go to war in response to each of the available strategies from which the United States had to choose. What is surprising, however, is just how poorly the degree to which an action was thought to harm Soviet interests predicts the odds that the Soviets were expected to start a war in reaction to it. More than acquiring the Western Sectors of Berlin, the Soviets were believed to desire a halt in the process of forming a sovereign government in Western Germany. Yet, not only were the Soviets unwilling to go to war over this goal, they were unwilling even to threaten to do so. In contrast, the Soviets were seen by most to be willing to fight if the Western Powers attempted to send an armed convoy through to Berlin despite caring less about Berlin than Western Germany. Why were the Soviets perceived as willing to fight a war to prevent the resupply of Berlin by road, but unwilling to fight for an objective that was of considerably more importance to them? Moreover, why were the Soviets seen as willing to fight to prevent the resupply of Berlin by road, but unwilling to fight to prevent resupply by air? The deleterious effect on Soviet
interests was the same either way, but the expected odds of war differed greatly. All of this sums to a puzzle. The Soviets were perceived as unwilling to fight for what they wanted most, as willing to fight for their secondary objective if pursued in one manner, and as unwilling to fight for that secondary objective if pursued in a slightly different manner.

There was a general consensus among Western policymakers that the Soviet Union held two immediate objectives in the Berlin Crisis: 1) terminating, or at least slowing, the formation of government in Western Germany and 2) acquiring the Western Sectors of Berlin or, failing that, an economic stranglehold over it that amounted to control. Over time, the prevailing view in Washington became that the Soviet Union prioritized events in Western Germany over control of the Western Sectors of Berlin. For instance, a December 1948 memorandum from CIA Director R. H. Hillenkoetter to President Truman concluded that the Soviets had given up on leveraging Berlin to influence events in Western Germany and had shifted to the secondary objective of forcing the West out of Berlin or at least gaining major concessions on the status of the Western Sectors of Berlin.

Given the events of the two World Wars, a high level of insecurity and even paranoia in the Soviet Union with regard to renewed German aggression may have been inevitable. Early in the occupation, Soviet authorities protested an American move to teach baseball to German children on the grounds that it was quasi-military training. The potential for a reinvigorated Germany to swing the balance of power in the Cold War also did not escape notice in the Kremlin. The Soviet interest in the formation of the government in Western Germany should be understood in this light.

The Moscow negotiations in August, 1948 helped consolidate Western perceptions of Soviet interests. These negotiations consisted of a series of direct meetings between the Western ambassadors in Moscow and Stalin or Molotov. They produced what seemed to be a deal on Berlin exchanging the lifting of the blockade for the use of the Soviet Zone currency in the Western Sectors of Berlin. Stalin and Molotov had initially sought the explicit inclusion of this concession in the Moscow talks, but were rebuffed. To the surprise of the West, Stalin ultimately relented to its exclusion, resulting in the Moscow Directive. However, this agreement fell apart when it was referred to Berlin to iron out the details, and may never truly have reflected a mutually-acceptable bargain. In Berlin, the Soviet determination to link the end of the blockade to the establishment of a state in Western

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44 Haydock, City under Siege, p. 56.

45 Some in the West shared these views to some extent, especially in France. According to George Kennan, “The Germans, from all accounts, are confused, embittered, self-pitying and unregenerate. Western concepts of democracy have only a slender foundation among them. There is a very good prospect that they will move toward a strongly nationalistic and authoritarian form of government.” “Kennan to Marshall and Lovett” [“Policy Questions Concerning a Possible German Settlement”], August 12, 1948 [FRUS]. Also see Department of State Policy Paper, “Security Against Germany,” February, 1948 [FRUS].

Germany continued to resurface despite an agreement in principle (the Moscow Directive) that excluded it. Ambassador Smith (Moscow) warned that any agreement could be temporary and the blockade re-imposed in response to movement towards a government for Western Germany. The first explicit Soviet statement linking the continuation of the blockade to the London Conference arrangements came only on July 29th, 1948, courtesy of Clay’s counterpart, Marshal Sokolovsky. Over time, it became clear to Western negotiators that no bargain was obtainable without a concession on the London Conference arrangements.

There was a broad consensus among Western policymakers that the Soviet Union did not want a war. This conclusion was never taken for granted, and analysis of Soviet intentions with regard to the prospects for war continued relentlessly throughout the crisis. According to Clay, “I am still convinced that the Soviets do not want war. However, they know that the Allies also do not want war and they will continue their pressure to the point at which they believe hostilities might occur.” Intelligence assessments concurred with this view throughout the crisis. Responding to a cable from Ambassador Smith in Moscow, Secretary of State Marshall wrote on April 29th, 1948,

We did not have in mind the probability of some Russian counter move in Europe proper since we agree with you that the present indications are that, with the exception of a possible miscalculation in Berlin or Vienna, the Kremlin does not intend to mount any action in Europe proper which would carry the risk of actual hostilities.

These informed observers generally saw two potential paths to war, neither of which entailed a sudden Soviet decision to attack. The first involved a Soviet miscalculation of the West’s willingness to fight, whereas the second involved the potential consequences of trying to force an armed convoy

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48 Miller, To Save a City, p. 83.
49 For instance, the following memorandum from the Secretary of the Navy considers three possible scenarios for Soviet Pearl Harbor-like attacks are, including long-range air raids on the Seattle area, a large-scale sabotage campaign, and a set of coordinated submarine strikes on key ports. “Sullivan [Secretary of the Navy] Marshall,” Washington, December 6, 1948 [FRUS].
50 “Clay to the Department of the Army,” July 10, 1948 [FRUS].
52 “Marshall to Smith,” April 29, 1948 [FRUS]. Marshall also stated, “We do not feel ... that the Soviet Government has committed itself so irrevocably to maintain the blockade to preclude the possibility of some face-saving retreat on their part.” Shlaim, The United States and the Berlin Blockade, p. 252. For Smith’s telegram drawing similar conclusions: “Smith to Marshall,” April 26, 1948 [FRUS].
through to Berlin. As I explore further in subsequent sections, the intriguing aspects of these perceptions are the disconnects between what American policymakers thought the Soviets cared about most and what they thought would cause the Soviets to use force. The Soviets would not use force for what they cared about most, halting state formation in Western Germany. The Soviets would use force to stop the resupply of Berlin by land, but not by air (more on this below). These perceptions suggest that red lines can trump interests in driving crisis outcomes, at least to a limited extent within the confines of this case.

THE WESTERN POWERS

The Western side of the equation is less puzzling, but still informative. Why was the United States willing to fight a war if the Soviets seized the Western Sectors of Berlin by force, but potentially willing to withdraw under duress were the airlift to fail? The cost of losing Berlin would exist either way, but the intended policy responses differed greatly. And why would a deliberate Soviet attack on the airlift so likely lead to war, whereas successful Soviet passive interference (e.g., jamming or blinding searchlights) that killed as many American airmen would not? Much of the rest of the chapter analyzes these issues, and the remainder of this section lays the foundation for that discussion.

The West’s goals entering the crisis mirrored those of the Soviets. Keeping Western Germany in the Western camp took precedence, followed by the restoration of the economy and self-governance in the three Western Zones as part of the larger effort to stabilize Europe. From the European perspective, this goal was intrinsically valuable, while to the United States it had value in large part because it would create a bulwark against Communism. Soviet control of all of Germany was seen as a grave threat. Control of the Western Sectors of Berlin was seen as important, but less so than progress in Western Germany.

Available evidence suggests that most Western policymakers expected to use force in response to Soviet uses of force, including limited uses of force in Berlin or the air corridors. Partly for that reason, these policymakers feared the escalation of the crisis into a war throughout the crisis. Reacting to the failure of the Moscow talks and Soviet threats to harass the airlift, Truman wrote in his diary on September 9th, “I have a terrible feeling that we are very close to war. I hope not.” An October 6th National Security Council memorandum asks the Joint Chiefs of Staff to submit recommendations on how to respond to aggressive Soviet actions such as an attack on a U.S. transport aircraft. It asks that two types of measures be prepared:

1) those essential for the defense of the personnel and military equipment of U.S. forces and

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53 “Jessup to Acheson,” April 19, 1949 [FRUS]; Shlaim, The United States and the Berlin Blockade, pp. 27, 105. One important caveat was the reticence by many in the French government to allow the creation of a centralized German state even just in the Western Zones due to the threat is might again pose. “Clay to the Department of the Army,” November 22, 1948 [Clay Papers].
54 “Department of State Policy Statement,” August 26, 1948 [FRUS].
55 Haydock, City under Siege, pp. 212-213.
2) offensive and retaliatory measures against USSR forces which may be interfering with the airlift to the extent of causing loss of U.S. lives or planes; measures which in the present tense situation might well result in the outbreak of hostilities leading to war.\textsuperscript{56}

Although nonviolent responses to limited Soviet first uses of force (especially against an armed convoy) were discussed, there is no indication that these reflected national policy.\textsuperscript{57} The British and the United States came to agreement on a general formula for the use of force, namely that they would fight if attacked but that they would not unconditionally commit to choosing war over withdrawing from Berlin.\textsuperscript{58}

One of the most intriguing unanswered questions about the Berlin Blockade Crisis is what would have happened had the airlift been unable to sustainably supply the Western Sectors of Berlin. Red lines theory predicts that the Western Powers would ultimately have backed down in the crisis, lacking any remaining viable method of circumventing Soviet red lines and believing that Berlin was not intrinsically worth a world war. It is impossible to know with any certainty what would have happened, but there is suggestive evidence in this direction.

President Truman’s account of the crisis would seem to strongly disagree. Truman announced to his advisors a clear decision to hold firm in Berlin early in the crisis and never wavered from it. On July 19\textsuperscript{th}, Truman wrote in his diary, “We’ll stay in Berlin-come what may” and “I’d made the decision ten days ago to stay in Berlin” (emphasis in original).\textsuperscript{59} A State Department telegram to the London Embassy reports on a meeting with Truman in which he made the decision to stay in Berlin and “to use any means that may be necessary.” The first draft then added “whatever the consequences,” but this line was removed before transmission.\textsuperscript{60} As clear as these facts may seem, the evidence suggests that they indicate a decision to avoid any major concessions to the Soviets at that time rather than a decision to go to war if it was necessary to break the blockade. The Truman Administration never declared (even internally) that it was willing to attack first over Berlin.\textsuperscript{61} Instructions to American forces in Germany were clear: do not initiate the use of force.\textsuperscript{62} Ambassador Smith (Moscow) highlighted his concerns about this absence of an explicit decision over whether to fight or make concessions if the blockade could not be circumvented by nonviolent means:

I have also pointed out that our governments must decide whether we are prepared to deal indefinitely with the situation now existing in Berlin in the event of breakdown of present

\textsuperscript{56} National Security Council Memorandum, “Re: Possible Soviet Interruption of Airlift,” October 6, 1948.
\textsuperscript{57} E.g., Teleconference TT-9286 [Clay, Royall, Bradley, Collins, Wedemeyer], March 31, 1948 [Clay Papers].
\textsuperscript{59} Harry S. Truman, Diary, July 19, 1948 in Ferrell, Robert H., ed. Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman. (Columbia, M.O.: University of Missouri, 1997).
\textsuperscript{60} “Marshall to Douglas,” July 20, 1948 [FRUS].
\textsuperscript{61} Shlaim, The United States and the Berlin Blockade, p. 363.
\textsuperscript{62} “Marshall and Lovett to Douglas,” April 30, 1948 [FRUS].
conversations, or if our ability to cope indefinitely with the Berlin situation is doubtful, what concessions we would be willing to make to relieve the situation. I have indicated that these concessions might have to be substantial. In none of the replies that I have received has there been an indication that this basic strategic question has been considered and a definite line of action, beyond immediate reference to UNO [United Nations], decided upon. I do not ask to know what this decision is, but it would certainly help my digestion if I knew that it had been taken.  

Many officials in the United States, Britain, and France harbored thinly veiled – and sometimes explicit – desires to extricate themselves from the problematic Berlin situation. Lucius Clay, among the strongest advocates of holding firm in Berlin, wrote on May 15th, 1948 that he understood that the airlift was not a permanent solution, but that it should continue until Western Europe stabilized. At this point, “the political consequences of the abandonment of Berlin would be minimized.”  

Robert Murphy, another of the strongest advocates of staying in Berlin, wrote to Washington of his fears that the “strength of determination” of the United States to stay would wane over time. Lewis Douglas, U.S. Ambassador to the United Kingdom, offered suggestions for minimizing the damage of abandoning Berlin to America’s reputation, including formal alliance commitments, a regional pact, increased troop deployments, and evacuating pro-Western Berliners. A CIA Report also spoke of countermeasures to mitigate the loss of prestige from backing down. British Commandant Edwin Herbert initially predicted Western Powers would be driven from Berlin by October and that “by that time, the people of Berlin will be so fed up with starvation rations that they’ll start rioting.” The French, reliant on the Americans to support their sector and even their garrison in Berlin, were widely believed to favor withdrawal throughout the crisis by both the Americans and the British.

Contrary to some preconceptions about the aggressive military mindset, support in Washington for a withdrawal was strongest within the Department of Defense. On July 28th, 1948, Secretary of Defense Forrestal wrote, “It may not be altogether out of the question to consider ... the possibility that some justification might be found for withdrawal of our occupation forces from Berlin without undue loss of prestige.” Army Chief of Staff Omar Bradley debated the issue with Clay early in the crisis,

64 “Clay to Gruenther [Secretary of the Joint Staff],” May 15, 1949 [Clay Papers].
65 “Murphy to Marshall,” April 13, 1948 [FRUS].
68 Haydock, City under Siege, p. 175.
69 Dean Acheson, “Memorandum of Conversation,” March 31, 1949 [FRUS]; “Clay to the Department of the Army,” January 15, 1949 [FRUS].
70 Haydock, City under Siege, p. 229; Shlaim, The United States and the Berlin Blockade, pp. 108, 136-137, 176, 224, 267.
saying, “Here we doubt whether our people are prepared to start a war in order to maintain or position in Berlin and Vienna.” Later in the conversation, Bradley asked, “Should we now be planning how ... we might ourselves announce withdrawal and minimize loss of prestige rather than being forced out by threat.” Bradley also ordered plans to implement a withdrawal (if so ordered) to be drawn up in Germany, and at least one plan for the “Orderly Evacuation of Berlin by Air” did exist. Secretary of the Army Royall called for a “definite decision” on staying in Berlin late in March 1949, shortly before the Soviets backed down, and advocated that this decision be to abandon the city. This skepticism about Berlin within the military leadership remained true even after the successful conclusion of the crisis, with a June (1949) Defense Department report to the National Security Council calling for serious consideration for evacuating Berlin if the blockade were re-imposed.

The counterfactual of what would have happened if the airlift had proved inadequate to sustainably supply the Western Sectors of Berlin can never be known with certainty. Nor can the counterfactual in which the Western Powers had to respond to the Soviet use of force against the airlift or in Berlin itself. Nonetheless, the evidence suggests that the red line against firing on their forces was a stronger determinant of the Western willingness to use force than their interest in retaining the Western Sectors of Berlin. In other words, the Western Powers may have been willing to lose Berlin to non-violent coercive pressure from the blockade but were not willing to abide the use of force by the Soviet Union without responding in kind. There was never any decision or widespread agreement that force should be used if needed to stay in Berlin, but the decision to use force if the Soviets did so was often taken for granted. In this crisis, the red lines seem to have mattered more than the stakes.

Airlift vs. Armed Convoy

Why did most American policymakers believe that the Soviets would ultimately relent to the resupply of Berlin by air but not by road? Why was resupplying Berlin by road so different that it was generally expected to lead to war, a humiliating retreat, or both? Relative power cannot explain this difference, and Soviets interests would be equally harmed by a shipment of food or coal reaching Berlin regardless of how it arrives. Similarly, without a theory of red lines, it is unclear why aerial resupply would send a different signal than road resupply. The airlift-convoy discrepancy provides one of the most telling unique observable implications in this case, because the conventional wisdom has so much trouble explaining it.

72 Teleconference TT-9341 [Clay, Bradley], April 10, 1948, [Clay Papers].
73 Teleconference TT-9287 [Clay, Royall, Bradley], March 31, 1948 [Clay Papers]. Part of this planning involved the number of Germans to be evacuated for fear of Soviet reprisals. “Clay to Wedemeyer,” July 28, 1948 [Clay Papers]; “HQ Dept of the Army from Dir Plans and Operations to EUCOM,” September 20, 1948.
75 The Acting Secretary of Defense, “Report to the National Security Council: Possible U.S. Courses of Action in the Event the USSR Reinforces the Berlin Blockade” June 1, 1949 [FRUS].
The Western Powers saw themselves as having four basic policy options in confronting the blockade: withdrawal, negotiation, airlift, and armed convoy (also referred to as “armored convoy” and “guarded convoy”). Aside from withdrawal, the options were not mutually exclusive. Negotiations continued off-and-on throughout the year-long crisis but played little role in the outcome. With withdrawal as a last resort, the key strategy decision, then, was whether to supplement the airlift with the armed convoy option. This option came in several forms. A May 1948 version of the plan envisioned assembling three divisions, one from each of the three Western Powers occupying Germany, at Helmstedt and informing the Soviets that these forces would proceed to Berlin at a certain time. A June, 1948 version consisted of a constabulary regiment, an engineer battalion, a bridge train, road repair equipment, two hundred trucks, a British infantry battalion, and French tank destroyers. The orders would be to advance, not to fire unless fired upon, and to clear obstacles even under threat of force. Later versions of the plan envisioned a purely American effort due to opposition by the British and French.

The two top American officials in Germany, Military Governor Lucius Clay and top political representative Robert Murphy, both supported the use of an armed convoy, but few others in Washington, London, or Paris shared that view. Around the peak of the crisis, Clay wrote,

I am still convinced that a determined movement of convoys with troop protection would reach Berlin and that such a showing might well prevent rather than build up Soviet pressures which could lead to war. Nevertheless I realize fully the inherent dangers in this proposal since once committed we could not withdraw.

Clay justified this position in part by arguing, “If the USSR does intend war, it is because of a fixed plan. Hostilities will not result because of action on our part to relieve the blockade unless there is such a fixed plan.” Robert Murphy echoed this thinking almost verbatim. Murphy added, “If an unfortunate incident should occur, there would be no good reason to regard it as more than local and not a casus belli.” All of this reasoning is strongly at odds with both red lines theory and the conventional wisdom’s understanding of brinksmanship, both of which allow more scope for aggressive crisis actions to trigger a war that neither side wanted. After the West prevailed in the crisis without resorting to an armed convoy, Clay moved away from his controversial stance, “While at one time I believed movement by surface routes under armed guard would be feasible, I am sure that if there is a re-imposition of the blockade it is to be expected that an attempt to move into Berlin under armed convoy would be met by force.” He added than an airlift was the “only acceptable option” in that circumstance. However,  

77 Teleconference TT-9768 [Mayo, Pritchard], July 13, 1948, [Clay Papers].
78 “Clay to the Department of the Army,” June 25, 1948 [FRUS].
79 “Clay to the Department of the Army,” July 10, 1948 [FRUS].
81 Robert D. Murphy, “Comments on JCS Analysis,” June 1, 1949 (FRUS).
82 “Clay to Gruenther [Secretary of the Joint Staff],” May 15, 1949 [Clay Papers].
writing years later he returned to his initial view, “I shall always believe that the convoy would have reached Berlin.”

The dominant view in the State Department, the Defense Department, the White House, London, and Paris, however, was that a convoy was unlikely to reach Berlin and quite likely to lead to war. According to Clay, President Truman informed him that he had been open to the convoy option until confronted with the strong unified opposition of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Truman later described the convoy option as overly risky.

Opposition to an armed convoy was particularly strong in the American military. Secretary of Defense Forrestal opposed an armed convoy because its chances of success were “remote” and because the “distinctly probable consequence of war” would be disastrous given the “inadequacy of United States preparation for global conflict.” For this reason, both the U.S. Department of Defense and the British Government called for military mobilization prior to an armed convoy effort. A report to the National Security Council as the crisis came to a close offers perhaps the clearest verdict on the armed convoy option,

Armed motor convoy ... was thoroughly considered by the Joint Chiefs of Staff shortly after the Berlin blockade was first imposed and the conclusion then reached is still considered sound, that such an attempt would be fraught with the gravest military implications, including the risk war, and would probably prove ineffective even if faced with only passive interference.

The British military informed the U.S. Army that they considered an armed convoy attempt to be “militarily unsound and politically undesirable.” Even Clay’s top subordinate in Berlin, Colonel Frank Howley, responded to a question months into the crisis about how an initial armed convoy attempt would have gone by saying simply, “We would have gotten our asses shot off.” When interviewed decades later, Soviet junior officers who had manned the border posts expressed the belief that they would have fired on what would, to them, have looked like an invasion force.

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83 Clay, Decision in Germany, p. 374.
84 Haydock, City under Siege, pp. 144-145.
85 Shlaim, The United States and the Berlin Blockade, p. 264.
86 Ibid., p. 262.
89 Even the phrasing is similar to the conclusions reached a year early. The Acting Secretary of Defense, “Report to the National Security Council: Possible U.S. Courses of Action in the Event the USSR Reimposes the Berlin Blockade,” June 1, 1949 [FRUS].
90 “HQ Dept of the Army from Dir Plans and Operations to EUCOM,” September 10, 1948.
91 Haydock, City under Siege, p. 255.
Other Western policymakers envisioned a different scenario, one in which an armed convoy entered Eastern Germany only to find itself trapped in an impossible position after the Soviets destroyed several of their own zone’s bridges and erected other obstacles. A July, 1948 report to the National Security Council warned that “Soviet passive interference, such as road and bridge obstruction or destruction, could make an armed convoy method abortive.”\(^93\) Potential Soviet responses included destroyed bridges, roadblocks that included tanks and trucks, and other obstacles.\(^94\) Clay’s British counterpart, General Robertson, feared that the Soviets would simply block the road with tanks.\(^95\) This would leave the convoy with no choices beyond violating the use-of-force red line and halting its progress. According to Army Chief of Staff Bradley, the Soviets “could stop you in so many ways short of armed resistance…. A bridge could go out just ahead of you and then another bridge behind you, and you’d be in a hell of a fix.”\(^96\) In response to these concerns, Clay and Murphy increasingly emphasized bridging equipment as part of their armed convoy plans, but there was little confidence in Washington or London that this would solve the problem, e.g., of Soviet tanks blocking the road.\(^97\)

Many Western policymakers took seriously this rather bizarre scenario that leaves a Western convoy stuck in Eastern Germany by the Soviet’s destruction of their own bridges. This predicted outcome for an armed convoy attempt makes sense only if the tactics of both sides are deriving from a desire to maneuver around the firing-on-forces red line without violating it. Taking that tactic, used by both sides, to one plausible logical extreme produces a convoy stuck in the middle of Eastern Germany. It therefore offers a compelling unique observable implication for red lines theory.

The decisive advantage of the airlift over the armed convoy was that it could be accomplished as a \textit{fait accompli} without needing to cross the red line against attacking Soviet forces deployed to block access to Berlin.\(^98\) Even General Clay, the principal advocate of an armed convoy, saw this advantage keenly in the period in which he had stepped back from his ardent support of the convoy, “It must be remembered that the surface convoy places the responsibility for the first use of force on our hands, whereas the airlift can be interfered with only by aggressive action on the part of the Soviet Government.”\(^99\) At the start of the crisis, however, Clay was far more sanguine than others about the possibility of circumventing this problem with an armed convoy, “I believe if we advised Soviet authorities of our intent to move supplies into Berlin with armed escort and gave 48 hours’ notice, convoy would get through.” This view is at odds with red lines theory, which expects that the Soviets could disregard merely verbal warnings, interpose their forces, and hold fast behind the red line against

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\(^94\) Teleconference TT-9768 [Mayo, Pritchard], July 13, 1948, [Clay Papers].
\(^95\) Shlaim, \textit{The United States and the Berlin Blockade}, p. 131.
\(^98\) Miller, \textit{To Save a City}, pp. 25-26.
\(^99\) “Clay to Gruenther [Secretary of the Joint Staff],” May 15, 1949 [Clay Papers]. This advantage was widely recognized, e.g., here: Teleconference TT-9768 [Mayo, Pritchard], July 13, 1948, [Clay Papers].
a direct attack on their forces. Clay added to his recommendation, “Am sure neither British nor French would join us.” Washington shared their concerns. Clay’s proposals were rejected.

The Soviet Union faced the same problem in confronting the airlift. They could issue declarations that no flights would be permitted, or that they would somehow halt a flight, but in the end the burden was on them to fire or relent. In one incident on May 4th, 1948, a Soviet officer phoned the U.S. Berlin Air Safety Center to inform them that a particular scheduled flight would not be permitted. The flight landed in Berlin that night. The Soviets respected the red line against firing on Western forces. Even though the value of one plane and its crew paled in comparison to the costs of a war, shooting down a plane deliberately could have crossed a focal point and led to that outcome. A State Department Policy Planning Staff report from mid-way through the crisis dealt with the question of how to respond to such an incident. This report recommended that the United States should react to the downing of a U.S. aircraft by demanding an explanation and implementing “defensive measures” (fighter escorts, presumably). Unless the Soviet Union denied responsibility and avoided repeating the aggression, the United States should “assume that there exists a grave risk of imminent war.”

There is no compelling explanation for the sharp difference between the anticipated results of an airlift vs. an armed convoy that does not make use of a theory of red lines. Normally, any action taken in a crisis can be interpreted as a calibrated signal (see Chapter Three for more on this point). Despite signaling’s impressive malleability, however, it is hard to explain the observed difference between the expected outcomes of these two actions with a logic predicated on signaling. Why is one mode of transport so different from another? If anything, the airlift alone would seem to represent the inferior signal of resolve. Convoy advocate Robert Murphy saw it that way, stating that the airlift “carries with it also a confession of inability or unwillingness to enforce a well-earned right of surface passage.”

As the Berlin Blockade Crisis came to a successful conclusion and with the benefit of hindsight, American policymakers embarked on an extensive analysis of what to do if the blockade were to be re-imposed. The consensus was to adopt the same strategy predicated on an airlift and eschewing an armed convoy. A National Security Council report on this question regarded an armed convoy probe as “impractical” and a renewed airlift as “the only practicable step short of great risk of hostilities or decision to leave Berlin.” Undersecretary of State James Webb described President Truman’s views as follows, “He agrees that the reinstitution of the air lift is probably the only answer, he would like to

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100 Teleconference TT-2066 [Clay, Haislip], March 30, 1949 [Clay Papers]. Murphy continued to believe that this approach of announcing a convoy in advance and then dispatching it would succeed throughout the crisis. Robert D. Murphy, “Comments on JCS Analysis,” June 1, 1949 [FRUS].


102 “Report by the [State Department] Policy Planning Staff,” October 1, 1948 [FRUS].


104 The Acting Secretary of Defense, “Report to the National Security Council: Possible U.S. Courses of Action in the Event the USSR Reimposes the Berlin Blockade,” June 1, 1949 [FRUS].
come up with a better answer, and would not be averse to reconsidering the possibility of breaking the blockade if some means of surface transportation showing reasonable possibilities of success could be found."  

Truman ordered that, if the blockade was re-imposed, American traffic should only stop when the Soviets emplace a physical barrier or an armed guard. Purely verbal warnings were to be disregarded. However, Truman also ordered that no “show of force” such as an armed convoy then be made if a physical barrier was in place. This balancing act mirrors the strengths and weaknesses in Soviet red lines, with the United States willing to act unilaterally where it felt it could get away with it but unwilling to directly engage or challenge Soviet forces.

The conventional wisdom expects crisis strategy to revolve around signaling resolve to the adversary while trying to gauge their resolve to ascertain the best possible bargain that can be reached. Western policymakers consistently considered this approach to crisis strategy, and consistently went another way. After replacing Marshall as Secretary of State in January, 1949, Dean Acheson initially floated the proposal for a one or more limited “probes” of Soviet restrictions, making clear that he was sympathetic to the option as a means for “testing out Soviet intentions.” He was promptly rebuked by his own subordinates, with Undersecretary of State Webb writing, “The Dept supports the above views of the JCS [Joint Chiefs of Staff] on the isolated issue of probing tactics. Our general view is that half-way measures in a matter of this type with the Soviets are likely to be unsuccessful and are, in some respects, even more dangerous than more deliberate courses of action.” Acheson seems to have been persuaded, saying, “Neither side wishes to be driven by miscalculation to general hostilities or humiliation. Therefore initial moves should not, if it is possible to avoid it, be equivocal – as a small ground probe would be – or reckless – as a massive one would be.”

The Futility of Attempting to Supply Berlin by Rail

Trains were the first tool used to test the Soviet announcement of new, intrusive inspections on trains to and from Berlin, a measure seen as unacceptable by the Western Powers and as a prelude to an inevitable full blockade. In response, on April 1st the United States and United Kingdom dispatched five trains with orders to proceed to Berlin. All were repulsed in a humiliating failure, save for one American train which submitted to inspections in contravention of its orders. The commandant of that train was immediately court-marchaled, but was later acquitted on the grounds that his orders to reach

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105 The Acting Secretary of State, “Possible Courses of Action in Event Berlin Blockade is Renewed,” May 31, 1949 [FRUS].
107 “The United States Delegation at the Council of Foreign Ministers to the Acting Secretary of State,” May 22, 1949 [FRUS]. Also see “Acheson to the Acting Secretary of State,” June 5, 1949 [FRUS].
108 “The Acting Secretary of State to Acheson,” May 26, 1949 [FRUS].
110 For Clay’s explanation of why the inspections were intolerable: Teleconference TT-9286 [Clay, Royall, Bradley, Collins, Wedemeyer], March 31, 1948 [Clay Papers].
Berlin and to refuse inspections were contradictory. After these failures, the option to send further trains largely fell into disfavor, with advocates of a land supply approach consistently preferring a truck convoy. Why the change? Why were trucks any different? It is difficult to imagine why one would send a stronger signal than the other, and from a commitment standpoint the train offers an advantage: trains cannot stop on a dime, so moving a train towards the border at high speed would have the tactical effect of “throwing the steering wheel out the window” in a game of chicken. That is, the Soviet border guards would be the only ones in a position to choose to fire or not to fire, placing the burden on them. So, why were trucks seen as superior?

The pivotal weakness of using trains to assail the blockade was that the Soviets could more easily stop train movements with passive measures that did not require crossing the red lines against attacking Western forces. These Soviet measures to block access and force the burden of firing first on the Western Powers took two forms, neither of which even required directly interposing military forces on the tracks, let alone firing on trains. First, the Soviets announced “technical difficulties” with the main lines of track, requiring repairs. The fact that Soviet trains continued to use one available line of track up to within a few miles of the border puts this statement in the appropriate light, as does the deliberate tearing up of at least one hundred-yard stretch of track. On a critical highway bridge over the Elbe, the Soviets erected barriers while also removing planking and sawing off cross-beams. Shooting was not necessary.

Second, the Soviets had control over switches which determined the line of track a train would take, enabling them to shunt an intruding train along a dead-end line of track without firing a shot. The Soviets made full use of this advantage to divert uncooperative American trains, and it was the inability to solve this problem which best explains the shift in Western emphasis from trains to the armed convoy option. Soviet control of canal locks enabled them to stop barge traffic in the same way, an action that has received little attention but was of no less importance from a logistical standpoint.

American policymakers sought an option that would resupply Berlin while forcing the burden of firing first onto the Soviets. Lucius Clay and others repeatedly proposed announcing to the Soviets that a train would proceed to Berlin at a certain time, placing the burden on the Soviets to stop it, then following through. The problem, however, is that a verbal commitment was not the same as an automatic action beyond Western control. The train could still be stopped by the Americans. Soviet soldiers could still have emplaced barriers to block the train’s route, and the train could still have been

111 “Clay to Bradley,” April 1, 1948 [Clay Papers]; Haydock, City under Siege: pp. 126-128; Shlaim, The United States and the Berlin Blockade, p. 128.
113 Haydock, City under Siege, pp. 126; Shlaim, The United States and the Berlin Blockade, pp. 130-131.
diverted to a siding near the border. The consideration of this option is strongly suggestive of a search for an equivalent of the airlift on the ground, but the Soviet red line was simply not vulnerable to flanking on the ground like it was in the skies. Although reluctantly acceding to orders that train guards would not fire unless fired upon, Clay ordered a train movement to Berlin along these lines on June 21st, 1948. Predictably, the Soviets prevented the train from proceeding by diverting it down a siding. Eventually, the Soviets attached their own locomotive and sent it back to Western Germany.\footnote{116} 

The debate over how to conduct the initial train probe also revealed the keen sensitivity to the use-of-force red line. General Clay, a striking exception to this general approach of working around strong red lines, initially sought to challenge the new Soviet restrictions by sending a train to Berlin defended by armed guards with orders to fire upon any Soviets boarding the train. Clay’s superiors in the Defense Department immediately ordered the train to be delayed due to their grave reservations about this course of action. President Truman, per their advice, instead ordered the train to proceed with the guards ordered to fire only if fired upon.\footnote{117} Clay was also ordered not to increase the number of guards or their armament, contrary to his intent.\footnote{118} After repeatedly overruling Clay, the commander on scene, Secretary of the Army Kenneth Royall offered him an apology, “We are sorry that so much chaperonage was necessary but the war danger element made it necessary.”\footnote{119} 

The ability of the Soviets to shunt the train to a siding and leave it there until it became more cooperative may have rendered some of this debate about rules of engagement irrelevant. More generally, the events surrounding the failed attempt to force trains through to Berlin demonstrate the power of the use-of-force red line. The United States anticipated and endured a significant tactical setback by failing in its efforts to uphold a train line of communications with Berlin in order to respect this red line. Clay’s suggestion that train guards might fire first under certain circumstances was met with nearly universal hostility in Washington. Perhaps most informative is the importance of something as small as which side controlled the switches able to divert trains in determining whether or not trains would reach Berlin. At a minimum, this seemingly trivial consideration sufficed to shift the debate away from trains and toward the two core options: airlift and armed convoy.

The Crisis in Berlin

Although the border between the Eastern and Western Sectors of Berlin did not prove inviolable, the pattern of events shows that it provided clear advantages to the force aiming to hold

\footnote{116} “Murphy to Marshall,” June 21, 1948 [FRUS]; “Murphy to Saltzman and Hickerson,” June 21, 1948; Civil Administration Division, OMGUS, “The Berlin Blockade,” May 17, 1949; Miller, To Save a City, p. 31. 
\footnote{118} Shlaim, The United States and the Berlin Blockade, p. 127. 
\footnote{119} Teleconference TT-9287 [Clay, Royall, Bradley, Wedemeyer], March 31, 1948 [Clay Papers].
ground on its side of the line. A series of incidents in Berlin demonstrate both the power of borders and the degree to which each side maneuvered around and the red line of deliberately using force against the other side. This section 1) reviews several of the most prominent border incidents in Berlin during the crisis; 2) considers the process through which the occupying powers disestablished the Berlin city government and infrastructure, replacing it with two rival city administrations; and 3) discusses the pattern of smaller incidents of arrests and harassment in Berlin throughout the crisis. Even at what could be considered the tactical level of the crisis, strong red lines appear to have provided powerful advantages.

Prior to the crisis and despite its division into four sectors, Berlin was intended to function as a single unified city with one city government and relatively free movement of people and goods across the sectors. This flexible status quo ante, while preferable for the daily life of Berliners, left Berlin without a border focal point as stark as would exist with the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961. The resultant incidents seem to follow a pattern in which two key advantages determine the outcomes: 1) the other side must use force first and 2) the incident was on one’s own side of the sector border. Although the sector border did not completely prevent incursions, the home side consistently out-escalated the other in terms of the number of troops deployed and the (perceived) willingness to use them – this despite the undisputed ability of the Soviets to ultimately out-escalate the Western Powers in Berlin and in Germany.

When the Soviets began imposing restrictions on rail traffic starting April 1\textsuperscript{st}, 1948, the Central Railway Administration in Berlin naturally became an object of dispute. Up to this point, it had been controlled by the Soviets despite being located in the U.S. Sector. Perhaps fearing trouble, the Soviets stationed armed guards outside the building. Like the Soviets confronting the airlift, the United States opted not to take the building by force. Instead, American forces surrounded the building to deny entry. The Soviets dispatched reinforcements, but the American MPs held firm. Eventually, the Soviets withdrew, first the reinforcements and then the guards inside the building on April 4\textsuperscript{th}.\textsuperscript{120} In a similar if smaller incident on April 1\textsuperscript{st}, a squad of Soviet soldiers advanced 100 yards into the British Sector and established a roadblock. The British surrounded them on three sides with hundreds of troops, and the Soviet squad took the open line of retreat back to their own sector.\textsuperscript{121}

On August 14\textsuperscript{th}, the Soviets raided a large black market involved in smuggling supplies into the Western Sectors of Berlin on Potsdamer Platz, located at the intersection of the American, British, and Soviet sectors. The Soviet raid crossed the sector border into Western territory. German civilians at the scene responded with stones, leading Soviet-sector police to fire into the crowd, wounding six Germans. Both sides reacted with reinforcements, and the ensuing standoff eventually ended with the Soviets withdrawing to their sector. The next day, the Soviets again sent hundreds of police and soldiers to the market. The Western Powers were prepared this time, directly interposing their forces along the

\textsuperscript{120} Clay, Decision in Germany, p. 373; Haydock, City under Siege, p. 127.
\textsuperscript{121} Haydock, City under Siege, p. 127.
The United States deployed a full battalion of MPs, and the British did the same plus barricades. The Soviets stood down.\textsuperscript{122}

On December 16\textsuperscript{th}, 1948, French forces surrounded two radio towers in their sector used by a Soviet-controlled station, sealed them off, evacuated the staff, and dynamited them. This was done primarily to clear flight lanes for the newly-built Tegel Airfield. Although this action infuriated the Soviets, reportedly sending Soviet NKVD Colonel Sergei Tulpanov into a rage strong enough to cause a gallstone attack, the Soviets did not directly retaliate.\textsuperscript{123} No Soviet personnel were killed, and no Soviet border was violated. Perhaps perceiving the crisis more in terms of reciprocity than red lines, a State Department telegram had warned in October, “We strongly advise against any direct action now interfering with Berlin radio station since this would be sure to provoke violent Soviet action.”\textsuperscript{124} This prediction turned out to be unduly pessimistic, as red lines theory would expect.

Although most of the major incidents in Berlin took the form of Soviet incursions into the Western Sectors, perhaps the single gravest incident occurred in the Soviet Sector, where the Berlin City Government was located. Freely elected city governments would favor the Western Powers despite rigged electoral victories for the communists in the Soviet Sector. As the Moscow negotiations came to naught, the Soviets moved to consolidate an entirely communist city government presiding over their sector. Rather than move directly, the Soviets orchestrated the storming of the building by a communist mob. Western officials barricaded themselves in their offices. Soviet agents broke into the U.S. offices, beating some Americans there, including reporters, but killing no one. Pro-Western Germans found there were arrested. Eventually, the French struck a deal with the Soviets to evacuate by truck. After three blocks, the Soviets ordered the trucks to pull over on the Schloss Bridge, surrounded the trucks, and proceeded to arrest all the pro-Western Germans. The trucks were then allowed to proceed. In the aftermath, French commandant Major General Jean Ganeval wrote to Soviet General Kotikov, “You and I reached an agreement. I did not doubt your word for a moment and issued my orders accordingly. I still cannot believe that an agreement personally guaranteed by you could have been violated in so flagrant a form.”\textsuperscript{125} The incident was a clear tactical victory for the Soviets.

In a revealing exchange, Clay declared on September 6\textsuperscript{th} to a concerned Under-Secretary of Defense William Draper that he would send U.S. military police into the Soviet Sector to prevent exactly this sort of mob takeover of the city government. This ambitious approach would seem to contradict the expected deterrent advantage that the border offers to the Soviets per red lines theory. However, in a September 8\textsuperscript{th} follow-up discussion that included Army Chief of Staff Bradley and Secretary Royall, Clay was urged to avoid that action if at all possible. Clay then backed away from his earlier comments,

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., pp. 191-192.
\textsuperscript{123} Clay, Decision in Germany, p. 384; Miller, To Save a City, pp. 113-114.
\textsuperscript{124} It is not certain that this telegram envisioned disrupting Soviet-controlled radio in the same way that the French went about it, but it is hard to imagine that it referred to a more aggressive approach. “The Acting Secretary of State to the Embassy in France,” October 2, 1948 [FRUS].
\textsuperscript{125} Haydock, City under Siege, pp. 206-208; “Murphy to Marshall,” September 7, 1948 [FRUS].
saying, “Sometimes I let off steam to Draper which I can’t let off here and tell him what I would like to do but am not doing.”

Most of the actions taken to divide Berlin into two cities were conducted unilaterally and elicited little more than pro forma protests. Each of the occupying powers was able to restructure the utilities and governance of its sector. This involved sealing off, re-routing, and often rebuilding key parts of the electrical, communication, transportation, and sanitation infrastructure, all with the goal of providing no aid to the other side. For the Soviets, this was part of the blockade; for the Western Powers, retaliation. In one incident, U.S. forces cut a gas main to Soviet Marshal Sokolovsky’s house, leading him to move rather than deal with them about it. In the course of that move, a truck carrying some of his furniture attempted to pass through the American Sector, where it was seized. Police forces, media, labor unions, currencies and the city government all divided in two.

Arguably, the Soviet faits accomplis that led to the administrative and economic division of Berlin backfired for the Soviet Union. On May 2nd, Clay argued that the use of the Western German currency or a separate third currency in Berlin would be “most difficult and probably untenable in the long run” due to the importance of the links between the Western Sectors of Berlin and the surrounding areas. Over time, however, the costs of restructuring the Western Sectors around the loss of those linkages became an accepted reality. Once the Western Sectors held what amounted to a separate election late in 1948, re-integrating the city would amount to betraying the pro-Western political parties who were elected, the voters who turned out en masse to elect them, and perhaps even the principle of democracy. This principle would necessarily be disregarded in any plausible compromise with the Soviets, due to Soviet unpopularity. By December, 1948 Clay described a return to joint governance as “virtually impossible.” By 1949, the United States had abandoned its objective of restored joint control of Berlin, with one official writing, “We have now found by bitter experience that direct quadripartite economic operations of this complexity are impossible.” The Soviet faits accomplis succeeded in a tactical sense, but may have resulted in an inadvertent strategic setback to their ambitions for influence in the Western Sectors of Berlin.

126 Teleconference TT-1162 [Clay, Draper], September 6, 1948 [Clay Papers]; Teleconference TT-1182 [Clay, Royall, Draper, Bradley, Wedemeyer, Byroade], September 8, 1948 [Clay Papers].
127 Clay, Decision in Germany, p. 365; “Murphy to Marshal,” November 24, 1948 [FRUS].
128 Miller, To Save a City, p. 54.
129 Haydock, City under Siege, pp. 181, 191.
130 For much of the crisis, the CIA shared this Soviet view that these measures would strengthen the Soviet bargaining position. “Hillenkoetter to Truman,” December 10, 1948.
131 “Clay to the Department of the Army, May 2, 1948 [FRUS].
132 “Clay to Draper,” August 19, 1948 [Clay Papers].
133 “Murphy to Marshal,” November 26, 1948 [FRUS].
134 “Clay to the Department of the Army,” December 4, 1948 [Clay Papers].
135 “Adams [Policy Planning Staff] to Jessup,” April 15, 1949 [FRUS].
Although strong red lines appear to have played a powerful part in determining the outcomes of many types of local conflicts within Berlin, some issue areas defied this form of crisis management. Where strong red lines were unavailable, the two sides generally seemed to fall back on tit-for-tat reciprocity.

Soviet forces arrested U.S. servicemen who crossed into the Soviet sector of Berlin almost routinely during the crisis. For instance, at least 24 were arrested between July 15th and September 15th, 1948. Far from being political acts, however, many of these incidents appear to result from the greater availability of alcohol in the Soviet sector, with drunkenness reported in many of the cases even in U.S. sources. Although incidents of long detentions, poor confinement conditions, and beatings did occur on occasion, the norm was for the enlisted soldier in question to be held for about a day in reasonable conditions and released. In addition to detaining Western servicemen, the Soviets arrested several thousand pro-Western Germans, many of them police officers. There were frequent allegations that these arrests took place covertly in the Western Sectors, exploiting this limited element of unverifiability in the Western red lines.

In retaliation for Soviet actions like these detentions, Clay ordered the enforcement of traffic laws on Soviet vehicles long accustomed to speeding through the Western Sectors in total disregard of them. In one resultant incident, Soviet Marshal Sokolovsky’s vehicle was pulled over, leading to a confrontation with his bodyguards that ended when a gun was shoved into Sokolovsky’s chest. In another incident, a Soviet jeep refused to stop for an American MP on a motorcycle, and instead ran him off the road, breaking his arm. Other American soldiers fired on the jeep and pursued it into the Soviet sector before giving up and turning back. These incidents elicited protests but not major escalation. The latter incident poses the question of whether the results would have been more severe if the firing had killed any Soviet soldiers and/or if the firing had been sanctioned directly by Washington.

The Western powers adopted a general policy of something like tit-for-tat retaliation to minor Soviet acts of harassment that did not cross any strong red lines. Lucius Clay was a strong believer in this approach to crisis strategy,

I know that these measures have the appearance of opéra bouffe and that it does not seem possible that they could take place between the representatives of great nations. However, surrounded in Berlin and subjected to continued and deliberate annoyances, there was no other

136 “Hays to Huebner,” July 21, 1949; Haydock, City under Siege, p. 128.
138 Haydock, City under Siege, p. 192.
139 Clay, Decision in Germany, p. 372; Haydock, City under Siege, pp. 146, 200-201.
recourse. The countermeasures were effective, and Soviet-created incidents were always reduced when we retaliated.\textsuperscript{140}

Clay reported that in one exchange the Soviets initially refused to budge in response to protests regarding the detainment and treatment of American officers and Western-Berlin policemen in their sector, but that the Soviets became more cooperative when explicitly threatened with added restrictions on access to and transit through the Western Sectors.\textsuperscript{141}

A State Department report of April 26\textsuperscript{th}, 1948 listed both a series of Soviet measures short of force to harass the Western position in Berlin and a series of possible retaliatory countermoves. These included barring Soviet publications, evicting Soviet personnel, denying entry, and intensified propaganda. The Western Powers also moved against communists in their zones, arresting some leaders and banning the SED, the Soviet-arranged communist party.\textsuperscript{142} However, the aforementioned report makes clear that the power of the border as a deterrent loomed large:

Within Berlin, there are few major means available to the US for exerting practical countermoves against the Soviet forces. In any campaign of mutual retaliation the USSR would have the advantage. American retaliatory action would of necessity be confined to specific Soviet installations located in the western sectors, such as the Soviet Zone Railroad Administration Headquarters in the American sector and the Soviet-controlled Berlin Radio studio in the British sector.\textsuperscript{143}

Despite these disadvantages, the Western Powers prevailed in the crisis writ large and most of the major incidents in Berlin during the crisis period. They won the day in most of the Berlin incidents not because of greater strength or better signaling in Berlin – they had neither – but because they were more careful than the Soviets to avoid even small-scale \textit{fait accompli} attempts on the other side of the border in Berlin.

\textbf{Deploying B-29s to Britain: A Pivotal Signal?}

No event taking place within the Berlin Blockade Crisis has received more academic interest than the deployment of two groups (60 planes in total) of nuclear-capable B-29 heavy bombers to

\begin{footnotes}
\item[140] Clay, \textit{Decision in Germany}, p. 373.
\item[141] “Clay to Draper and Bradley,” September 8, 1948 [Clay Papers].
\item[142] “Lovett to Bohlen,” October 2, 1948; “OMGUS SGD Hays to HQ Dept of the Army for CSGID Chamberlin,” June 30, 1948; “Wiesner to Murphy ["Program to Restrict Communism and Aid Democracy"],” March 27, 1948.
\item[143] Division of Research on Europe [State Department], “Possible Soviet Measures to Harass the Western Forces in Berlin,” April 26, 1948. For a similar line of reasoning: Teleconference TT-1756, December 29, 1948 [Clay Papers].
\end{footnotes}
This action seems to offer a prototypical signal of resolve. That interpretation has some truth behind it. The intent was to signal, and the deployment was understood not to entail any great military significance in itself. In advocating this action, Clay described the deployment as “essential” and British Foreign Minister Bevin as “highly important.” However, there are several reasons to doubt the significance of the B-29 deployment.

First, the deployment generated no visible change in Soviet policy. The enthusiastic British request for the deployment came from Foreign Minister Bevin on late June 27th, shortly after the full imposition of the blockade, and was approved by President Truman the next day. There was no obvious change in Soviet in the period following the decision to deploy, nor the deployment itself. After many ebbs and flows in the level of tension and a series of (largely fruitless) negotiations undertaken in several different venues, the crisis ended ten months later.

Second, the British were insistent that both they and the Americans lie about the purpose of the deployment, recommending the phraseology of “routine training flights” and publicly denying any link to events in Berlin. This disingenuousness hardly seems consistent a strong signal of resolve. Nor was there any public announcement of the deployment of nuclear weapons (none were deployed), though one could have hoped the Soviets would draw this conclusion nonetheless. The bomber squadrons selected were not those used for the nuclear mission. Some B-29s even seem to have been moved back from Germany to England to reduce vulnerability in the event of Soviet attack.

Third, the timing of the deployment was delayed nearly a month in order to fit nicely alongside the current status of the ever-evolving exchange of diplomatic notes. The bombers did not reach Britain until late July. The delay had to do with a desire to avoid having the deployment appear to be a response to specific Soviet diplomatic notes, stalling implementation until an appropriate lull in the diplomatic correspondence. If this signal was seen as a potentially decisive tool rather than a minor act more on par with yet another diplomatic note, this delay becomes more difficult to explain.

Finally, despite some strongly-worded support for the deployment, nowhere in the documentary record do American policymakers suggest that they expected the B-29 deployment to lead
to a change in Soviet policy.\textsuperscript{150} In the aftermath of the B-29 deployment, it receives virtually no further discussion. There were no expressions of surprise or disappointment at the lack of impact. The B-29s faded from high-level attention virtually upon arrival.

The limited significance of the B-29 deployment suggests two conclusions. First, the pivotal events and strategies during the crisis were less a matter of signaling than the conventional wisdom would expect. Second, this lack of change in Soviet perceptions of Western resolve fits quite well with the discussion of type-separation in Chapter Three. The logic of type-separation suggests that for the B-29s to be a credible signal of resolve, it would need to be true that the Western Powers would have been less likely to send this signal if they were irresolute. However, forward deploying bombers to Britain in no way prevented an eventual decision to abandon Berlin rather than fight for it. Even if the Western Powers had already decided to do just that if necessary, they could still have hoped to bluff the Soviets into backing down first. Therefore, the incentive for the Western Powers was to send the B-29 signal regardless of their true level of resolve, implying in turn that the Soviets could learn little about Western resolve from the deployment. American and British policymakers seem to have recognized this, widely regarding the deployment as a desirable measure with scant prospects of changing Soviet perceptions, eliciting Soviet concessions, or risking war. The Western Powers could have found ways to send stronger signals had they wished to do so, but, in the words of Harry Truman, “This is no time to be juggling an atomic bomb around.”\textsuperscript{151}

\section*{Soviet Harassment of the Airlift: Brinksmanship to Signal Resolve?}

Brinksmanship offers perhaps the most important way in which the conventional wisdom believes that states signal resolve in order to prevail in crisis. By incurring a significant risk of war, a state reveals something about its willingness to fight over that issue. This section explores the extent to which this strategy was in fact used during the crisis. In particular, once the airlift put it in a disadvantageous position, did the Soviet Union use this strategy to attempt to halt or supersede the airlift? Soviet fighter aircraft could, after all, have literally played the game of chicken with the airlift. I show first that U.S. policymakers consistently worried about accidental escalation and various readily-available Soviet brinksmanship options. Most of these options involved harassment of the airlift, such as close buzzing of transport aircraft. However, despite some accounts which blow the Soviet usage of these tactics out of proportion,\textsuperscript{152} the Soviets consistently decided against using assertive brinksmanship measures that would truly have brought the crisis to a head. This signaling strategy was available, but not used.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[150] It is difficult to prove a negative, but for the same conclusion: Shlaim, \textit{The United States and the Berlin Blockade}, p. 239.
\item[151] Shlaim, \textit{The United States and the Berlin Blockade}, p. 255.
\end{footnotes}
Western policymakers continually feared that the Soviets would resort to brinksmanship tactics to combat the ongoing success of the airlift and in so doing trigger inadvertent escalation. According to Ambassador Walter Bedell Smith (Moscow), “there is of course the possibility of a miscalculation on their part of the probable consequences of harassing actions that that they might take.” He went on to predict that the Russians “will harass the airlift; we may occasionally lose a pilot or a plane.” The State Department’s Policy Planning Staff put the problem in more general terms,

Where forces of mutually antagonistic great powers are operating in such close proximity ... there is always a danger of incidents which, although not so intended, would lead directly to military complications.

Intelligence assessments warned of miscalculation on the Soviets’ part leading to overly aggressive actions. General William Tunner, the commander of the airlift, believed that what harassment did take place happened after (and because) the airlift began to demonstrate its sustainable endurance. He described the harassment as follows,

The Russians resorted to many silly and childish stunts in their efforts to harass us. Their first action was to announce that on the morrow they would be flying in formation over Berlin and East Germany, including the corridors ... I was convinced all along that the Russians were bluffing ... I put out orders to all pilots to continue boring ahead and not to pay attention to the Russians if they did show up. The threatened formation never developed.

What harassing measures did the Soviets take? Were they merely “silly and childish,” or did the Soviets incur a meaningful risk of accidental escalation so as to signal resolve. Many accounts of the crisis emphasize the dangerous harassing measures employed by the Soviets, including buzzing transport aircraft with fighters, aerial and AAA target practice near transport aircraft, and the use of barrage balloons. On further inspection, however, Tunner’s characterization was apt; the Soviets never used the type of intentional brinksmanship that Western policymakers feared, at least not on a large scale.

The most notable single incident cited as an instance of brinksmanship-type harassment was the April 5th, 1948 collision of a Soviet Yak-3 fighter with the British Vickers Viking transport aircraft that it was buzzing in the vicinity of Gatow Airfield on the edge of the British Sector of Berlin. This was the sole collision of this sort during the crisis, and seems to offer a textbook example of brinksmanship.

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153 “Minutes of the 286th Policy Planning Staff Meeting,” September 28, 1948 [FRUS]. Also see “Director of Plans and Operations, Department of the Army to Clay,” Cable WX-83789 [date unknown]
155 E.g., Division of Research on Europe [State Department], “Soviet Intentions in Berlin,” April 27, 1948.
156 Tunner, Over the Hump, p. 185.
157 Haydock, City under Siege, pp. 177, 212, 224.
However, this incident did not arise out of a pattern of close encounters in which one was a bit too close. There were no other buzzing or alleged buzzing incidents at that stage of the crisis, including the preceding year and the next month. All accounts suggest that Marshal Sokolovsky’s initially appeared shocked and quite uncharacteristically apologetic, although eventually the Soviets would blame the British pilot for the incident.\footnote{Haydock, \textit{City under Siege}, p. 127; Shlaim, \textit{The United States and the Berlin Blockade}, pp. 133-134; Miller, \textit{To Save a City}, p. 25.} Given the lack of any pattern of harassment at this time, both the British and the American governments concluded the incident was not ordered by the Soviet Government.\footnote{“Murphy to Marshall,” April 6, 1948 [FRUS].}

Intelligence reports and studies by the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff continued to warn of a potential escalation in Soviet buzzing that would create a real risk of collisions and therefore the escalation of the crisis as a whole.\footnote{Central Intelligence Agency, “Consequences of a Breakdown in Four-Power Negotiations on Germany,” September 28, 1948; State Department Policy Planning Staff, “Factors Affecting the Nature of the U.S. Defense Arrangements in Light of Soviet Policies,” June 23, 1948 [FRUS]; “Report by the State Department Policy Planning Staff,” October 1, 1948 [FRUS]; Murphy, “US Policy Respecting Germany.” March 23, 1949 [FRUS].} These dangerous buzzing incidents never came. After the collapse of the Moscow Negotiations, the Soviets announced that they would begin large-scale air maneuvers in the Berlin flight corridors in early September, 1948. This announcement inspired a certain amount of alarm that the long-feared buzzing-type brinksmanship campaign was set to start, but it quickly became apparent that the Soviet announcement was a bluff.\footnote{“OMGUS to HQ Dept of the Army for Director Intelligence,” July 20, 1948; Haydock, \textit{City under Siege}, pp. 167, 224.} Although incidents of buzzing did take place and heavy Soviet fighter activity around the corridors was common,\footnote{Gobarev, “Soviet Military Plans and Actions during the First Berlin Crisis,” p. 20.} in the end the Soviets never adopted a policy of playing chicken with Western transport aircraft. One historian’s rare look inside Soviet archives from this period also found no evidence of orders to buzz Western aircraft.\footnote{Haydock, \textit{City under Siege}, p. 224; Riddleberger to Saltzman and Hickerson, Telegram #1799 [date unknown].}

The Soviets had options beyond buzzing for engaging in brinksmanship with the airlift, including conducting target practice in the vicinity of Western aircraft. There were instances of dry firing passes by Soviet fighters, Soviet fighters firing live ammunition at dummies trailing behind other aircraft, and AAA fire near the corridors.\footnote{Clay, \textit{Decision in Germany}, pp. 373-374.} However, few of these incidents occurred in dangerously close proximity to airlift aircraft. In his memoirs, Clay wrote, “Frequent Soviet warnings of aerial gunnery practice and formation flying in the air corridors did not materialize in threatening form.”\footnote{Tunner, \textit{Over the Hump}, p. 185.} General Tunner regarded the actions that did occur along these lines as “never more than a morale threat.”\footnote{Gobarev, “Soviet Military Plans and Actions during the First Berlin Crisis,” p. 20.}
When and Why Perceptions Changed

The lack of compelling evidence that the most notable signals of resolve – the B-29 deployment and buzzing incidents – affected perceptions raises several questions. Why didn’t these signals affect perceptions? Did perceptions change at all during the crisis? Is a blanket dismissal of signaling to cultivate a perception of resolve appropriate, at least with regard to this case? This section explores these questions, starting with the instances in which perceptions did change. By comparing these instances to the seeming insignificance of more traditional signals, it is possible to draw conclusions about when and why actions taken in crisis affect the adversary’s perceptions. This analysis again points to the importance of type-separation for signals to be informative.

The most important change in perceptions during the crisis regarded the effectiveness of the airlift. Soviet leaders, like most Western policymakers, entered the crisis with the prior belief that an airlift could not sustainably supply the Western Sectors of Berlin. A January 1948 report by the U.S. Army General Staff clearly stated that an airlift to supply the population of the Western Sectors of Berlin was infeasible.\(^{167}\) According to the U.S. Ambassador to Moscow (Smith), the Soviets also did not think the airlift could prevent starvation in Berlin.\(^{168}\) A CIA Report of June 30th, 1948, shortly after the full restrictions came into effect, reported that the Soviets had given orders to Eastern Berlin judicial authorities to begin treating the Western Sectors as part of the Soviet Zone because the Western Powers would be gone within three weeks.\(^{169}\) Secretary of State Marshall wrote on June 27th that “our general estimate is that the current supply situation in Berlin means that the zero hour there will not be reached for two to three weeks.”\(^{170}\) At that time, British Foreign Minister Ernest Bevin also did not believe the airlift would be enough to supply the city, but that it would at least be “a symbol of our determination” that would buy time for negotiations.\(^{171}\)

Over time, these views changed, and the airlift became seen able to continue for an indefinite period, albeit at a cost for the United States, Britain, and the economy of Berlin. In a cable from Clay to Army Chief of Staff Bradley on April 1st, 1948, Clay conveys the decision to begin the airlift, saying “I believe [the airlift] will meet our needs for some days.”\(^{172}\) Although Clay was initially skeptical about the airlift as more than a stopgap measure, but members of his staff began to persuade him that it could transport more material than he had assumed.\(^{173}\) By April 2nd, Clay’s views had already begun to shift, with a follow-up cable to Bradley speaking of a sustained airlift for a “much longer period.”\(^{174}\) Clay had

\(^{167}\) Shlaim, *The United States and the Berlin Blockade*, p. 111.
\(^{168}\) “Smith to Marshall,” July 24, 1948 [FRUS].
\(^{169}\) “Hillenkoetter to Truman” [“Russian Directive Indicating that Soviets Intend to Incorporate Berlin into Soviet Zone”], June 30, 1948.
\(^{170}\) “Marshall to Douglas,” June 27, 1948 [FRUS].
\(^{172}\) “Clay to Bradley,” April 1, 1948 [Clay Papers].
\(^{173}\) Haydock, *City under Siege*, p. 167.
\(^{174}\) “Clay to Bradley,” April 2, 1948 [Clay Papers].
initially estimated a ceiling of 700 tons for the airlift, a figure which paled in comparison to the 4,500 estimated requirement for Berlin. Berlin had imported 15,500 tons daily prior to the blockade. By July, the US-UK effort reached 2,250 tons. By Autumn, 1948, the airlift began to exceed the daily requirements, at times surpassing 10,000 tons. Not surprisingly, the success of the airlift produced a change in perceived capability among Westerners and, one can assume, Soviets. Notably, it was perceptions of a very specific logistical capability which enabled an ongoing series of faits accomplis that changed, not perceptions of aggregate relative power or willingness to fight.

Perceptions of the logistical potential of an airlift changed for the straightforward reason that the airlift proved itself. The most direct way to signal the strength of a capability is to visibly use that capability to full effect, and the airlift did just that. The Soviets could count the volume of traffic and calculate its implications for themselves. Eventually it became clear that the airlift could continue for years, and the United States began to plan for that contingency. Why, then, did the crisis take so long? To fully convince the Soviets of its effectiveness, the airlift needed to supply Berlin through the winter. Flying conditions were at their worst in the winter in Central Europe, as the Battle of the Bulge illustrated. Winter weather resulted in (by one U.S. estimate) a 40% reduction in airlift operations. Coal consumption also peaked in wintertime, and most of the tonnage flown into Berlin consisted of coal. The Soviets hoped that winter would break the airlift. Making it through the winter successfully was necessary to demonstrate that the airlift could continue indefinitely. Only the “type” of Western powers able to pull off an airlift indefinitely could have sustained it through the unusually severe winter of 1949. The commander of the airlift, General William Tunner, described Soviet perceptions along these lines,

The Russians had never had an airlift themselves, and they didn’t take ours seriously until it was too late. I have another personal opinion on this. The Russians did not understand instrument flying themselves and therefore did not believe that we could maintain the Airlift during the long European winter.

The Soviet decision to end the blockade came not long after the end of the Winter of 1949.

American perceptions of the likelihood of war generally declined during the crisis as well – why? First, the conventional wisdom’s emphasis on military mobilization finds support in this case. The Western Powers carefully monitored Soviet troop movements and readiness levels for signs of

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175 Tunner, Over the Hump, 1985.
177 “Cable Ref# UAX-1736,” December 16, 1948.
178 Miller, To Save a City, p. 86.
179 On that severity: Tunner, Over the Hump, p. 209.
180 Tunner, Over the Hump, p. 184.
preparations for war, in line with the conventional appreciation of mobilization as an effective signal.\textsuperscript{181} Western analysts interpreted the lack of additional Soviet forces in Eastern Germany as a significant indicator that no attack was imminent.\textsuperscript{182} The lack of mobilization, however, was a constant that cannot explain reductions in the perceived probability of war.

The most compelling explanation for the reduction in the perceived probability of war over the course of the crisis is that the absence of a Soviet attack led Western policymakers to become increasingly confident that the crisis was not a smokescreen for premeditated aggression.\textsuperscript{183} This observation may apply to crises quite generally. Lebow (1981) distinguishes traditional coercive crises, which he refers to as “brinksmanship crises” from “justification-of-hostility” crises in which the appearance of coercion is merely a charade used to obscure and legitimize what would otherwise be naked aggression.\textsuperscript{184} Once crises pass the point at which an adversary merely seeking a contrived justification for war would have initiated hostilities, the other side can become more confident that this adversary is not dead-set on war. Only that type would continue the crisis rather than attack. An American official at the Warsaw Embassy during the crisis described the change in perceptions over time, “Local rumors of impending war now reach peaks about monthly instead of bimonthly as here-to-fore.”\textsuperscript{185} The importance of screening out justification-of-hostility crises reappears in the mid-1949 discussion of a potential Soviet re-imposition of the blockade. Several senior officials in Washington explicitly warned that such a move might presage a Soviet decision to start a war while placing as much blame as possible on the West.\textsuperscript{186} These fears, in turn, would likely have waned as that future crisis continued without the onset of hostilities.

Although useful in partially defusing crisis tensions, this reduction in the perceived likelihood of war does not extend to long-term trust in the adversary’s intentions. George Kennan aptly summarized this problem of conveying cooperative intentions to the Soviets,

Nothing short of complete disarmament, delivery of our air and naval forces to Russia, and resigning of powers of government to American Communists would dent this problem; and even then, ... Moscow would smell a trap and would continue to harbor most baleful misgivings.\textsuperscript{187}

\textsuperscript{181} Miller, To Save a City, pp. 47-48; “USMA Warsaw SGD Betts to HQ Dept of Army for Director of Intelligence,” August 20, 1948.
\textsuperscript{182} “Summary of the Daily Meeting with the Secretary” [State Department], March 22, 1949 [FRUS].
\textsuperscript{183} On this decline: Shlaim, The United States and the Berlin Blockade, pp. 289-290.
\textsuperscript{185} “USMA Warsaw SGD Betts to HQ Dept of Army for Director of Intelligence,” August 20, 1948.
\textsuperscript{186} The Acting Secretary of Defense, “Report to the National Security Council: Possible U.S. Courses of Action in the Event the USSR Reimposes the Berlin Blockade,” June 1, 1949 [FRUS].
\textsuperscript{187} Quotation from 1946. Quoted in Shlaim, The United States and the Berlin Blockade, p. 65.
Reversing the perspectives, Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov cited the recent lenient treatment of Finland as evidence of benign Soviet intentions. The U.S. Ambassador in Moscow (Smith) recorded his comments as follows,

Molotov replied that surely after two years in the Soviet Union I must realize that the Soviet Government does not pursue any aggressive aims in its foreign policy but that its first and foremost desire is to rehabilitate and reconstruct its internal economy.\footnote{Smith to Marshall," May 4, 1948 [FRUS].}

Nothing of the sort would happen for the next forty years.

**Why Didn’t the Soviets Wait for a Nuclear Arsenal?**

The blockade began in part during March, 1948 and in full by June, 1948. It ended in May, 1949. The Soviet Union tested its first nuclear weapon in August, 1949. If the Soviets believed that Western perceptions of Soviet power were a potentially decisive factor, why didn’t the Soviets continue the crisis until they could exploit this sharp increase in their perceived power? There was no immediate, urgent need to lift the blockade. The situation had stabilized into a stalemate of sorts that, although costly to each side in certain ways, was far from catastrophic. The Soviets were also very likely aware that the Western Powers were underestimating the progress of the Soviet nuclear program, and therefore that a sudden, favorable change in Western perceptions of Soviet power loomed on the horizon. A nuclear test, after all, is a signal of increased power whose credibility is not in doubt; only a nuclear power would be able to send it. So, why not take advantage of it?

If perceived relative power is a decisive advantage in crises, it is difficult to explain why the Soviets chose not to wait and at least see if this sudden increase in perceptions of their military capabilities could bring them victory. More formally, the relative power hypothesis in its stronger forms has a certain observable implication that the Soviets should have waited and exploited this advantage. They did not do so. More information on Soviet strategic thinking would help to elucidate this point, but it is not easy to imagine how it could alter this conclusion.\footnote{Because the Soviet nuclear test occurred unexpectedly and after the crisis ended, there was no discussion of a possible Soviet nuclear test in the documents on the Berlin Crisis that I have seen.} Relative power matters, of course, but this case offers two reasons to view its explanatory power as more circumscribed than the conventional wisdom tends to assume. The first is the decision by the Soviet Union not to wait to lift the blockade until after its nuclear test. The second is the range of possible outcomes – from Soviet victory to Western victory to war – that Western policymakers considered possible despite relative power remaining virtually constant during the critical period of the crisis in mid-1948. Relative power and relative interest alone cannot explain the outcome of the Berlin Crisis.
The Surprising Rarity of Soviet Passive Interference to the Airlift

Among the most surprising aspects of the Berlin case – and the most problematic for red lines theory – is the lack of non-violent Soviet technical measures to disrupt the airlift. These actions avoid the pertinent focal points, direct attack on military forces and border-crossing, and so should have held great appeal for the Soviets. This section asks why the Soviets refrained from jamming western radio communications and radar. One possibility is that the Soviets lacked an understanding of the electronic warfare options available to them. Other explanations such as human error and organizational dysfunction remain possible pending further information on the Soviet side of the crisis. Nonetheless, the rarity of Soviet passive interference with the airlift remains a piece of evidence that potentially calls red lines theory into question to some extent.

The Soviet Union did not engage in a sustained effort to jam Western communications in order to disrupt the airlift. Most or all of the jamming activity mentioned in various historical accounts seems to have consisted only of low-level jamming of police radio bands used by German officers in the Western Sectors of Berlin. Little effort was made to jam the various electronic frequencies used to coordinate so many aircraft in the air at once and to conduct instrumental landings in difficult weather conditions. The Soviets did remove Western navigation beacons in Eastern Germany on April 9th, 1948, but could have gone much farther. One historical account suggests that this Soviet restraint may have been motivated by a desire to signal the limits of their intentions and thereby aid in avoiding war, but there is no evidence available to support that interpretation. General Tunner believed that the Soviets may simply have lacked an understanding of instrumental flying, a new technology, and that in any case the airlift would have been able to persevere despite jamming. Red lines theory, however, predicts that they could have gotten away with this action without undue risk because the red line against attacking Western aircraft did not extend to passive electronic interference. It remains somewhat puzzling for the theory that the Soviets did not at least try.

The Soviets had at least two other, higher-risk options for (somewhat) passively interfering with the airlift: high-powered searchlights and barrage balloons. Searchlights were used at times to interfere with landing at Gatow at the outer edge of the British Sector of Berlin. Although occasionally forcing pilots to put up newspapers on the cockpit windows to avoid temporary blinding, this tactic never caused a crash. There is something odd about the fact that taking down an American aircraft by

190 Miller, To Save a City, pp. 26, 126; Shlaim, The United States and the Berlin Blockade, p. 288.
193 I find this explanation unconvincing for two reasons: 1) as U.S. sources suggest, these actions would have been perceived as little more than a logical extension of the blockade that was already underway and 2) these actions would have been less provocative than many other actions taken by the Soviet Union, especially the incidents in Berlin itself. Shlaim, The United States and the Berlin Blockade, p. 288.
194 Tunner, Over the Hump, p. 224.
195 Tunner, Over the Hump, p. 185; Michael D. Haydock, City under Siege, p. 224.
shooting searchlights at it has such different implications as taking a plane down by shooting bullets or shells, but this likely has to do with searchlights falling in a gray area within the in-this-sense-imprecise red line against using force on Western armed forces.

Barrage balloons are the other option that was available to the Soviets. Used during World War II to defend against attack by low-flying enemy aircraft, barrage balloons are stationary balloons tethered to the ground by a cable. The threat to aircraft is not so much the balloon as the cable, which damages aircraft that collide with it. Although there were reports of barrage balloons during the airlift, the Soviets never attempted to use them on a scale that could interfere with the airlift. For instance, on July 2nd, 1948 the Soviets warned the Western Powers that a barrage balloon would go up in the corridor. They gave the time, location, and altitude along with a promise not to place the balloon in clouds. The balloon was never sighted by a Western aircraft.\(^{196}\) A retrospective assessment of reports of barrage balloons in the air corridors around June 30th, 1948 concluded that only one balloon near Magdeburg was present and that it was “considered of no importance.”\(^{197}\) These two incidents reflect the minimal extent of the Soviet usage of barrage balloons, a tactic that could be viewed as passive interference or as brinksmanship. Barrage balloons fell into a gray area for the firing-on-forces red line, because they were equipment but not living soldiers. Western policymakers anticipated a more aggressive use of barrage balloons and wrestled with the problem of how to respond. Eventually they gave orders to refrain from shooting down balloons without receiving orders from Washington or London to do so, despite the ambiguity of whether firing on balloons violated the focal point of firing on Soviet forces.\(^{198}\) It is unclear whether the Western powers would have exploited this imprecise aspect of the Soviet red line to try to get away with shooting down Soviet balloons as a \textit{fait accompli} if the Soviets had made more widespread use of this tactic.

The absence of these passive interference measures, especially jamming, is puzzling not just for the theory being tested, but also surprised U.S. policymakers. Even in October, months into the airlift, a report by the State Department Policy Planning Staff mentioned continuing fears of “indirect mechanical interference to navigation through such means as jamming of radio control systems, smoke smudges, etcetera.” As expected, this report also recommends that such measures should be met with “immediate vigorous protest” in the form of statements, but the report refrains from endorsing any stronger responses.\(^{199}\) These fears in Washington and London, at least, meet the expectations of red lines theory. Future research exploiting Russian sources might search for evidence against red lines theory by exploring why the Soviets refrained from widespread passive interference measures that sought to disrupt the airlift without clearly violating the red line against firing on it.

\(^{196}\) “Berlin Military Post SGD Willard to EUCOM,” July 2, 1948.
\(^{197}\) Civil Administration Division, OMGUS, “The Berlin Blockade,” May 17, 1949.
\(^{199}\) “Report by the State Department Policy Planning Staff,” October 1, 1948 [FRUS].
Conclusion

The course of the Berlin Blockade Crisis is best understood as the Soviet Union flanking the incomplete red line protecting Berlin by interposing forces and obstacles to cut the land supply routes. The Western Powers then mirrored this tactic by using the airlift to flank this new – and also incomplete – Soviet red line, taking to the sky to avoid having to dislodge Soviet forces in their path. The auxiliary red lines that might have filled these gaps suffered from arbitrariness. Non-arbitrary red lines use a focal point to encapsulate many individually small valued units into a larger whole that states can more credibly threaten to defend. Red lines against overflying occupied Germany in the pre-arranged flight corridors and against sealing roads into Berlin fall far short of this standard.200 Firing on Soviet forces to remove them from the land routes to Berlin did not. Even the Western Sectors of Berlin writ large fell short of the ideal on this score, being as they were an isolated picked in Eastern Germany. Imprecision and unverifiability featured less prominently in this case, but the next chapter will explain how both played major roles in the Cuban Missile Crisis. Both in the actions they took and in their assessments of what would transpire in contingencies that never came to pass, Western policymakers consistently respected the deterrent power of strong red lines.

Over the course of the chapter, Lucius Clay emerged as the standout exception, a policymaker with little if any concern for strong red lines. His views differed in pronounced ways from those of his superiors in Washington, resulting in his being repeatedly overruled on questions relating to the conduct of U.S. policy during the crisis. Clay was not an outsider or thought to have extreme views in general; for instance, his views on U.S. interests and goals were quite mainstream. His disregard for red lines seems to be a reliable predictor of his disagreements with Washington, most of which concerned questions of crisis strategy. This disregard also led to some erroneous predictions; on April 2nd, 1948, Clay declared to his superiors, "I am sure our position has stopped for time being further interference with air and highway movements which would require force to implement."201

Clay left the Berlin Blockade Crisis with a reputation for strong leadership in a difficult situation. For this reason, he was brought back from retirement during the 1961 Berlin Crisis and charged with command of the U.S. forces in West Berlin (although his authority was vaguely defined). He promptly began a series of provocative actions, including aggressive patrols and sending American officials into the Soviet Zone without submitting to inspection by East Berlin police. His intent was to enforce the right of such access. Clay was the main instigator of the famed tank standoff at Checkpoint Charlie. At one point, Clay ordered a mock Berlin Wall created so American soldiers could practice tearing it down. He also inquired as to Washington’s view of a quick military raid into East Berlin to destroy obstructions and segments of the Wall. These positions were at odds with the majority views in Washington and

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200 Importantly, it is not just the focal point itself, but a focal point that encapsulates enough value to be worth defending. In this sense, red lines theory is not entirely divorced from state interests.

201 Teleconference TT-9300 [Clay, Royall, Bradley], April 2, 1948 [Clay Papers]. He was wrong in part because blocking highway movements did not require force.
NATO, leading to Clay’s marginalization, his eventual resignation, and a more conciliatory policy.\(^\text{202}\) Whereas most policymakers thought in terms of working around strong red lines, Lucius Clay’s recommendations consistently showed how radically different crisis policy would be if run by those with little concern for them.

It is easy to take the impact of strong red lines for granted. A counterfactual illustrates: what if Western Berlin had been geographically contiguous with Western Germany?\(^\text{203}\) Tactically, no blockade would have been possible. The Soviets could have seized the Western Sectors by violating the use-of-force red line, but this they were unwilling to do even with Berlin as an exclave encased by their territory and forces. Moreover, if red lines theory is correct, the strategic stakes would have been further tilted in favor of the West. After giving up on Berlin, there would have been no fallback focal point on which to declare, “Here and no further” short of the French and Dutch borders. In contrast, allowing the Soviets to tear off a swathe of territory from a single zonal border would leave no compelling focal point against further Soviet advances. As a result, the incentive for the West to hold would have been stronger, and their deterrent correspondingly enhanced. Walter Bedell Smith, U.S. Ambassador in Moscow for the critical phases of the crisis, clearly recognized the importance of strong red lines in regulating crises:

> Although a clear-cut zonal line separating us from them would minimize the danger of armed conflict now, the confused relationships existing in Berlin and the corridors leading to it have present potentialities for incidents that could readily lead to war.\(^\text{204}\)

The arrangements made for Berlin during the Second World War have rightly come under a great deal of criticism, and red lines theory underscores the pitfalls of creating this sort of isolated geographic pocket. However, red lines theory also implies that these wartime planners may deserve a great deal of credit for the decision to effectively pre-partition Germany into occupation zones.\(^\text{205}\) This unheralded move may have averted a more severe crisis, and perhaps a war. If the occupying powers had attempted to govern all of Germany in a truly joint fashion, there would have been no focal points to serve as the basis for a partition of Germany that gave each side enough to reduce their fears of the full might of a re-militarized Germany allied to their Cold War adversary. Instead, each side would have jockeyed for total control of the political orientation of the German Government in a situation of even greater uncertainty and consequence. With such high stakes and no strong red lines to step in and

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\(^{203}\) American and British planners in fact sought a settlement along these lines, but Berlin is too far east for the resultant Soviet Zone to have been of adequate size. Daniel J. Nelson, *Wartime Origins of the Berlin Dilemma* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1978), pp. 141-142.

\(^{204}\) “Minutes of the 286th Policy Planning Staff Meeting,” September 28, 1948.

\(^{205}\) This decision was not without its critics. Some State Department officials opposed occupation zones because they were a step towards dismemberment as advocated by those who sought to indefinitely suppress German power. Nelson, *Wartime Origins of the Berlin Dilemma*, p. 28.
shape outcomes when diplomatic negotiations deadlocked, the situation could easily have taken a dire turn.

The Berlin Blockade Crisis galvanized the creation of NATO and accelerated the Cold War. Despite the distinct legal and historical status of defeated, occupied, demilitarized Germany, American policymakers clear saw a need to incorporate it into one broader whole (NATO) that they could more credibly threaten to protect. ²⁰⁶ By making the Berlin exclave a part of this, the Western Powers increased the costs to themselves of a Soviet move on the Western Sectors. Consequently, they were able to deter Soviet moves against it. The 1961 Berlin Crisis ended with the Soviet Union’s unilateral construction of the Berlin Wall. The West excoriated that action, which fell just outside the red lines protecting West Berlin, for imprisoning thousands of would-be refugees behind the Iron Curtain. But, it also effectively marked the end of the Berlin crises. The Berlin Wall even contributed to further strengthening the focal point protecting Berlin from a more aggressive Soviet fait accompli. From this point on, the geography of Cold War crises shifted away from the Central European front, most notably to the Caribbean Sea.

²⁰⁶ Jacob D. Beam, “Set of Principles for Treatment of Western Germany in Event It Is Impossible to Repair the Split of Germany (Revised),” February 29, 1949 [FRUS]; “Lovett to Smith,” April 24, 1948 [FRUS].