

# Clash of Emotions: White House—State Department Relations during the Kennedy Administration

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**Abstract:** *This article examines the rather poor emotional relationship between the White House and the State Department during 1961, the first year of the presidency of John F. Kennedy. The article argues that both sides had expectations of the relationship that turned into disappointments and that both sides felt that their approach and work was superior to the other. During the Berlin Crisis, this clash of emotions gained political significance concerning the case of the American response to a Soviet formal diplomatic note (an aide-mémoire) following the June 1961 Vienna Summit between Kennedy and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. The White House and the State Department had different priorities and because of the poor emotional relationship they failed to find common ground. The end result was that the State Department won the battle by having its preferred version of the response sent to the Soviets. But the Department lost the war, because the White House used the opportunity to take control of Berlin policy at the expense of the State Department.*

**Keywords:** *John F. Kennedy, History of American Foreign Relations, History of Emotions, Berlin Crisis, Cold War*

“What’s wrong with that god dam department of yours, Chip?”, President John F. Kennedy asked Charles “Chip” Bohlen, a high-ranking State Department officer and among the foremost Soviet experts in the US government, in 1961. Bohlen – who was one of the few State Department officers to enjoy good relations with the Kennedy White House – replied that it was the *President himself* who embodied the problem due to the penchant of

Kennedy and his inner circle for meddling in State Department affairs and circumventing its authority.<sup>1</sup> In the same vein, a clearly frustrated Secretary of State Dean Rusk told his Executive Secretary Lucius D. Battle: “The White House is all over this building. Papers are going from here to there without going through the Seventh Floor. We don’t know what is going on. Try to get a handle on it...”<sup>2</sup>

The tension between the two institutions is well-documented and is part of the story of the Kennedy years in the early 1960s. The crux of the matter is as follows: An activist president perceiving his State Department to be conservative and incapable of innovation took control of foreign policy by way of National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy and the National Security Council (NSC) staff, which he used as a personal foreign policy unit that ultimately allowed Kennedy to serve as what Averell Harriman, an old foreign policy hand, and others have called “his own Secretary of State.”<sup>3</sup>

Reflecting on this tension in 1971, former Secretary of State in the Truman Administration, Dean Acheson, noted that beginning with the Kennedy Administration, this process of supplanting the State Department continued and expanded through the 1960s. On that note he wondered musingly: “What emotions they stirred in the breasts of their colleagues at the State Department we must wait on future memoirs to learn. Meanwhile, we can imagine that there has been strain.”<sup>4</sup>

This article takes up Acheson’s musings and examines the institutional relationship between the White House and the State Department during the Kennedy Administration from an *emotional* perspective. What was the nature of the emotional strain in the State Department? Which emotions were at the

1 Charles E. Bohlen Oral History Interview, 1964, John F. Kennedy Library, 33.

2 Lucius D. Battle Oral History Interview, 1991, The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, 16 ([www.adst.org](http://www.adst.org)). The Seventh Floor of the State Department was where the Department leadership was located.

3 W. Averell Harriman Oral History Interview #2, 1965, John F. Kennedy Library, 70. Cf. e.g. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002 (1965)), 406ff.; I. M. Destler, *Presidents, Bureaucrats, and Foreign Policy: The Politics of Organizational Reform* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 95-104; Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos and Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 37, 65; Andrew Preston, *The War Council: McGeorge Bundy, the NSC, and Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 36; Ivo H. Daalder and I. M. Destler, *In the Shadow of the Oval Office: Profiles of the National Security Advisers and the Presidents They Served – From JFK to George W. Bush* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 19.

4 Dean Acheson, “The Eclipse of the State Department”, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 49, no. 4 (July 1971), 603.

heart of White House actions and how did the clash of these emotions help cause the discord between the two institutions and its leading members? And, more tentatively, did these emotional aspects have any effect on policy?

In sketching out the emotional underpinnings of White House-State Department relations, the article focuses on events and developments during the Administration's inaugural year of 1961. This was arguably the time when the emotional relationship between the two was at its lowest point and the NSC staff led the charge on the White House side. Staff member Michael Forrestal, who joined the Administration in 1962, speculates that in 1961 it was a "very powerful kind of staff that may have gone much further than I ever would have gone in attempting to impose their will or the President's will on the Departments."<sup>5</sup>

First of all, the article argues that both sides came to the relationship with a number of expectations that were not met and consequently led to disappointment. Secondly, both sides were convinced of their own self-worth and superiority in matters of policy and process, which in turn led to accusations of inferiority against the other side. Thirdly, the poor relations between the two institutions was made abundantly clear when the Berlin crisis was re-ignited in the summer of 1961. The case under examination here – the American response to the Soviet aide-mémoire reaffirming Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's ultimatum regarding the status of Berlin – contained the entire spectrum of emotional clash between the two actors. The White House became so exasperated with the Department that even though the final version followed the State Department line, it was a Pyrrhic victory, which served only as a further source of discord between the two and yet another reason for the White House to want to control the policy process at the expense of the State Department.

A final note must be made on the nature of WH-State relations during the Kennedy years. While it is true that the state of the relationship was often acrimonious, it never reached the point of animosity and suspicion of the Nixon-Kissinger tenure a decade later.<sup>6</sup> Personal relations between individual actors were often collegial - depending on the people involved – and the White House neither sought nor assumed full control.<sup>7</sup>

5 Michael V. Forrestal Oral History #1, 1964, JFK Library, 58.

6 Daalder & Destler, *In the Shadow of the Oval Office*, 93.

7 Robert Komer Oral History Interview #5, 1969, JFKL, 12, 23-24.

### **Emotions as a Category of Analysis in American Foreign Relations**

Emotions are a vital and important part of the history of human interaction and must be acknowledged as such. For some, this will require a “leap of faith”, due to the fact that emotions can seem hard to detect and even harder to manage analytically.<sup>8</sup> Others will be more easily persuaded by the seemingly simple maxims of historian Barbara Keys, who in her analysis of Henry Kissinger argues that “we are all influenced by emotion in fundamental and sometimes decisive ways. Even the most Herculean efforts to insulate policy choices from sentiment are doomed to failure”. Keys further argues that: “Cognition is profoundly influenced by feelings. The reverse is also true: emotions require an assessment of relevance and effects; hence, emotion is often shaped by cognition.”<sup>9</sup>

Keys’ emphasis of the reciprocal relationship between cognition and emotion is important, because emotion should rightly be seen as an added layer of complexity and explanation rather than a smoking gun-type explanation where world leaders or important aides are reduced to their emotional reactions without a larger, multi-faceted explanatory framework.

In examining the White House-State Department relationship, this article thus looks for signs of emotional expressions. The source material is drawn from oral history interviews, in which participants were specifically asked about how events and developments affected them, memoirs by selected actors as well as some unpublished memoranda and correspondence from the John F. Kennedy Library and the National Archives. Regarding oral history interviews and memoirs, the historian must of course be careful in trusting these sources, because in later recollection there can be a tendency towards inflation of the subject’s own importance, the degradation of memory as well as the possibility of later events influencing the memory of an emotion so as to skew the perception of the actual emotion experienced in the period under investigation.<sup>10</sup>

The use of contemporary material also presents challenges, because one of the characteristics of emotional life and emotional norms in the Kennedy

8 I am indebted to Dr. Maria Ryan (University of Nottingham), who suggested this phrase during a panel at the 2016 American Politics Group conference in Reading, United Kingdom.

9 Barbara Keys, “Henry Kissinger: The Emotional Statesman”, *Diplomatic History*, vol. 35, no. 4 (September 2011), 591.

10 Cf. e.g. Jan Plamper, *The History of Emotions: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 290.

Administration was a dislike of overt displays of emotion. Here, then, we must follow historian Barbara Rosenwein's suggestion to "[r]ead the silences" and carefully employ historical inference to suggest plausible emotional activity based on worldview and context.<sup>11</sup>

### **Research on the History of Emotions**

Research on emotions often takes as point of departure the debate between universalists and constructivists, the central point of which revolves around the notion of whether emotions do or do not have a history. Universalists, mostly neuroscientists and psychologists, argue that emotions are by and large constant across time and space, whether observed through facial micro expressions or fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) brain scans.<sup>12</sup>

On the other side of the debate we find constructivists, who view emotions as mainly socially and culturally constructed. This approach to emotions research has generally been strongest in the human sciences, where anthropologists, for instance, have identified culturally distinct emotions around the world, arguing thus that emotions can best be explained as being socially constructed.<sup>13</sup>

Historians, too, tend to belong to the constructivist camp, because they believe that the emotions people have experienced and expressed through history are not constant, but contingent upon different cultures, norms, languages, relationships and perceptions of the world. That being said, I join Susan J. Matt in her assessment that many historians occupy some version of the middle ground between universalists and constructivists, where "feelings are never strictly biological or chemical occurrences; neither are they wholly shaped by language and society."<sup>14</sup> The middle ground, however, does have a constructivist preference.

11 Barbara H. Rosenwein, "Problems and Methods in the History of Emotions", *Passions in Context*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2010, 17.

12 Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friesen, "Constants Across Cultures in the Face and Emotion", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1971; Elizabeth J. Carter & Kevin A. Pelphey, "Friend or Foe? Brain Systems Involved in the Perception of Dynamic Signals of Menacing and Friendly Social Approaches", *Social Neuroscience*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2008.

13 For a good overview of the research, see Plamper, *The History of Emotions*, 75-146.

14 Susan J. Matt, "Current Emotion Research in History: Or, Doing History from the Inside Out", *Emotion Review*, vol. 3, no. 1 (January 2011), 118.

The history of emotions traces its roots to Europe in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> Now classical works by scholars such as German historical sociologist Norbert Elias and French historian Lucien Febvre examined emotional life in the Middle Ages and called for a concerted efforts by historians and social scientists to examine the emotional life of the past.<sup>16</sup>

After a period of hiatus, three American historians, Peter Stearns, William Reddy and Barbara Rosenwein, took up the mantle of emotions history from the 1980s onwards and developed analyses using innovative methodological and theoretical perspectives. Stearns developed the notion of *emotionology* in the 1980s, which dealt with societal emotional norms.<sup>17</sup> Reddy followed suit in the 1990s by arguing that emotions could be studied by their spoken expressions, which Reddy called *emotives*.<sup>18</sup> In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Rosenwein presented the notion of *emotional community* – grouping historical actors together by shared emotions. An emotional community can be described as the same as other forms of social communities, such as families, churches, medieval princely courts and presidential administrations and the goal is to examine shared emotions, emotional practices and emotional norms.<sup>19</sup>

Traditionally, the integration of emotions as an analytical element into the historical study of US foreign policy has not been commonplace. Realist historians have looked to the rational acts of rational men who cared about the national interest. Revisionist historians have focused on economic motives and the furthering of American capitalism as a significant driving force. Even those historians who have taken an interest in the role of ideas have tended to focus on the rational and non-emotive side of their subject matter. Recently, however, historians have increasingly looked at other aspects of American foreign policy, such as gender, race, culture and emotions – and have expanded and rebranded the subject matter as American foreign *relations*.<sup>20</sup>

15 For a good overview of the history of emotions both before and after this time, see Plamper, *The History of Emotions*, 40-74.

16 References are to the English translations published somewhat later than the original works. Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000); Lucien Febvre, "Sensibility and History: How to Reconstitute the Emotional Life of the Past" in Peter Burke (ed.), *A New Kind of History: From the Writings of Febvre* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

17 Peter N. Stearns with Carol Z. Stearns, "Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards", *The American Historical Review*, vol. 90, no. 4 (October 1985), 813-836.

18 William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

19 Rosenwein "Problems and Methods in the History of Emotions", 11.

20 For a good overview of historiographical trends, cf. Frank Costigliola and Thomas G. Paterson "Defining

Very few historians have written about emotional aspects of American foreign relations. Frank Costigliola, who has helped shape the field, has argued that not only are emotions important for a full understanding of events and causation, but they are in fact vital.<sup>21</sup> Costigliola further argues, in a 1997 article on diplomat George F. Kennan, that in order to demonstrate this connection, historians need to carefully examine language, which is “neither transparent nor value-free” and which can “emotionalize and condition the interpretation...”<sup>22</sup> The approach of Costigliola is thus a significant inspiration to this article.

### **Emotions: Clash and Misunderstanding**

President Kennedy entered office without a grand strategic plan for American foreign policy. It was not that he did not have visions – a change in East-West relations, more focus on the Third World and a reduced reliance on nuclear weapons, but he did not have a strategy in place. He did, however, have a clear view about his Administration’s *approach* to foreign policy. He wanted action and innovation to be guiding parameters, not conservatism and traditionalism. His was the era of the New Frontier; the old ways simply would no longer do.<sup>23</sup>

Kennedy seems to have been convinced from the outset that the State Department was a major proponent of the traditional approach to foreign policy from which he sought to escape. But while his expectations of State’s ability and willingness to participate in foreign policy-making in the new regime were low, this did not mean that he did not envision it to play a significant role. But in order to do so, new people and a new way of doing things were required both at State and at the White House.<sup>24</sup>

Kennedy’s rather slim electoral victory coupled with his desire to reward the people who had helped him obtain it and his desire to exercise

and Doing the History of American Foreign Relations: A Primer”, in Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson (eds.), *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2004).

21 See e.g. Frank Costigliola, “Reading for Meaning: Theory, Language and Metaphor”, in Hogan and Paterson, *Explaining American Foreign Relations*, 2004; idem, *Roosevelt’s Lost Alliances: How Personal Politics Helped Start the Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

22 Frank Costigliola, “‘Unceasing Pressure for Penetration’: Gender, Pathology, and Emotion in George Kennan’s Formation of the Cold War”, *Journal of American History*, vol. 83, no. 4 (March 1997), 1309.

23 Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars*, 34.

24 Robert Dallek, *Camelot’s Court: Inside the Kennedy White House* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 89-95.

control over appointments, played a not insignificant role in his political appointments at the State Department. He set up an unofficial committee headed by his brother-in-law Sargent Shriver to gather names and interview the people. The progressive wing of the Democratic Party was hoping that Kennedy would appoint Adlai Stevenson – who had lost presidential elections to Dwight D. Eisenhower twice – as Secretary of State, but because he had failed to deliver early support for Kennedy’s campaign, he would have to settle for the ambassadorship to the United Nations. Stevenson’s close associate, Chester Bowles, on the other hand, had signed on to the New Frontier at an early stage and served as foreign policy advisor to the campaign. For his efforts, he was appointed Under Secretary of State, which was the number two job in the Department.<sup>25</sup>

Dean Rusk had not yet been appointed Secretary of State when the selection of his two high profile subordinates was announced. Chip Bohlen recalls having felt that Kennedy “presented Mr. Rusk with an almost impossible [task] by appointing two of his subordinates before he had selected him.”<sup>26</sup> Rusk, however, writes in his memoirs that *he* asked the President to appoint both Stevenson and Bowles and thus offers an alternative narrative.<sup>27</sup> As Rusk is the only one to champion this particular version of event, the more plausible explanation might be that their appointments did indeed bother Rusk and out of sheer embarrassment, he seized the opportunity to try to influence the perception of history.

Rusk was not Kennedy’s first choice for Secretary of State. It was initially offered to moderate Republican Robert Lovett, a former Defense Secretary, Under Secretary of State and Wall Street banker, but he turned down all offers of Cabinet posts (he was also offered Defense and Treasury). There would have been significant political upside to having a Republican in the Cabinet, especially one as formidable as Lovett, but he instead suggested Rusk for State (moderate Democrat) and the head of the Ford Motor Company, Robert McNamara (moderate Republican) for Defense. Before accepting Rusk, Kennedy attempted to recruit William Fulbright, the Democratic senator from Arkansas, for the job, but ultimately had to give up on him, because Fulbright had signed the so-called Southern Manifesto against racial integration and might thereby create difficulties for New Frontier di-

25 Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars*, 35-36.

26 Charles E. Bohlen Oral History Interview, 1964, JFKL, 33.

27 Rusk, *As I Saw It*, 204-05.

plomacy in Africa, the Middle East and elsewhere. Thus the choice fell on Rusk, who was not particularly popular with the White House staff – Arthur Schlesinger felt that Rusk represented “the lowest common denominator.”<sup>28</sup>

Kennedy and the White House continued to try and control appointments at State after Rusk had been chosen. It created the same kind of resentment, but White House efforts were not always successful. Kennedy managed to push through appointments such as Roger Hilsman as Director of Intelligence and Research (INR) at State over Rusk’s objections, but did not manage to circumvent the Secretary and place either McGeorge Bundy or Walt Rostow at the Department.<sup>29</sup> To Rusk and much of the Foreign Service in the Department, the message seemed clear: State must serve and implement the New Frontier policy line, but Kennedy representatives are needed to make sure the Department performs as scheduled.

The greatest structural change, however, came at the White House. In order to play the role of his own secretary of state, Kennedy needed his own organization to provide him with foreign policy analysis and advice, and on whose loyalty he could depend. He consequently reorganized the staff of the National Security Council (NSC) for these purposes. Originally, the staff was an administrative support unit for the National Security Council – created by the National Security Act of 1947 with the intention of coordinating the diplomatic and military aspects of national security policy. The staff pushed around papers and tried to iron out differences between the State Department – the major bureaucratic player in the Truman and Eisenhower Administrations – and the Defense Department, the CIA and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. But in the Kennedy Administration, however, the President wanted to play a role independent of his professional diplomats at State and, consequently, the NSC staff was transformed into a presidential foreign policy staff that worked to strengthen the presidency and to represent presidential views throughout the Administration.<sup>30</sup>

Harvard Dean McGeorge Bundy was chosen as special assistant to the President for national security affairs – the job more commonly known

28 Dallek, *Camelot's Court*, 83-85; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *Journals: 1952-2000* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 98.

29 Roger Hilsman Oral History Interview #1, 1970, JFKL, 3.

30 Cf. Anna K. Nelson, “The Evolution of the National Security State” in Andrew Bacevich (ed.), *The Long War: A New History of U.S. National Security Policy Since World War II*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

as the national security advisor. Bundy, who only knew Kennedy slightly from social circles, was a Boston Brahmin and born into the East Coast Establishment. Bundy's father had worked for former Secretary of War and State Henry Stimson, who was often seen as the very embodiment of the bipartisan foreign policy Establishment, and Bundy himself had co-written Stimson's memoirs. Bundy had made a name for himself as an academic star on the rise: one of the youngest tenured professors in the Government Department (though lacking a PhD degree), the youngest dean of Arts and Sciences at Harvard – sharp, quick, acerbic and brilliant. Walt W. Rostow – a development economist from MIT, who had been somewhat active in the presidential campaign – was chosen as Bundy's deputy. Together they brought in a team of so-called "action-intellectuals", such as Robert Komer of the CIA and Carl Kaysen from Harvard, to support the president in his efforts.<sup>31</sup>

The new NSC staff immediately went to work strengthening Kennedy's role in foreign affairs. The staff effectively became a "little State Department" with staffers acquiring regional expertise and becoming intimately familiar with the ins and outs of the most important policy areas.<sup>32</sup> Coupled with access to raw cable traffic from posts around the world, which ex-CIA officer Robert Komer managed to negotiate through his former employer (who controlled the hardware), this enabled the staff to provide Kennedy with information and often alternative analyses and advice based on reliable intelligence, which strengthened the role of the White House and reduced its reliance on State, Defense and the CIA.<sup>33</sup>

It seems reasonably clear that the reorganization of the NSC staff and the early appointment of State Department leadership increased the friction between the White House and the State Department. Even before the collaboration had begun, State Department expectations had been disappointed, because the signal from the White House was not an invitation to join the New Frontier, but rather a decree to follow in its footsteps.

It seems, however, that a significant reason for State Department disappointment – especially prevalent among members of the Foreign Service – was that many of them had been excited about the New Frontier and many

31 Daalder & Destler, *In the Shadows of the Oval Office*, 16-18.

32 Cf. Andrew Preston, "The Little State Department: McGeorge Bundy and the National Security Council Staff, 1961-1965", *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 31, no. 4 (December 2001)

33 Robert Komer to McGeorge Bundy, 29 April, 1961, Box 321, NSF, JFKL.

had voted for JFK. Executive Secretary Lucius Battle remembers that “[e]veryone wanted to be part of what was a very exciting thing, the New Frontier. There was the greatest sense of exhilaration in the Department of State and in the city of Washington.”<sup>34</sup> State Department officers consequently experienced a feeling of disconnect and had difficulty reconciling the aspiration and expectation of the New Frontier with the reality of the Kennedy Administration.

Kennedy expected leadership from the State Department (within the framework set up by him and his White House advisors), but he tended to be disappointed. According to Schlesinger, Kennedy complained: “They never have any ideas over there [and they] never come up with anything new.”<sup>35</sup> Why were State Department officers so reluctant to exhibit leadership in foreign affairs? Here it seems that we can point to at least two reasons for White House disappointment. First of all, past experiences played a significant role in shaping patterns of action, thought and feeling in the Department of State. Throughout the 1950s, the professional Foreign Service had been exposed to a great deal of mistrust from central figures, most notably Senator Joseph McCarthy (R-Wisconsin) and its own Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. The Department’s Executive Secretary Lucius Battle remembers that the McCarthy Era of the early 1950s had a “devastating effect on morale.”<sup>36</sup> McCarthy’s presentation of an infamous list of 205 named State Department officials, who were allegedly members of the Communist Party, intensified the hunt for traitors, spies and fellow travelers in the American government. The list and the number, of course, were exaggerations, but did manage to create mistrust and disruption in the State Department and bring about the dismissal of the so-called China hands, such as John Carter Vincent and John Service, who were especially accused of “losing China” after the communist victory in the Chinese Civil War in 1949.<sup>37</sup>

In 1953, when Chip Bohlen – whom we met in the beginning of this article – was nominated to be the US Ambassador to the Soviet Union, McCarthyites tried to mount sufficient opposition to block his nomina-

34 Lucius D. Battle Oral History Interview #1, 1968, JFKL, 5

35 Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 406.

36 *Ibid.*, 4.

37 Kenneth Weisbrode, *The Atlantic Century: Four Generations of Extraordinary Diplomats Who Forged America’s Vital Alliance With Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2009), 141.

tion, mainly because he had served as President Roosevelt's translator at the Yalta Conference in 1945 and was thus blamed for accepting Soviet control over Eastern Europe. President Eisenhower stuck by him and he was eventually confirmed, but this support was not shared by Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, who would not fight for Bohlen - one of the few Foreign Service officers to achieve the rank of Ambassador and thus a role model to his colleagues. This incident proved a general exemplar of the relationship between Dulles and the Department. Lucius Battle recalls that the Secretary, "...was not a person who used the Foreign Service. He distrusted it completely, and had very little to do with it. The continuation of the McCarthy era plus the Dulles era had pretty well shaken the self-confidence that the Service had".<sup>38</sup>

The second reason for White House disappointment lay in the nature of the expectation. Kennedy and the White House wanted the State Department to fill out a foreign policy framework when it was clear that the Department took issue with several core elements of that framework, such as urgency, innovation and pragmatism. Chip Bohlen remembers trying to explain to the President that "foreign affairs did not make possible quick, snap answers in regard to any question of importance...", because the repercussions of any important issue were invariably consequential not only for the United States, but also for its allies and the rest of the world.<sup>39</sup> This, according to State Department tradition, was a central tenet of the diplomatic craft.

The President and his inner circle did not appreciate State's penchant for the slow, diligent approach to foreign affairs. In the summer of 1961 - in the midst of the Berlin Crisis - he portrayed the Department as a "bowl of jelly", saying: "It's got all those people over there who are constantly smiling. I think we need to smile less and be tougher."<sup>40</sup> As we shall see regarding the case of the American response to the Soviet aide-mémoire, this created severe discord between the two institutions.

### **Response to the Soviet Aide-Mémoire:**

The clash of emotions in White House-State Department relations gained policy implications during the summer of 1961 when the Berlin Crisis was

38 Lucius D. Battle Oral History Interview #1, 1968, JFKL, 4.

39 Charles E. Bohlen Oral History Interview, 1964, JFKL, 32.

40 Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, 406.

re-activated following the June Vienna Summit between Kennedy and his Soviet counterpart Nikita Khrushchev. At the end of the summit, which was supposed to improve relations between the two countries, but in fact ended on a particular sour note with talk of war and conflict, Khrushchev handed the President a document recapturing the Soviet position – known as an aide-mémoire. Crafting an American response to this document became a battleground between the White House and the State Department, in which all of the emotional components – expectation, disappointment, feelings of superiority and accusations of inferiority – were activated.

Berlin was *the* European hotspot during the early phase of the Cold War and was in many ways representative of the East-West conflict itself. Like Germany itself, the former capital had been divided into four zones of occupation controlled by France, Great Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union. In theory, both Germany and Berlin were to be treated as single occupied entities, but it soon became clear that each occupying force would make up its own rules.<sup>41</sup>

This became exceedingly apparent in the first crisis over Berlin in 1948-49. The Western Allies merged their zones of occupation with the added intent of making a new, strong West German currency. The much smaller Soviet zone would be completely outmatched, but it had one strong card left to play: it was home to Berlin and it controlled the ground access routes, which Soviet authorities blockaded. The Western part of Berlin could not survive in isolation and the Allies created an air bridge to the city with supplies, which the Soviets did not interrupt for fear of escalation into a new war in which the United States still possessed a monopoly on the nuclear weapon.<sup>42</sup> Once it became clear that the Soviet blockade was not a deterrence to Western action, it was lifted. Both sides proclaimed the creation of “their” Germany – the Federal Republic of Germany in the West and the German Democratic Republic in the East – and NATO, the defensive transatlantic alliance, was formed. The Cold War now seemed a tangible reality.<sup>43</sup>

For much of the 1950s, East-West confrontation centered on other areas than Berlin. But in late 1958, crisis erupted anew. Soviet leader Ni-

41 Hans-Peter Schwartz: “The division of Germany” in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 138-39.

42 Ernest R. May, “America’s Berlin”, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 77, no. 4 (July/August 1998), 149-150.

43 Schwarz, “The division of Germany”, 149.

kita Khrushchev demanded that the Western allies sign a World War II peace treaty with Germany and that Western forces vacate Berlin within six months – otherwise he would turn over all Soviet responsibilities to the East German government.<sup>44</sup> This represented a problem for the West and especially the United States, because they did not recognize the East German government as the country's legitimate authority. This was very much a courtesy to West Germany, whose so-called Hallstein Doctrine prohibited the FRG from recognizing any country that also recognized the GDR (save for the Soviet Union from the mid-1950s). The US also did not want to accept the current Oder-Neisse line as the final border between East Germany and Poland, which had effectively moved Poland to the West so as to create even more of a buffer zone between the Soviet Union and Germany. This was also out of deference to West Germany, whose leaders imagined a future merger between the two Germanies and did not want to give up German territory.<sup>45</sup>

The Eisenhower Administration was not inclined to immediately give up its position, but instead invited Khrushchev to the United States, which he accepted. For part of 1959, a so-called “spirit of Camp David” reigned in the US-Soviet relationship and Khrushchev withdrew the 1958 ultimatum. Substantial discussion would take place in the following year at a meeting in Paris between representatives from the US, the USSR, Britain and France. The Paris Summit, however, was derailed by the Soviet downing of an American U2 spy plane about two weeks before the summit was scheduled to start in May of 1960 and Khrushchev expressed his desire to await the election of his American counterpart in the fall before revisiting the issue of Berlin in international politics.<sup>46</sup>

Kennedy's election did not precipitate immediate American action. Rather Kennedy was happy to let Khrushchev make the first move, because while the Americans could live with the status quo, the Soviets felt that change was necessary. The two leaders agreed to meet in the Austrian capital of Vienna in early June for a summit about common problems, including disarmament, the neutralization of Laos and, of course, Berlin. From an American perspective, the Vienna Summit was a failure. Kennedy's agenda

44 May, “America's Berlin”, 152.

45 Melvyn Leffler, *For the Soul of Mankind: The United States, the Soviet Union and the Cold War* (New York: Hill Wang, 2007), 235.

46 Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars*, 58-59.

was to move ahead on nuclear disarmament or a test ban, while Khrushchev wanted a solution to the Berlin question as a prerequisite for joint nuclear ventures. They found common ground on Laos, but the tone of the exchanges between the two leaders became shrill and ideological. Khrushchev might have believed that he could rattle an inexperienced American president and, following the ill-fated US-supported invasion of the Bay of Pigs in Cuba in mid-April, the Soviet leader probably also believed that Kennedy would buckle under pressure.<sup>47</sup> Khrushchev handed Kennedy an aide-mémoire restating the terms of the 1958 ultimatum: leave Berlin within six months or negotiate a new agreement with the German Democratic Republic.<sup>48</sup> A few days later, on 10 June, the Soviets made the document public, which increased the pressure on the American side for a quick resolution to the crisis.<sup>49</sup>

The State Department was given the task of writing a response to the Soviet aide-mémoire and it was handled by the Office of German Affairs under the auspices of its director, Martin Hillenbrand, and ultimately Assistant Secretary for Europe Foy Kohler and Secretary of State Dean Rusk. From the outset, the White House and the Department had, it seems safe to assume, very different expectations about the direction, content and application of the American response. The White House preferred a *political* approach that would help counteract Soviet intentions and actions with regard to Berlin. In order for that avenue to work, the aide-mémoire would need to be a document, which presented a bold and innovative American position that took a marked departure from past policy – though without abandoning the American position in Berlin. The State Department, on the other hand, preferred what can be termed a *traditional* and *legalistic* approach, which re-iterated the American policy from the 1958-59 crisis of maintaining the status quo. This position was also one that was agreed to by the Western Allies, France, the United Kingdom and West Germany, and the Department put heavy emphasis on inter-Allied consultation and agreement.<sup>50</sup>

47 Dean Rusk, *As I Saw It* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 221.

48 "Soviet Aide-Mémoire, Berlin-Germany", 4 June 1961, Berlin Crisis Documents, 1961, Box 1, RG59-250/51/19/17/5-6, National Archives II.

49 David Reynolds, *Summits: Six Meetings that Changed the Twentieth Century* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 192-195.

50 Cf. e.g. Michael Beschloss, *The Crisis Game: Kennedy and Khrushchev, 1960-1963* (New York: Edward Burlingame, 1991), 246, Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars*, 51-57.

Within this atmosphere of differing expectations, the State Department began the drafting process. In an oral history interview from 1964, Hillenbrand reflected on both the tension and State's drafting process:

I think it is also fair to say that... some of the President's new team felt that there must be some new solution to the Berlin problem which could be pulled out of the hat and which a new administration, obviously possessed of a great deal of collective intelligence, would be able to devise. Our feeling in State, of course, was that there were no easy solutions to the Berlin problem, and our recommendations were along those lines.<sup>51</sup>

Hillenbrand and his colleagues had made no secret of this approach. In the early spring, Hillenbrand had been asked to write an analysis of the Berlin Crisis for the White House and possible American action, in which he made clear that he felt no change was advisable in the Administration's position.<sup>52</sup> Hillenbrand clearly felt that the State Department approach – tried and tested and carried out by seasoned professionals – was superior to that of his White House colleagues. When the first draft was received by the White House on 10 June this feeling was not mutual. McGeorge Bundy presented the draft to the President in a memo calling it

a pretty good document, of its kind. It is right in the tradition of arguments on our side, and it would probably be persuasive to those who have tended to agree with us in the past. It is well worth study. Except for the reiteration of the Western Peace Plan of May 14, 1959, it contains no affirmative proposals, but the exception is a substantial one.<sup>53</sup>

Bundy continued his memo to Kennedy by referring to a policy analysis by Henry Kissinger, (Nixon's National Security Advisor, who at that time was serving as a consultant to the NSC staff), which Bundy called "a powerful document setting forth a strong line on Germany."<sup>54</sup>

Bundy's 10 June memo, while written in what might be considered unemotional language, can nevertheless provide insight into the emotions of Bundy and the people of the White House. First of all, while Bundy was seemingly not dismissive of the State Department draft, he emphasized the fact that the document was not presenting any new ideas – and hardly any

51 Martin J. Hillenbrand Oral History Interview #1, JFKL, 1964, 3.

52 Martin J. Hillenbrand, "The Problem of Berlin", undated, Hillenbrand Files, Box 2, Lot 84 F 53, RG 59 631/58/6/3-5, National Archives II.

53 Bundy to Kennedy, "Berlin", 10 June, 1961, Box 405, NSF, JFKL.

54 Ibid.

“affirmative proposals”. New and affirmative proposals, of course, had been part of the White House mandate to State’s drafting process, which meant that behind the appearance of praise, Bundy was in fact criticizing the document. Secondly, feelings of superiority were also displayed here, as Bundy juxtaposed the draft response to Kissinger’s “powerful document”. He did not fully agree with Kissinger’s writings, because he found them too activist and militaristic in their push for German unification, but nevertheless still held them in higher regard, because of their innovative and non-traditionalist character, than he did State’s draft response to the Soviet aide-mémoire.

From the time Nikita Khrushchev handed John F. Kennedy the Soviet aide-mémoire in Vienna on 4 June almost six weeks elapsed before it was finally sent to the Soviets on 18 July. The White House, having assumed that this would be a rather speedy affair that could quickly present the American case to the Soviets and to the world, was disappointed in the delay and blamed the State Department. On 10 July, Kennedy dictated memo to Bundy in which he deplored the delay and the State’s handling of the draft response:

As you may know, Secretary Rusk called me yesterday and told me the Aide Memoire answer was going to be put off until next week again. It has taken us more than six weeks to answer an Aide Memoire, which merely restates our past position. This is lamentable. Would you ask the State Department to give us an actual log on the Aide Memoire, when we got the first draft, when we first consulted on it, how many meetings, and all the rest. If we can’t speed up the procedures on this sort of thing how are we ever going to speed them up on the really important consultations.<sup>55</sup>

Kennedy’s memo point to three interesting aspects. First of all, it seems clear that the White House did not see the aide-mémoire as the most important element of crisis planning as evidenced in the final part of the quote. Concurrently with the process of answering the Soviet message, a Berlin Task Force was set up under State Department leadership to handle day-to-day planning, but the White House felt that that task force was being neglected in favor of work on the aide-mémoire. Arthur Schlesinger argues in his memoir/history of the Kennedy Presidency that “[n]o one in the White House, least of all the President, would ever understand why this not very exacting assignment proved so difficult.”<sup>56</sup> The White House clearly felt

<sup>55</sup> Kennedy to Bundy, 10 July 1961, Box 62, POF, JFKL.

<sup>56</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 383-84.

that State's handling of the process – the legalistic approach with its focus on inter-Allied consultation and the importance of protocol – was wrong and was disappointed that State did not finish the response sooner so the more important part of planning for the Berlin Crisis could get underway.

Secondly, the very question of the delay in finishing the draft response is interesting regarding the emotional relationship between the White House and the State Department. Kennedy called the delay “lamentable” and directed Bundy to obtain a chronological account of the process from the Department. Seemingly, he was disappointed and seriously dismayed by the delay. The State Department at the time could do nothing but take the blame, but would fight back in due course through memoirs in the hope that historical interpretations would right the wrong.

This counter-narrative originated with Martin Hillenbrand, who put it in his own 1998 memoirs, and with Rusk – to whom Hillenbrand relayed his version – who put it in his memoirs from 1991. Hillenbrand claimed that it was the White House and not the State Department that was indeed responsible for the delay in finishing the aide-mémoire. After sending over yet another draft in mid-June, Hillenbrand argued, the White House lost or misplaced it: “What had actually happened, we later learned, was that our draft had ended up in the safe of Ralph Dungan, a presidential assistant, to which he alone had the combination. He then went off on a two-week holiday.”<sup>57</sup> This counter-narrative has been picked up by scholars, who joined Hillenbrand in concluding that this issue was indeed the major cause of the delay.<sup>58</sup>

Hillenbrand's interpretation of events is debatable as we shall see shortly. But the emotions experienced by the responsible State Department officers seem relatively clear: they were angry at the White House staff for making them seem incompetent in the eyes of the President, who was still not blamed by State, and they felt that the White House staffers were amateurs, whose unprofessional conduct was clearly inferior to their own.

The reason why Hillenbrand's account is not the correction of the record he would like it to be is connected to the third interesting point in Kennedy's 10 July memo to Bundy, which is the reasons for the delay and the emotional responses it engendered. Bundy followed the President's instruc-

57 Martin J. Hillenbrand, *Fragments of Our Time: Memoirs of a Diplomat* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 177. See also Rusk, *As I Saw It*, 222.

58 Cf. e.g. Freedman, *Kennedy's Wars*, 65; Daalder & Destler, *In the Shadow of the Oval Office*, 27.

tions and obtained a chronological report of everything that had happened with the American response to the Soviet aide-mémoire. He received the report from Frank Cash of Hillenbrand's Office of German Affairs on 13 July.<sup>59</sup> Cash's report, which has seemingly thus far remained unused by other scholars, is an interesting source that can illuminate both the reasons for the delay and State's feelings about White House involvement. The document began by stating that diplomacy was a long and arduous process, reminiscent in subject of Bohlen's attempts at convincing JFK of the same, but Cash's style was clearly condescending. His timeline referred to the Ralph Dungan-case, but by no means as the central time-consuming factor. Because while the Dungan *faux pas* had set back White House clearance of the response, it did not stop the inter-Allied consultation with the United Kingdom, France and West Germany – sending messages back and forth, conducting meetings and ironing out the details – which continued unabatedly in both June and July, and which took up most of the time.

The fact that it was State's adherence to the legalistic and traditionalistic approach, i.e. the process of inter-Allied consultation, and not the Ralph Dungan-affair that was the major cause of the delay, seems to represent a smoking gun – which it might actually have done to the White House. But to seasoned State Department officers, this process was so natural that it would have been incomprehensible to them had it not been there, which means that to them, White House action was the problem.

The State Department clearly felt that the White House's involvement was meddlesome and that State's approach was clearly superior. It also seems as if feelings were hurt and a need for retaliation arose. The fact that Bundy's request – on behalf of the President – was answered by Cash, a mid-level Foreign Service officer in Hillenbrand's office, and not Hillenbrand himself, or the responsible Assistant Secretary, Foy Kohler, seems to indicate a deliberate slight from a department intent on adhering to protocol.

Both State's hurt feelings and the feelings of superiority (and accusations of inferiority) from both the White House and State came into play about a week before Kennedy's 10 July memo to Bundy. Apparently disparaged by a 30 June draft response from State, Kennedy had directed speech writer and Special Counsel Ted Sorensen to make significant alterations to

59 Cash to Bundy, "Chronology of Preparation of US Reply to Soviet Aide-Mémoire of 4 June", 13 July, 1961, Records Relating to the Berlin Crisis, 1961-1962, Box 2, RG 59, National Archives II.

the draft and send them to the State Department for comments.<sup>60</sup> Sorensen complied and sent of a memorandum to Secretary Rusk on 3 July in which he essentially broke up the American response into several parts. He seems to have done this to emphasize a point: the primary audience for the entire response to the aide-mémoire was not necessarily the Soviet government, but rather shapers of world opinion. The White House was aiming at a “wide circulation”, Sorensen wrote. The White House was also looking to perhaps take the entire Berlin issue before the International Court of Justice, because it felt that State’s draft lacked any “positive proposals” that could move the matter forward and in which Kennedy and the United States could be seen as actively engaging with the issue.<sup>61</sup>

Sorensen’s revised draft was not viewed favorably at State. Rusk complained about Sorensen’s attempt at “filling it with flowery language that read like an inaugural address but was totally unacceptable for a diplomatic note. This led to further delays as the exciting adverbs and purple prose were toned down.”<sup>62</sup> In his memoirs, Hillenbrand agreed with Rusk and added that the “inexperienced White House staffers obviously could not distinguish between formal diplomatic communication intended for the historical record and a political speech.”<sup>63</sup>

The very fact that Kennedy asked Sorensen to redraft the response and that Sorensen sent a message to Rusk about the need for general improvements and the inclusion of “positive proposals”, seem to indicate a low regard for State’s professionalism and a clear feeling of superiority. Rusk’s reaction to some extent mirrored the White House’s: he too held Sorensen’s abilities (concerning the writing of diplomatic correspondence) in poor esteem and felt that State’s approach – honed through many years of professionalization – was clearly superior. He did not agree with the White House’s idea for “wide circulation” of the draft response that would allow it to play a more political role.

The entire matter of the American response to the Soviet aide-mémoire shows that the emotional and cognitive sides of the brain interact: a disagreement over the right course of action, grounded partly in different traditions and approaches, led to a clash of emotions. But the emotional aspect

60 Freedman, *Kennedy’s Wars*, 65.

61 Sorensen to Rusk, 3 July, 1961, Box 117, POF, JFKL.

62 Rusk, *As I Saw It*, 222.

63 Hillenbrand, *Fragments of Our Time*, 177.

also helped cause the disagreement in the first place, because had each side held the other in higher esteem, a compromise might have been found. As it happened, no such compromise emerged and in the end, the White House gave up its resistance, though Sorensen's introduction was used as a covering note when it was finally sent on 18 July.<sup>64</sup> The State Department might have won the battle, but it lost the war, because this incident – which the White House found tedious and minor – reinforced the perception of Kennedy and his inner circle that the State Department was incapable of participating in policy decisions. Consequently, the White House – and especially McGeorge Bundy and the NSC staff – took over primary responsibility policy-making during the Berlin Crisis.<sup>65</sup>

### Conclusion

When Deputy National Security Advisor Walt Rostow left his White House post to become Chairman of the Policy Planning Staff at State in November of 1961, he likened it to leaving “my comfortable and cheerful parish church in Rome to become a bishop – or something – in the provinces...”<sup>66</sup> Rostow's farewell salute underscores the extent to which the White House had eclipsed the State Department in Kennedy's New Frontier; Rostow's move to State (beyond some friction with Bundy and Kennedy) underscores the extent to which the White House still found it necessary to “fix” the State Department. Kennedy's expectations of the Department's role in foreign policy-making – disappointed through 1961 – continued full stop.

This article has examined the emotional relationship between the White House and the State Department represented by key actors, such as President Kennedy, McGeorge Bundy and Ted Sorensen on the White House side; and Dean Rusk, Martin Hillenbrand and Charles Bohlen on the State Department side. The analysis has shown that both institutions came to the relationship with expectations that were – by and large – met with disappointment. The White House wanted leadership from the State Department,

64 The State Department copy in the National Archives does not include Sorensen's cover note, cf. “U.S. Reply to the Soviet Aide-Mémoire”, 18 July, 1961, Berlin Crisis Documents, 1961, Box 1, RG59-250/51/19/17/5-6, National Archives II.

65 Cf. Kasper Grotle Rasmussen, “In search of a negotiated settlement: McGeorge Bundy and the 1961 Berlin Crisis”, *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1 (January 2016), 47-64.

66 Rostow to Kennedy, 29 November, 1961, Box 65, POF, JFKL.

but only to the extent that it followed a pre-set framework. The State Department, which had gone through a rough patch in the 1950s with successive attacks from Joseph McCarthy and the far right and even its own Secretary, John Foster Dulles, was ill-gearred to assume a leadership role from day one. It also did not agree with all of the central tenets of the White House framework, such as the requirement for urgency and constant innovation.

Both institutions felt comfortable and superior in their own professionalism and had a tendency to perceive the other side as inferior. Along with the disappointed expectations, these feelings engendered the clash of emotions that occurred in June and July of 1961 concerning the American response to the Soviet aide-mémoire given to Kennedy by Khrushchev in Vienna. Responsibility for answering this particular diplomatic communication was given to the State Department, but it quickly became obvious that where the President and the White House expected a political approach - using the American response to regain the initiative in the brewing Berlin Crisis after the Vienna Summit - the Department delivered a legalistic and diplomatic approach, which, although natural to State, was completely disappointing to the White House.

Accusations of amateurism were hurled from each side as both institutions proclaimed their feelings of superiority over the other. In the case of the State Department, its feeling of superiority also masked a resentment and hurt feelings that the President and the White House did not have sufficient faith in the Department's abilities. Having won the battle over which version of the American response to send as a reply to the Soviets, the State Department felt vindicated in its professionalism. It was, however, a Pyrrhic victory as the White House used this as an opportunity to assume control of Berlin policy and thus leaving State very little of substance to show for its efforts.

This article shows that emotions are an important category of analysis in the history of American foreign relations, because they can nuance our findings and open new doors of inquiry. As with any analytical framework, emotions do not offer a mono-causal catch-all explanation, but they can open our eyes to motivations and relationships between historical actors that in the end prove vital to our understanding of the past.