

General de Gaulle In Action

1960 Summit Conference

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On 14 May 1960 I left the United States with President Eisenhower to attend the Four-Power Meeting in Paris among the USSR, France, Great Britain, and the United States. This conference had been scheduled for some time, but its convening had been in doubt following the crash of the U-2 in the Soviet Union and the capture of its pilot, Gary Powers. After a period of doubt, General de Gaulle had announced that the conference would be held as scheduled and the other chiefs of government had successively announced that they would attend. When Khrushchev announced he would attend, a worldwide sigh of relief went up.

Shortly after arriving in Paris on 15 May, I accompanied President Eisenhower on his call on President de Gaulle. As always, the meeting between the two was most cordial, almost affectionate. I had accompanied a number of American dignitaries to see General de Gaulle; the two he did not really talk down to were General Eisenhower and Governor Harriman. But only to Eisenhower did he show real warmth.

De Gaulle said Khrushchev had been to see him and was highly excited about the U-2 overflights. He had read to de Gaulle a long statement denouncing the overflights and demanding an apology from President Eisenhower. De Gaulle, who had with him only his superb English and Russian interpreter Constantin Andronikof, added, "Obviously you cannot apologize but you must decide how you wish to handle this. I will do everything I can to be helpful without being openly partisan."

He said he had asked Khrushchev whether under these circumstances they should go ahead with the conference. He had had his Ambassador in Moscow put this question to Khrushchev before he left Moscow, and Khrushchev had said that they should. He had repeated the question to Khrushchev after his arrival in Paris, and again he had said that they should go ahead. De Gaulle had indicated to Khrushchev that he could not seriously expect that the U. S. President would apologize to him. This sort of thing was not done among serious chiefs of government. But Khrushchev had been adamant that Eisenhower must apologize for the U-2 flight. De Gaulle felt that Khrushchev's readiness to go ahead with the conference after he had told him that Eisenhower could not be expected to apologize was a hopeful sign, but he added, "We shall see."

The U.S. delegation was clearly embarrassed by the shutdown and Powers's confession, but it was determined that Khrushchev would not be allowed to use this for public humiliation of the

United States. President Eisenhower clearly felt that in the discharge of his responsibilities to the United States he must ascertain the measure of the threat against it, and, with a closed society such as the Soviet one we faced, there was no way other than by such imaginative methods as the U-2. After all, Soviet satellites had already overflowed the United States, and the Soviets had published pictures taken by cameras aboard such satellites.

The conference was held in the Elyse Palace, the traditional residence of the presidents of France. It was held in a large, high-ceilinged room on the second floor of the Elyse, only a few rooms removed from General de Gaulle's office. The windows looked out to the south and west over the gardens of the Elyse. In the center of the room was a large table in the form of a square. General de Gaulle and the French delegation sat on the east side, nearest to de Gaulle's office. Opposite him sat the U.S. delegation (I was seated at the far right of the U.S. delegation, closest to the Soviets). On the right of the U.S. were the Soviets, and facing them were the British.

As I entered the room with President Eisenhower and General de Gaulle, who had met him at the top of the stairs, the Russians were already there, standing around talking together. Eisenhower greeted the other French delegates and the British, but the Russians kept talking among themselves, and so Eisenhower walked around to his own side of the table and sat down with the Secretary of State beside him. After a few minutes, General de Gaulle called the meeting to order, and all who were still standing sat down.

General de Gaulle then greeted the chiefs of delegation, thanked them for coming, and expressed the hope that the meeting which was about to begin would be fruitful and contribute to world peace. He then said that inasmuch as President Eisenhower was the only other chief of delegation who was also a chief of state, he would give him the floor first. Khrushchev, obviously agitated, stood up and said that he had asked to speak first and that as chiefs of delegation they were all equal. He demanded the right to read a prepared statement first. De Gaulle, when this outburst was translated, raised his eyebrows and looked questioningly at General Eisenhower, who nodded. De Gaulle then gave the floor to Khrushchev. Khrushchev stood up and began to read from a prepared statement in a very loud voice. This was clearly the same statement he had read to de Gaulle previously. De Gaulle assumed a pained but patient expression as Khrushchev rumbled on. From time to time, he would pause for translation and take a drink of water.

I had been strongly enjoined by the State Department not to wear my uniform as this was a "peace conference." Notwithstanding this, Soviet Defense Minister Marshal Rodion Malinovsky was there glowering in full uniform. As Khrushchev thundered on, I fell to counting the ribbons on Malinovsky's chest. There were 54, including, as I noted with some interest, the U.S. Legion of Merit. At one point as Khrushchev read (and I noticed that his hands trembled as he held the piece of paper he was reading--whether from agitation, anxiety or anger, I do not know), he raised his voice even louder. De Gaulle interrupted, turned to the Soviet interpreter, rather than his own, and said, "The acoustics in this room are excellent. We can all hear the Chairman. There is no need for him to raise his voice." The Russian interpreter blanched, turned to Khrushchev with a faltering voice, and translated. Khrushchev paused, looked over the top of his glasses, and cast a furious glance at General de Gaulle and then continued reading in a somewhat less loud voice.

As Khrushchev read, he was clearly lashing himself into an even greater frenzy, and, as he denounced the U.S. overflights, he pointed at the ceiling as though a U-2 were overhead at that moment. De Gaulle interrupted to say that he too had been overflowed. "By your American

allies?" asked Khrushchev. "No," said General de Gaulle, "by you. Yesterday that satellite you launched just before you left Moscow to impress us overflowed the sky of France 18 times without my permission. How do I know you do not have cameras aboard which are taking pictures of my country?" De Gaulle crossed his arms and looked at Khrushchev questioningly. Khrushchev's jaw dropped. Then an almost beatific expression came over his face. He raised both hands above his head and said clearly. "Bog menya videt. Moi ruki chisti. (God sees me. My hands are clean.) You don't think I would do a thing like that?" "Well," said General de Gaulle, "how did you take those pictures of the far side of the moon which you showed us with such justifiable pride?" "Ah," said Khrushchev, "in that one I had cameras." "Ah," said General de Gaulle, "in that one you had cameras. Pray, continue."

This exchange had upset Khrushchev, and his hands trembled even more as he continued reading his long statement. While he was talking, State Department Counselor and former Ambassador to Moscow Chip Bohlen kept grumbling, "We can't sit still for this. We've got to answer." Eisenhower sat silently listening to the original and its translation. He doodled impatiently with a pencil. (I still have the doodle, as I picked it up when he left the table.) His face and neck were flushed, however, and I could tell he was extremely angry. I had worked closely for General Eisenhower for a number of years, and I had never seen an outburst of temper, but long experience had taught me the signs of anger on his part, and they were all present here. Once or twice he looked at de Gaulle, who was sitting there with a slightly bored expression. He had already heard all of this from Khrushchev. The British Prime Minister was uneasy as he looked at the angry Khrushchev, the flushed Eisenhower, and the bored de Gaulle.

At one point Khrushchev exclaimed, "What devil made the Americans do this?" De Gaulle observed that there were devils everywhere, on both sides, that this was a matter of espionage such as went on all the time and was not worthy of the consideration of chiefs of government to whom the peoples of the world were looking for hopes of peace. Khrushchev shook his head like a bull and went on reading. He finally ended his long diatribe by announcing that, unless President Eisenhower apologized, he would not attend the conference.

President Eisenhower then made a mollifying statement containing many of the justifications used publicly for the U-2 flights and said that U.S. aircraft would not overfly the USSR again. Khrushchev angrily repeated that he would not attend any further meetings of the conference if Eisenhower did not apologize.

De Gaulle said, "Chairman Khrushchev, you have imposed conditions that are obviously impossible for General Eisenhower to accept. Before you left Moscow and after the U-2 was shot down, I sent my Ambassador to see you to ask whether this meeting should be held or should be postponed. You knew everything then that you know now. You told my Ambassador that this conference should be held and that it would be fruitful. I repeated this question to you when I saw you alone before this meeting, and once again you said it should be held. Now, by imposing conditions that cannot be met by the American President, you make it impossible to go further. You have brought Mr. MacMillan here from London, General Eisenhower from the United States and have put me to serious inconvenience to attend a meeting which your intransigence would make impossible. We should all reflect on this and on the hopes that the people of the world have placed in this meeting and meet again here tomorrow at the same time."

Khrushchev jumped to his feet and said that unless Eisenhower apologized he would not come. De Gaulle looked at him as one would look at a naughty child and announced that the

conference would meet on the following day. Khrushchev, accompanied by his whole delegation, strode out of the room and down the stairs. The other delegations looked at one another. De Gaulle said that he would stay in touch with the Russians. All then rose and started out of the room. De Gaulle came over to Eisenhower and took him by the arm. He took me also by the elbow and, taking us a little apart, he said to Eisenhower, "I do not know what Khrushchev is going to do, nor what is going to happen, but whatever he does, I want you to know that I am with you to the end." I was astounded at this statement, and Eisenhower was clearly moved by his unexpected expression of unconditional support. Only the three of us heard it, but it remains vivid in my mind to this day 15 years later. Eisenhower thanked de Gaulle, who walked down the stairs with him to his car. As we entered the car, Eisenhower, still upset by the whole episode, looked at me and said of de Gaulle, "He's quite a guy." We drove the short distance to the U.S. Embassy Residence, then on Avenue d'Ina, where the U.S. delegation went into a meeting to decide what to do next.

I was not privy to this discussion and do not know what was decided, but President Eisenhower's mollifying statement and promise that the U-2s would not overfly the Soviet Union had evidently not done the job of bringing Khrushchev back to the conference table, and Eisenhower's pending invitation to visit the USSR was obviously withdrawn.

In the meantime, Khrushchev had been holding a stormy and furious press conference making veiled threats and inveighing against the treacherous nature of the United States. Next day at the time appointed de Gaulle, MacMillan, and Eisenhower met in the same room in the Elyse where the meeting had taken place the previous day. The three delegations sat looking slightly sheepishly at one another and General de Gaulle said that he had had no word from Khrushchev, but he was out "kissing babies on the street and generally electioneering for the French Communist Party." Marshal Malinovsky was out near Verdun, where Malinovsky had been a sergeant in the two Russian divisions fighting in France in WW I, and "where he had attempted to subvert the Russian troops from fighting with the Allies." After some wait, General de Gaulle gave an order to contact Khrushchev and ask him whether or not he would attend the meeting. After a further delay, an assistant came into the room to say that Khrushchev had sent word he would not attend the meeting unless President Eisenhower apologized. De Gaulle looked furious, MacMillan, crushed by the news, and Eisenhower, torn between embarrassment and anger. De Gaulle turned to the assistant and said that Khrushchev had been invited in writing; therefore, he should reply in writing. A few minutes later the aide came back in to say that Khrushchev had answered that he would not answer in writing. De Gaulle said to the aide, "Tell him it is the usage between civilized nations to reply to written communications by written communications." The aide departed to return a few minutes later to announce that Khrushchev would answer in writing but would not come.

De Gaulle, who appeared pleased to have won this minor point, adjourned the conference. To my surprise neither de Gaulle, who did not seem unduly shaken, nor MacMillan, who was clearly staggered by the whole business, ever suggested, even indirectly, that Eisenhower should apologize.

Adenauer, who was still in Paris, appeared relieved that at least Germany would not pay the cost of a four-power agreement.

President Eisenhower then left for Portugal, where he was given a most warm welcome by President Tomas and Prime Minister Salazar.

It seemed to me that the Soviets had gambled on a capitulation by Eisenhower and were disoriented when it was not forthcoming. They had counted on both de Gaulle and MacMillan

to pressure Eisenhower for some form of apology, and this had not happened.

I have often been irritated and antagonized by some of the things General de Gaulle has said publicly where he sometimes appeared to equate the USSR and the United States as threats to the grandeur and independence of France. But I have not forgotten the statement he made at this crucial time--"Whatever happens or whatever he does, we will be with you to the end."

Seven years later, I returned to Paris as the U.S. military attach, shortly after General de Gaulle had taken France out of the integrated military structure of NATO and had asked the United States to remove its military presence from France. I could not help but wonder what had led us from the first statement of unconditional support to the second situation. During the years between 1967 and my departure from France in 1972, I tried as a matter of personal curiosity as well as of national interest to ascertain what had led General de Gaulle to undergo such a change. I never asked General de Gaulle point blank, but I did talk to him about his philosophy of the defense of France. I talked to many of his closest military and naval aides, some of whom I had known for more than 20 years, and I came to the following conclusion, based not just on what they told me but also on what I remembered of the discussions between General de Gaulle and General Eisenhower on nuclear weapons and their use.

In 1962, when President Kennedy had sent Dean Acheson and Sherman Kent to see General de Gaulle and to show him the photographs of the Soviet nuclear-tipped rockets in Cuba, General de Gaulle, unlike many of the European leaders, had accepted that it might be necessary for the United States to take preemptive military action against Cuba. He was a man who understood the uses of power, and he watched carefully to see what we would do. When he saw that instead of taking such action, we appeared to him to have made an agreement with Khrushchev by which we took our missiles out of Greece and Turkey in return for the withdrawal of Soviet missiles in Cuba, he felt that we had not really won the Cuban missile confrontation. One of his closest aides said to me that de Gaulle had told his entourage, "If the Americans will not fight for Cuba 90 miles from the United States, they will not fight for Europe 3,500 miles away. I must draw the conclusions from this that affect France's independence and defense." I cannot prove this, but nearly all my contacts close to de Gaulle reflected something very like this.

I remembered sitting before the fire at Rambouillet Castle in 1959 between General Eisenhower and General de Gaulle in bathrobes after dinner and de Gaulle saying, "You, Eisenhower, would go to nuclear war for Europe because you know what its loss would mean and you are bound to us by special ties. As the Soviet Union develops the capability to strike with nuclear rockets the cities of North America, one of your unknown successors will decide to go to nuclear war only if there is a nuclear strike against North America. When that day comes, I or my unknown successor must have in hand the nuclear means to turn what the Soviets may want to be a conventional war into a nuclear war. I do not seek to compete with SAC or the Long Range Air Army, but I wish France to have the means of some tactical and strategic strike against the Soviet Union. The addition of another center of nuclear decision will multiply the uncertainties of the Soviet planners. You Americans could survive--for a short time--the loss of Western Europe. We Europeans could not."

representing the official positions of any component of the United States government.