

Charles de Gaulle at the National Press Club, April 23, 1960



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French President Charles de Gaulle (1890-1970) arrived in Washington on Friday, April 22, 1960, for a State visit comprised primarily of talks with President Dwight D. Eisenhower to prepare for the upcoming Big Four summit planned for May in Paris, the first such meeting since World War II of leaders from the U.S., Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union. General de Gaulle, leader of the Free French Forces resisting both the German occupation of France and the collaborationist Vichy government during the war, drew a warm welcome from Washingtonians that matched an equally enthusiastic embrace the people of Paris had given General Eisenhower, the supreme commander of Allied forces in western Europe during the liberation of France, on his State visit seven months earlier. De Gaulle wrote in his memoir, “All the way from the airport to Blair House I drove beside President Eisenhower to a deafening accompaniment of cheers, sirens and brass bands, amid a forest of banners and flags.” Area police estimated that 200,000 people—many of them government workers given an extended lunch hour—crowded the airport, bridge, and streets. De Gaulle remarked that the greeting, “clearly represented something fundamental.” The next morning, de Gaulle held “a vast press conference at the National Press Club,” he reported, “where most of the questions put to me concerned the

projected meeting of the Big Four.” The *New York Times* described his performance as “relaxed and informal.”

On Sunday, de Gaulle flew with Eisenhower to the president’s farm in Gettysburg. Lt. Colonel Vernon Walters, Eisenhower’s translator, witnessed the austere French statesman—who normally, Walters wrote, “maintained about himself an aura of aloofness and mystery that he felt was absolutely necessary for greatness”—unwind as he played with Eisenhower’s grandchildren. The “old soldiers,” as de Gaulle characterized himself and Eisenhower—both 69 years of age—walked through the Civil War battlefield, then traveled to the president’s retreat at Camp David, Maryland, where Eisenhower confided his hope that the ensuing summit would establish a foundation for a lasting breakthrough in Cold War relations. Noting that 1960 would be his last year in office, Eisenhower told de Gaulle, “What a splendid exit it would be for me to end up, without any sacrifice of principle, with an agreement between the East and West!”

The visit to Washington, in Walters’ eyes, served to bind together the two leaders who, despite a friendship forged in war, had clashed in recent times on issues of international concern. De Gaulle believed that a renewed and independent France, restored to its former status as one of the world’s great powers, could lead the way to a revived Europe as a partner in international affairs equal to the two superpowers for the benefit of the whole world. Out of power since January 1946, when he had resigned as head of the French provisional government because he could not prevent the adoption of a constitution he abhorred, de Gaulle had been voted back into office by the French National Assembly in June 1958 to provide strong leadership after an insurrection in the colony of Algeria threatened to engulf France in civil war. De Gaulle protested against the Cold War system of alliances that had evolved during his absence from power as dangerously unstable and opposed as illegitimate supranational organizations that undermined the sovereignty of independent nation-states.

On September 17, 1958, de Gaulle had proposed to Eisenhower and British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan that their three nations form a new alliance to replace the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which de Gaulle believed made the security of France dependent on U.S. decision-making. After Eisenhower and Macmillan responded evasively, de Gaulle pulled the French Mediterranean fleet out of NATO and prohibited NATO from stockpiling atomic weapons on French soil. Skeptical that the U.S. would protect Europe under all circumstances, France tested its first atomic bomb in February 1960, designed to deter possible aggression in the absence of a disarmament agreement. In his memoir, de Gaulle wrote that at Camp David, he “confessed to Eisenhower that while believing America to be indispensable to the world, I did not wish to see her setting herself up as a universal judge and policeman.”

De Gaulle was not as optimistic as Eisenhower about the prospects for the summit. Although Eisenhower, de Gaulle, and Macmillan each had met individually with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev during the previous year, serious conflicts remained unresolved, especially with regard to the divided country of Germany and the city of Berlin. Khrushchev had announced on November 28, 1958, that unless the West agreed within six months to a peace treaty that would recognize two sovereign German states and transform West Berlin into a demilitarized free city, the Soviet Union would sign a separate treaty with East Germany and end Western occupation rights in West Berlin. Although Khrushchev revoked the threat after meeting with Eisenhower at Camp David in September 1959, De Gaulle revealed to Eisenhower that Khrushchev told him in March 1960 that he in fact still planned to sign a treaty with East Germany after a two-year “moratorium.” Both Eisenhower and de Gaulle agreed that such a threatened time limit would forestall progress in negotiations.

Rather than discuss Berlin at the summit, de Gaulle hoped to begin a gradual process of détente through agreements and cooperative efforts on other matters—cultural exchanges, steps toward nuclear disarmament, and programs directed at specific areas of concern for underdeveloped nations—in order to reduce tensions and foster an atmosphere that eventually could accommodate a resolution of the German situation. He feared that a treaty on Germany enacted prematurely might destabilize the status quo and lead to war. “Perhaps we shall, at least, decide on the road to follow, however long and arduous the stages may be,” he announced on April 25, his last day in Washington, in an address that the *Washington Post* called “one of the most stirring speeches ever heard before a Joint Session of Congress.”

De Gaulle’s modest hopes for the Paris summit remained unfulfilled. On May 1, some two weeks before the opening, a Soviet anti-aircraft unit shot down an American U-2 spy plane violating Soviet airspace as it traveled over Sverdlovsk, the Soviet Union’s tenth largest city. Eisenhower had approved the U-2 program in order to gather photographic evidence to document Soviet assertions of superior missile capabilities. The Soviets had refused Eisenhower’s “Open Skies” proposal advanced at the 1955 Geneva conference that would have permitted aerial photography over both countries to identify preparations for a massive surprise attack. Although Khrushchev claimed in November 1959 to have “stockpiled so many rockets, so many atomic and hydrogen warheads, that, if we were attacked, we could wipe from the face of the earth all of our probable opponents,” U-2 photography previously had failed to uncover any Soviet ICBM launch platforms. Eisenhower clearly suspected a bluff, but still authorized new U-2 flights in the spring of 1960, despite agonizing over the consequences that a crash would have if it were to occur during the summit.

When the meetings convened at the Elysée Palace in Paris on May 16, Khrushchev immediately launched into a tirade against Eisenhower, demanding an apology, condemnation of the flights, and a commitment to stop them.

Eisenhower calmly stated that there would be no more flights during his presidency, but refused to apologize, stating that the flights “had no aggressive intent,” but were made “to assure the safety of the United States and the free world against surprise attack by a power which boasts of its ability to devastate the United States and other countries by missiles armed with atomic warheads.” De Gaulle pointed out to Khrushchev that “this incident arose from the state of international tension and the sharp differences which exist between the two camps, both possessing terrible means of destruction and guided by differing ideologies” and argued that the incident “underlines the need for this Conference.” Khrushchev nevertheless refused to participate in further meetings and cancelled an invitation he previously had made to Eisenhower to visit the Soviet Union.

As the aborted summit came to a close, de Gaulle reassured Eisenhower that “no matter what happens, France as your ally will stand with you all the way.” Eisenhower, according to Walters’ notes, told de Gaulle “that the meeting in Paris had not been a complete failure, because he felt that the unity of the West was perhaps now stronger than ever before.” The Franco-American bond, however, would be tested later in the decade, as de Gaulle resisted American investment in France, charged that U.S. monetary policy caused inflation in Europe and in response advocated a return to the gold standard, withdrew his country’s armed forces completely from NATO, and condemned U.S. intervention in Vietnam, calling for a withdrawal of forces as France earlier had done in Algeria to allow for a political settlement.

-- Alan Gevinson, *Special Assistant to the Chief,*
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