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By Daryl G. Kimball

LOOKING BACK

JFK's American University Speech Echoes Through Time

In the modern age, U.S. presidents have delivered dozens of addresses on international peace and security, but few have been as profound or consequential as John F. Kennedy's "Strategy of Peace" address delivered 50 years ago on June 10 on the campus of American University in Washington.

Coming just months after the 1962 Cuban missile crisis drove home the risks of an unbridled nuclear arms race and the dangers of a direct superpower conflict, the speech was intended to send an unambiguous signal to Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev that the United States sought to "avert those confrontations which bring an adversary to a choice of either a humiliating defeat or nuclear war," as Kennedy phrased it in the speech.

During and after the Cuban missile crisis, Kennedy and Khrushchev exchanged letters expressing the need to "step back from the danger," as Kennedy put it, by making progress on arms control. In a letter to Kennedy on October 28, 1962, as the crisis came to a close, Khrushchev wrote, "We should like to continue the exchange of views on the prohibition of atomic and thermonuclear weapons, on general disarmament and other problems relating to the relaxation of international tension."[1]

Kennedy, writing back the same day, said that "perhaps now…we can make some real progress in this vital field. I think we should give priority to questions relating to the proliferation of nuclear weapons…and to the great effort for a nuclear test ban."[2]

Kennedy's June 10 address was courageous because it was conciliatory at a time of high tension and grave risks. It was prepared with his assistant Ted Sorenson, without the usual interagency review process. Using simple, eloquent phrases, Kennedy praised the Soviet people for their achievements and explained the urgent necessity of pursuing a strategy for peace to avoid the horrific dangers of nuclear war, including renewed steps on nuclear arms control and a hotline for urgent communications between Moscow and Washington. The speech offered a vision of hope and cautioned against defeatism.

At its core, the speech offered a revised formula for achieving progress on restricting nuclear weapons testing, a goal that had eluded President Dwight Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Khrushchev for more than six years. Kennedy viewed the nuclear test ban treaty—ideally a comprehensive ban—as an essential first step toward U.S.-Soviet disarmament and a barrier against the spread of nuclear weapons. In a March 21, 1963, interview, Kennedy said, "[P]ersonally I am haunted by the feeling that by 1970, unless we are successful, there may be 10 nuclear powers instead of 4, and by 1975, 15 or 20."[3]

Despite renewed efforts to negotiate a test ban in early 1963 and conciliatory offers from each side, U.S. and Soviet negotiators remained divided over the issue of on-site inspections and verification. On June 10, Kennedy sought to break the impasse with a strategy for unilateral but reciprocated initiatives. He announced that the United States "does not propose to conduct nuclear tests in the atmosphere so long as other states do not do so," and he suggested that this declaration could be codified through a binding treaty.

The historical and documentary record suggests that Kennedy's June 10 address had a profound effect on Khrushchev's thinking on the test ban issue and about Kennedy. Kennedy's address was published in full by the Soviet newspapers *Izvestia* and *Pravda* and welcomed by Khrushchev himself. In a statement in July 1963, the Soviet leader, who had previously insisted on a comprehensive ban, accepted for the first time a ban on atmospheric testing, which did not require on-site inspections or monitoring stations.

Two weeks later, the U.S. negotiating team, led by veteran diplomat Averell Harriman, went to Moscow for talks on the limited test ban and, if possible, the long-sought comprehensive test ban. With growing resistance to the test ban

Daryl G. Kimball is executive director of the Arms Control Association.

concept from the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff and from key senators, as well as the insistence of the Soviets on a less frequent inspection system for a comprehensive ban, the negotiators focused on achieving the limited test ban treaty.

Late on July 25, after just 12 days of talks, the negotiators concluded work on the Limited Test Ban Treaty. With a strong, public push from Kennedy, the U.S. Senate gave its advice and consent for ratification on September 24 by a vote of 80-19.

Kennedy's June 10 speech not only catalyzed action on this treaty, but also led to the formalization of an agreement on establishing a hotline. It ushered in a limited easing of tensions between the superpowers involving reciprocal troop reductions in Europe, U.S. grain sales to the Soviets, mutual British-Soviet-U.S. pledges to reduce production of fissile material for weapons, energetic U.S.- and Soviet-led diplomacy in Geneva from 1964 to 1968 toward conclusion of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, and an agreement in 1968 to hold discussions "on the limitation and the reduction of both offensive strategic nuclear weapons delivery systems and systems of defense against ballistic missiles."[4]

Since June 1963, every U.S. president—Democrat or Republican—has echoed some of the key themes of Kennedy's "Strategy of Peace" address in his own policies and statements. Kennedy's successors have continued to pursue many of the disarmament goals outlined during his administration. As the excerpts below indicate, these presidents have recognized to varying degrees the futility of nuclear war, the need to curb proliferation of nuclear weapons to additional states and subnational groups, and the importance of pursuing arms control measures to reduce the risks of nuclear weapons and increase global security. President Barack Obama's 2009 address in Prague outlining the steps toward the "the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons" addresses all of these key themes.

The real test for Obama and U.S. leaders yet to come is whether they can match the conviction and the urgency with which Kennedy sought to resolve the nuclear standoff in his 1963 address and in his bold leadership in the final months of his presidency as he sought global nuclear restraint.

American University

President John F. Kennedy speaks at American University in Washington on June 10, 1963. He said that "nuclear powers must avert those confrontations which bring an adversary to a choice of either a humiliating retreat or a nuclear war."

ENDNOTES

1. Glenn Seaborg, *Kennedy, Khrushchev, and the Test Ban* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981), p. 176.

2. Ibid.

3. Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, "107 - The President's News Conference," The American Presidency Project, n.d., http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=9124 (transcript of President John Kennedy's press conference on March 21, 1963).

4. Miller Center, "Remarks on Signing the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty," n.d., http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/4037 (remarks by President Lyndon Johnson on July 1, 1968).

Excerpts from Kennedy's "Strategy of Peace" Address and Subsequent Presidential Remarks on Dealing With the Threat of Nuclear Weapons

The dangers of nuclear war and the arms race

"Today, should total war ever break out again—no matter how—our two countries would become the primary targets. It is an ironic but accurate fact that the two strongest powers are the two in the most danger of devastation. All we have built, all we have worked for, would be destroyed in the first 24 hours.... [W]e are both devoting massive sums of money to weapons that could be better devoted to combating ignorance, poverty, and disease. We are both caught up in a vicious and dangerous cycle in which suspicion on one side breeds suspicion on the other, and new weapons beget counterweapons."

—John F. Kennedy, American University, June 10, 1963

"The world is still engaged in a massive armaments race designed to ensure continuing equivalent strength among potential adversaries. We pledge perseverance and wisdom in our efforts to limit the world's armaments to those necessary for each nation's own domestic safety. And we will move this year a step toward [the] ultimate goal—the elimination of all nuclear weapons from this Earth. We urge all other people to join us, for success can mean life instead of death."

—Jimmy Carter, inaugural address, January 20, 1977

"Today, the Cold War has disappeared but thousands of those weapons have not. In a strange turn of history, the threat of global nuclear war has gone down, but the risk of a nuclear attack has gone up. More nations have acquired these weapons. Testing has continued. Black markets trade in nuclear secrets and materials. The technology to build a bomb has spread. Terrorists are determined to buy, build or steal one. Our efforts to contain these dangers are centered in a global non-proliferation regime, but as more people and nations break the rules, we could reach the point when the center cannot hold."

—Barack Obama, Prague, April 5, 2009

Common interests in peace and security and avoiding nuclear war

"[B]oth the United States and its allies, and the Soviet Union and its allies, have a mutually deep interest in a just and genuine peace and in halting the arms race. Agreements to this end are in the interests of the Soviet Union as well as ours—and even the most hostile nations can be relied upon to accept and keep those treaty obligations, and only those treaty obligations, which are in their own interest.

So, let us not be blind to our differences—but let us also direct attention to our common interests and to the means by which those differences can be resolved. And if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal."

—John F. Kennedy, American University, June 10, 1963

"We are committed to a pursuit of a more peaceful, stable, and cooperative world. While we are determined never to be bested in a test of strength, we will devote our strength to what is best. And in the nuclear era, there is no rational alternative to accords of mutual restraint between the United States and the Soviet Union, two nations, which have the power to destroy mankind.

...

A very stark reality has tempered America's actions for decades and must now temper the actions of all nations. Prevention of full-scale warfare in the nuclear age has become everybody's responsibility. Today's regional conflict must not become tomorrow's world disaster."

—Gerald Ford, address to the UN General Assembly, September 18, 1974

"People of the Soviet Union, there is only one sane policy, for your country and mine, to preserve our civilization in this modern age: A nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. The only value in our two nations possessing nuclear weapons is to make sure they will never be used. But then would it not be better to do away with them entirely?"

—Ronald Reagan, State of the Union address, January 25, 1984

Mandel Ngan/AFP/Getty Images

In his speech in Prague on April 5, 2009, President Barack Obama spelled out steps leading to a world free of nuclear weapons.

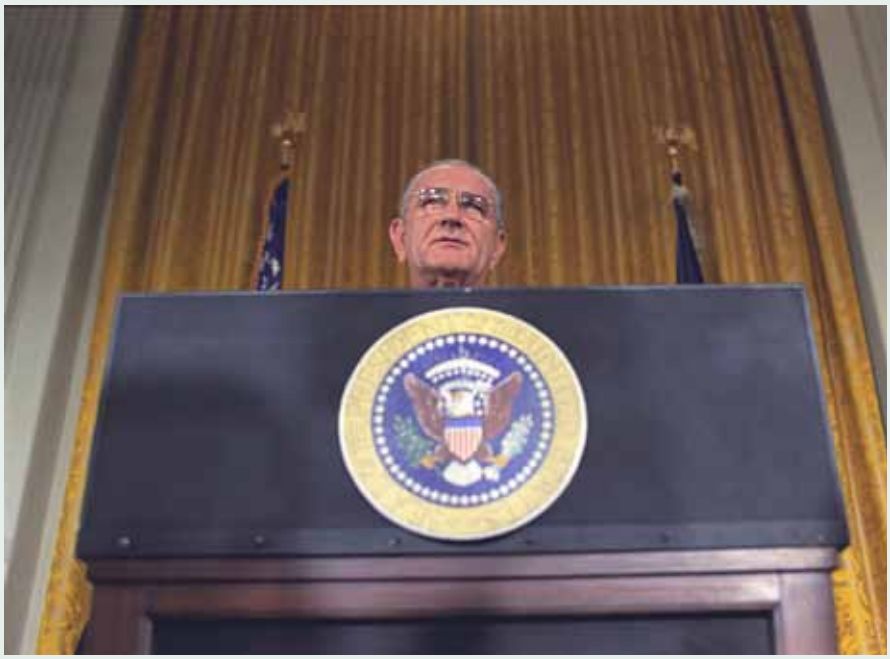
Averting conflict and engaging in talks with adversaries

"Above all, while defending our own vital interests, nuclear powers must avert those confrontations which bring an adversary to a choice of either a humiliating retreat or a nuclear war. To adopt that kind of course in the nuclear age would be evidence only of the bankruptcy of our policy—or of a collective death-wish for the world.

…

[I]ncreased understanding will require increased contact and communication. One step in this direction is the proposed arrangement for a direct line between Moscow and Washington, to avoid on each side the dangerous delays, misunderstandings, and misreadings of the other's actions which might occur at a time of crisis."

—John F. Kennedy, American University, June 10, 1963



LBJ Library

President Lyndon Johnson speaks at the White House ceremony marking his signing of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty on July 1, 1968.

"There are those who doubt whether true international cooperation is possible, given the inevitable differences among nations. And there are those who hear talk of a world without nuclear weapons and doubt whether it is worth setting a goal that seems impossible to achieve.

But make no mistake: we know where that road leads. When nations and peoples allow themselves to be defined by their differences, the gulf between them widens. When we fail to pursue peace, then it stays forever beyond our grasp. To denounce or shrug off a call for cooperation is an easy and cowardly thing. That is how wars begin. That is where human progress ends."

—Barack Obama, Prague, April 5, 2009

The need for nuclear arms control, nonproliferation, and disarmament

"We have also been talking in Geneva about the other first-step measures of arms control designed to limit the intensity of the arms race and to reduce the risks of accidental war. Our primary long-range interest in Geneva, however, is general and complete disarmament—designed to take place by stages, permitting parallel political developments to build the new institutions of peace, which would take the place of arms.…

The one major area of these negotiations where the end is in sight, yet where a fresh start is badly needed, is in a treaty to outlaw nuclear tests. The conclusion of such a treaty, so near and yet so far, would check the spiraling arms race in one of its most dangerous areas. It would place the nuclear powers in a position to deal more effectively with one of the greatest hazards which man faces in 1963, the further spread of nuclear arms. It would increase our security—it would decrease the prospects of war."

—John F. Kennedy, American University, June 10, 1963

"After nearly a quarter century of danger and fear—reason and sanity have prevailed to reduce the danger and to greatly lessen the fear. Thus, all mankind is reassured.

As the moment is reassuring, so it is, even more, hopeful and heartening. For this treaty is evidence that amid the tensions, the strife, the struggle, and the sorrow of these years, men of many nations have not lost the way—or have not lost the will—toward peace. The conclusion of this treaty encourages the hope that other steps may be taken toward a peaceful world.

It is for these reasons—and in this perspective—that I have described this treaty as the most important international agreement since the beginning of the nuclear age.

It enhances the security of all nations by significantly reducing the danger of nuclear war among nations."

—Lyndon Johnson, remarks on the signing of the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, July 1, 1968

"The Governments of the United States and the Soviet Union… have agreed to concentrate this year on working out an agreement for the limitation of the deployment of anti-ballistic missile systems…[and] on certain measures with respect to the limitation of offensive strategic weapons.

…

If we succeed, this…may well be remembered as the beginning of a new era in which all nations will devote more of their energies and their resources not to the weapons of war, but to the works of peace."

—Richard Nixon, announcement of an agreement in the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, May 20, 1971

"There is only one way safely and legitimately to reduce the cost of national security, and that is to reduce the need for it. And this we're trying to do in negotiations with the Soviet Union. We're not just discussing limits on a further increase of nuclear weapons; we seek, instead, to reduce their number. We seek the

total elimination one day of nuclear weapons from the face of the Earth.

Now, for decades, we and the Soviets have lived under the threat of mutual assured destruction—if either resorted to the use of nuclear weapons, the other could retaliate and destroy the one who had started it. Is there either logic or morality in believing that if one side threatens to kill tens of millions of our people our only recourse is to threaten killing tens of millions of theirs?"

—Ronald Reagan, second inaugural address, January 21, 1985

"In the area of security and arms control, we've stepped up patrol against the spread of weapons of mass destruction. The new [C]hemical [W]eapons [C]onvention will ban chemical weapons from the arsenals of all participating states. And once implemented, the agreements we've negotiated will ban new nuclear states on the territory of the former Soviet Union. And above all, we've sought to erase nuclear nightmares from the sleep of future generations."

—George H.W. Bush, Texas A&M University, December 15, 1992

"I ask Congress to join me in pursuing an ambitious agenda to reduce the serious threat of weapons of mass destruction. This year, four decades after it was first proposed by President Eisenhower, a comprehensive nuclear test ban is within reach. By ending nuclear testing, we can help to prevent the development of new and more dangerous weapons and make it more difficult for non-nuclear states to build them."

—Bill Clinton, State of the Union address, January 27, 1998

"There is a consensus among nations that proliferation cannot be tolerated. Yet this consensus means little unless it is translated into action. Every civilized nation has a stake in preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction. These materials and technologies, and the people who traffic in them, cross many borders. To stop this trade, the nations of the world must be strong and determined. We must work together, we must act effectively."

—George W. Bush, announcement of new measures to counter proliferation, February 11, 2004

"[A]s a nuclear power, as the only nuclear power to have used a nuclear weapon, the United States has a moral responsibility to act. We cannot succeed in this endeavor alone, but we can lead it, we can start it….

So today, I state clearly and with conviction America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons. This goal will not be reached quickly—perhaps not in my lifetime. It will take patience and persistence. But now we, too, must ignore the voices who tell us that the world cannot change.

…[T]he United States will take concrete steps toward a world without nuclear weapons. To put an end to Cold War thinking, we will reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security strategy and urge others to do the same.…

…

To achieve a global ban on nuclear testing, my administration will immediately and aggressively pursue U.S. ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.…

And to cut off the building blocks needed for a bomb, the United States will seek a new treaty that verifiably ends the production of fissile materials intended for use in state nuclear weapons.…

[T]ogether, we will strengthen the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty as a basis for cooperation.…

…

[W]e must ensure that terrorists never acquire a nuclear weapon."

—Barack Obama, Prague, April 5, 2009

Ronald Reagan Library

President Ronald Reagan delivers his second inaugural address on January 21, 1985. In the speech, he said, "We seek the total elimination one day of nuclear weapons."