In 1959, Dwight D. Eisenhower and Harold Macmillan were confronted with a new crisis, in addition to their concerns about disarmament, the Middle East, and even the situation in the Far East. On 10 November 1958, Nikita S. Khrushchev, the premier of the Soviet Union, told an audience in Moscow that the Western powers had violated their postwar agreements over the future of Germany. He called upon the United States, Great Britain, and France to end their occupation of West Berlin and said that the Soviet Union intended to negotiate a separate treaty with the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), thereby enabling the East Germans to control the access routes to Berlin. The Western powers, therefore, would be forced to negotiate a separate arrangement with East Germany, a country which they did not recognize diplomatically, in order to maintain their rights in Berlin. Khrushchev’s speech was perceived as a tactic designed to force the West out of Berlin. Shortly after his 10 November speech, Khrushchev gave a six-month ultimatum for settling the Berlin issue, holding out the prospect of armed confrontation if a settlement was not reached.

The Berlin crisis hung over the NATO alliance through the end of 1958 and into the winter and early spring of 1959. It certainly gave a new urgency to the problems of the Cold War. Khrushchev’s insertion of the Berlin issue into great power relations forced the West to deal with him on personal terms for the first time. For Eisenhower and Macmillan, 1959 became the year of getting to know Nikita Khrushchev. Could Eisenhower and Macmillan realistically hope to do business with the Soviet leader? Beginning in February 1959, when Macmillan traveled to the Soviet Union to confer with Khrushchev and other members of the Soviet hierarchy and ending with Khrushchev’s visit to the United States in September 1959, American and British foreign policy-makers tried to
defuse the tension in the international situation by face-to-face meetings with the Soviet premier. Admittedly, Macmillan’s visit to Moscow was carefully orchestrated to advance his domestic political fortunes by appearing as an international peacemaker. Regardless of the visit’s obvious political overtones, however, Macmillan did succeed in making some slight penetration of the closed Soviet society.

Following Macmillan’s visit to Moscow, he came to the United States for four days of talks with Eisenhower about the results of his trip to the Soviet Union and also to discuss other Cold War issues. The unstated purpose of the meeting was to start work on measures designed to change the climate of the Cold War from one of confrontation to one directed toward negotiations at the level of heads of government – Macmillan’s prized concept of a summit conference.

In retrospect, it is clear that Khrushchev was also looking for some type of opening to the West. In July 1959, due to the crossings of some diplomatic signals on the part of the State Department, he obtained an invitation from Eisenhower to visit the United States in late September 1959, for a series of meetings with the president and a nationwide tour of the country.

In anticipation of Khrushchev’s visit, Eisenhower made scheduled trips to the European capitals in late August and early September, consulting with Macmillan in London, Charles de Gaulle in Paris, and Konrad Adenauer in Germany. The purpose of these meetings was to reinforce Allied support for the prospective meetings with the Soviets and also to coordinate their respective policies. These talks were further steps toward the pursuit of détente with the Soviet Union, and with Khrushchev.

Eisenhower met with Khrushchev in late September 1959 but, even before that visit, the Americans made another attempt to understand Khrushchev when Vice President Richard M. Nixon visited the Soviet Union in late July. Nixon’s trip resulted in the famous “kitchen debate” with Khrushchev at the American exhibit at the large trade fair in Moscow, an event which was a political triumph for the vice president but probably added little to the American understanding of Khrushchev or his motives.2

Khrushchev’s trip to the United States was another matter. The Russian leader clearly enjoyed himself, although in public he mixed humor, bombast, and provocation. In his meetings with reporters, Khrushchev routinely denigrated American society as wasteful and inefficient. In his meetings with Eisenhower, he generally conceded nothing, but the mere fact that the two men were meeting led some to