Three Hats for Berlin: General Lauris Norstad and the Second Berlin Crisis, 1958–62

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The crisis begins

After learning of Nikita Khrushchev’s 10 November 1958 announcement that the Soviets wanted to turn over their functions in Berlin to the East Germans, a move designed to undermine and ultimately eliminate the position of the Western Allies in Berlin, General Lauris Norstad – NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR) and US Commander in Chief Europe (USCINCEUR) – directed his staff to gather all available information on Allied troops in Berlin and their legal obligations in the event of a Soviet or East German attack or incursion in Berlin. Then on 14 November the sense of crisis deepened when the Soviets detained a US convoy from Berlin for eight and a-half hours. General Henry I. Hodes, Commander of US Army Europe (USAREUR), proposed testing Soviet intentions by sending another convoy from Berlin and – if it was also detained – using force if necessary to extract the personnel and equipment. Norstad supported this proposal and relayed it to the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). Convinced that the convoy incident was a ‘deliberate probe’ by the Soviets, Norstad believed that if the Allies waited too long to react, they would ‘run the danger of seeming to recognize a de facto state of blockade’.

Although initially sympathetic to Hodes’ and Norstad’s proposal, the JCS were convinced by the State Department on 17 November to withhold their approval because the idea did not have Allied support and thus might leave the US isolated on the issue and because ‘an attempt to push through now would be the wrong time and probably the wrong issue’. Norstad was frustrated and told his political adviser, Raymond L. Thurston, that something strong should be done or the West would be ‘nibbled to death’. If a strong approach was not acceptable, however,
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'a conference of Foreign Ministers of the four Occupying Powers, together with German experts, should be called in to focus the attention of the world on this problem'. This 'carrot and stick' approach of a firm line on Allied rights in Berlin coupled with an offer of negotiations formed the basis of Norstad's approach throughout the crisis. Soon afterward Norstad warned the JCS, 'Unless we are willing to begin a humiliating process of yielding step by step to the GDR [German Democratic Republic], we must draw the line now and the Russians must understand we will use force to support this position if necessary.' Three days later Norstad expressed similar views in a meeting with British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan. Macmillan then asked about the possibility of staging another airlift, and Norstad replied that an airlift was 'manageable but it was not a permanent solution'.

In mid-December 1958 high-level tripartite discussions took place in Paris prior to the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in ministerial session. In preparation for these discussions, Norstad met with the secretaries of State and Defense on 13 December 1958 at the US Embassy in Paris. Continuing to advocate his carrot and stick approach, Norstad stressed that by simultaneously proposing a conference, the United States would make it easier for Britain and France to give their support. He cautioned against 'going it alone'. The other senior US military officer present at this meeting, JCS Chairman Nathan B. Twining, took a much more confrontational stance stating, 'We certainly have to stop this somewhere. We must ignore the fear of general war. It is coming anyway. Therefore we should force the issue on a point we think is right and stand on it.4

Two days later Norstad conferred with Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, who asked if it would be possible to take a number of military measures 'to show the Soviets that we mean business'. Such measures should 'not be so dramatic as to cause panic in Europe, but should be sufficiently apparent to the Soviets to back up our hand in standing firm'. Norstad suggested several possible moves, such as increasing the number of US fighter aircraft in Europe. He also thought that the British and French governments might be willing to take similar actions and suggested that Dulles encourage them to do so. Afterwards Norstad directed his US European Command (USEUCOM) staff to draw up a list of possible measures.5

The JCS then prepared a study which stated that the allies should meet a Soviet challenge to Berlin access on the ground, not with an airlift. The study recommended a series of military measures ranging in size from a small convoy to a reinforced division, with Norstad to be