

Diplomacy at Gettysburg Reading 1: Inviting Khrushchev to the United States

Read the following background information and primary source documents and then answer the discussion questions at the end of this document. This can be done as an individual or group activity.

Dwight David Eisenhower (1890-1969) enjoyed a long and distinguished military career and attained the rank of five-star general before becoming the 34th president of the United States. One of the most serious problems Eisenhower faced during his eight years in office (1953-61) was the Cold War, a struggle between the Soviet Union and the United States. While the Soviet Union tried to spread communism throughout the world, the United States used its energies to help countries fight against it.

Under Soviet-style communism, the rights of the individual were always secondary to the intentions and needs of the state. Farms and factories were owned by the government. The government chose what was shown on television, printed in newspapers, or taught in schools. To speak out against the government was to risk going to prison. Soviet leaders argued that their dictatorship of the proletariat was the wave of the future. Once the whole world became communist, there would be no cause for war. But until that time they saw themselves in permanent conflict with the democracies of Europe and America. The United States, with its constitutional guarantees of individual rights, was widely recognized as the leader of the Western democracies, and was the natural and inevitable enemy of communism.

The Cold War began at the end of World War II when the Soviet Union attempted to create its own "sphere of influence" by refusing to remove its troops from Eastern Europe. It was a war of mutual propaganda, espionage, and encroachment on neutral territory. Each side used spies to steal the other's military secrets. Covertly, both countries helped smaller nations in their fights for or against communism by supplying them with weapons and economic aid.

What made the Cold War so frightening was the very strong possibility that it could turn into a "hot" war--nuclear war--at any moment. By 1953 both the United States and Soviet Union had produced nuclear weapons. To lessen the fear of nuclear war, in 1955 Eisenhower proposed an Open Skies plan of mutual overflights. The plan was flatly denounced by Nikita Khrushchev, the new leader of the Soviet Union, who, in 1958, further heightened Cold War tensions by issuing the Berlin Ultimatum. He insisted that if the United States and its Western European allies would not recognize East Germany as a separate nation, he would deny them access to Berlin.

Throughout his life, Eisenhower used a personal diplomatic style to get to know others and work together towards a common goal. He intended to use such a diplomatic style with Khrushchev. Eisenhower wanted to invite Khrushchev to visit the United States, but only after the Soviets stepped back from their ultimatum on Berlin. However, the U.S. State Department made a mistake and issued an invitation too early. It was not done the way Eisenhower had hoped, but Khrushchev was coming to the United States.

The Invitation to Nikita Khrushchev to Visit the United States
The President's News Conference, August 3, 1959

THE PRESIDENT: I asked this morning for this special press conference on the subject of the impending exchange of visits between Mr. Khrushchev and myself....

Sometime back, I suggested to the State Department that I believed in the effort to melt a little bit of the ice that seems to freeze our relationships with the Soviets, that possibly a visit such as I now have proposed would be useful....

Now, at this identical time, an identical statement is being issued in Moscow....

[Eisenhower reading:] The President of the United States has invited Mr. Nikita Khrushchev, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, to pay an official visit to the United States in September. Mr. Khrushchev has accepted with pleasure.

The president has also accepted with pleasure Mr. Khrushchev's invitation to pay an official visit to the USSR later this fall.

Mr. Khrushchev will visit Washington for 2 or 3 days and will also spend 10 days or so traveling the United States. He will have informal talks with the president, which will afford an opportunity for an exchange of views about problems of mutual interest.

On his tour of the United States, Mr. Khrushchev will be able, at first hand, to see the country, its people, and to acquaint himself with their life.

President Eisenhower will visit Moscow and will also spend some days traveling in the Soviet Union. This will provide further opportunity for informal talks and exchange of views about problems of mutual interest with the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR.

On his tour of the Soviet Union, President Eisenhower likewise will be able at first hand to see the country, its people, and to acquaint himself with their life.

Both governments express hope that the forthcoming visits will help create better understanding between the U.S. and the USSR and will promote the cause of peace. **[Ends reading]**

THE PRESIDENT: Now, one or two other items...

The heads of state were notified just recently about this impending visit...on balance, they think it's a very good thing to do....

In the meantime, I might tell you that this morning I have taken considerable trouble to inform some of the leaders of Congress, and those that I've heard from have been quite favorably disposed toward this plan.

I want to make this clear: by no means am I intending to be or can I be any spokesman for the Western powers in my talks with Mr. Khrushchev. I can be a spokesman only for America and for its government. Nevertheless, I have already suggested that prior to these meetings, I go to meet our friends in Europe and to discuss with them problems of mutual interest. . . .

Q. Fletcher Knebel, Cowles Publications: Could you say, sir, was it just two items of correspondence, you invited him and he accepted, or was there more than that?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I'd say it is a little bit more complicated than that.
[Laughter]

Sterling F. Green, Associated Press: Thank you, Mr. President.

The President's News Conference at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, August 12, 1959

THE PRESIDENT. Good morning. This is one way to get some of you people to come up to see the famous battlefield, isn't it? I have no announcements. We'll go to questions.

Q. John M. Hightower, Associated Press: Mr. President, what results do you hope to achieve in your talks with Premier Khrushchev?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I would hope for a bettering of the atmosphere between the East and the West. I do not by any manner of means intend or plan that this meeting can become a real negotiation of basic problems between the West and the East, because I have no intention of attempting to be the spokesman for the West. You will recall that Mr. Adenauer has gone to Moscow, Mr. Macmillan has gone to Moscow, and there have been these private talks between these several countries — Mr. Khrushchev and the prime ministers of these two countries. I am trying to do my best to see whether we can't bring about a somewhat better situation in the relations between the two and maybe he can learn a little bit more about our country as certainly I can about his....

Q. Robert C. Pierpoint, CBS News: In recent weeks, sir, we have been invited...to share your hospitality at the White House, and to speak with you personally....also you have now instituted...a new form of diplomacy by travel around the world.

THE PRESIDENT: When you have a situation that has gone on, as we have had this cold war since 1945...it becomes the kind of stalemate that...has the element of almost ss for people....I am trying to end the stalemate and to bring people together more ready to talk....

