

July 28, 1953

Letter from James B. Conant to John Foster Dulles

Citation:

"Letter from James B. Conant to John Foster Dulles", July 28, 1953, Wilson Center Digital Archive, NARA (FOIA release). On file at the National Security Archive, "Soviet Flashpoints" Collection. <https://digitalarchive.umd.edu/document/112598>

Summary:

Conant reports the apparent success of a food distribution plan from West Berlin to the occupants of East Berlin. However, he informs Dulles of received complaints by British and French Allied High Commandants about unilateral action in Berlin, and the American lack of consultation of the Allied High Commission on these matters.

Original Language:

English

Contents:

Transcript - English
Translation - English

July 28, 1953.

Dear Foster:

I am writing you this personal note about certain matters connected with the distribution of food in Berlin. I do not know whether you will want to pass this letter on to various members of your staff. But since the matters on which I am reporting involve the British and the French, as well as the Germans, I felt it better to write a personal letter rather than use the cables.

As I write this late on Tuesday, the operation of distributing food in the West Sectors of Berlin to inhabitants of the East Sector appears to have been successful. What the Russian reaction will be we cannot say, but at least they have allowed the situation to continue for two full days without taking a reprisal action. If it continues along these lines, I think we can say that the operation has been highly successful. On the other hand, if the Russians retaliate by closing the Sector borders or by confiscating the food packages from the people who return, or by punishing those who cross, then we will be faced with a new set of problems. Before you receive this letter, you will know the answer to these present speculations, and I shall not attempt to play the role of prophet.

The point of this letter is to report on the attitude of the British and the French in regard to this whole operation. Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick complained to me in private two days ago that he felt that there had been too much unilateral action in this matter and that the Allied High Commission had only been brought in after the situation had been allowed to develop beyond the Allied High Commission's control. He emphasized the importance of making this a really effective three-power Commission, particularly with reference to Berlin. I think I must agree that to a certain extent his complaint was justified. On the other hand, I feel certain that if I had consulted the other two Allied High Commissioners at every stage, the operation would not now be in full swing. I am sorry to report that on the matters of Berlin, in particular, my colleagues are much more cautious and are very prone to delay matters by referring to their governments. The French and British Commandants in particular have been, since the events of June 17, very apprehensive about both Mayor Reuter's activities and the American support of these activities. This uneasy atmosphere between the three Commandants has been reflected to some degree by the attitudes of my colleagues on the High Commission. As a consequence, if I had immediately explored with Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick and M. François-Poncet the first suggestions that American food might reach the East Zone inhabitants through the West Sectors of Berlin, I am sure there would have been many questions raised and a long delay. Mayor Reuter first identified his ideas in conference with the Bonn Government and I talked to him on Friday the 17th, assuming that he would communicate his plans for approval by the Commandants in due course. At that time he was talking of starting the distribution two weeks later. He presented his plans to the Commandants on Tuesday the 21st and meantime speeded up his schedule so that the distribution would start on Monday the 27th. By the time the Commandants had seen this proposal, "newspaper leaks" had made their position difficult. I think Sir Ivone feels that if I had [not approved] the whole idea on the 17th, or warned Reuter not to process further until the Allied High Commission had a chance to review the matter, we would have been on safer and more consistent ground.

Whatever may be the rights or wrongs of the procedure which I followed, the important point which I am calling to your attention is the reaction of the French and British in the Allied High Commission. The food episode does not stand alone. I am afraid my colleagues feel that the Americans have pushed them on the Ambassador title, more so on the war criminals, and I hear from direct sources that at least the lower members of both staffs are somewhat upset about the President's letter to the Chancellor--all of which adds up to the fact that I shall have to be more careful than ever in consulting my colleagues in the immediate future about any actions in which

our vigorous psychological campaign in the East Zone must flow through Berlin, I feel that you should realize the situation which I face here. I am making no apologies for what I have done in the past, but feel that I must not be open to the charge of unilateral action in the immediate future.

I hope you will not take it amiss if I conclude on a personal note by offering my heartfelt congratulations to you on the conclusion of the Korean truce and the highly successful outcome of the Three Ministers' Conference in Washington.

With all good wishes,

Sincerely,

James B. Conant
The Honorable
John Foster Dulles
Secretary of State,
Washington, D.C.

July 28, 1953. Dear Foster: I am writing you this personal note about certain matters connected with the distribution of food in Berlin. I do not know whether you will want to pass this letter on to various members of your staff. But since the matters on which I am reporting involve the British and the French, as well as the Germans, I felt it better to write a personal letter rather than use the cables. As I write this late on Tuesday, the operation of distributing food in the West Sectors of Berlin to inhabitants of the East Sector appears to have been successful. What the Russian reaction will be we cannot say, but at least they have allowed the situation to continue for two full days without taking a reprisal action. If it continues along these lines, I think we can say that the operation has been highly successful. On the other hand, if the Russians retaliate by closing the Sector borders or by confiscating the food packages from the people who return, or by punishing those who cross, then we will be faced with a new set of problems. Before you receive this letter, you will know the answer to these present speculations, and I shall not attempt to play the role of prophet. The point of this letter is to report on the attitude of the British and the French in regard to this whole operation. Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick complained to me in private two days ago that he felt that there had been too much unilateral action in this matter and that the Allied High Commission had only been brought in after the situation had been allowed to develop beyond the Allied High Commission's control. He emphasized the importance of making this a really effective three-power Commission, particularly with reference to Berlin. I think I must agree that to a certain extent his complaint was justified. On the other hand, I feel certain that if I had consulted the other two Allied High Commissioners at every stage, the operation would not now be in full swing. I am sorry to report that on the matters of Berlin, in particular, my colleagues are much more cautious and are very prone to delay matters by referring to their governments. The French and British Commandants in particular have been, since the events of June 17, very apprehensive about both Mayor Reuter's activities and the American support of these activities. This uneasy atmosphere between the three Commandants has been reflected to some degree by the attitudes of my colleagues on the High Commission. As a consequence, if I had immediately explored with Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick and M. François-Poncet the first suggestions that American food might reach the East Zone inhabitants through the West Sectors of Berlin, I am sure there would have been many questions raised and a long delay. Mayor Reuter first identified his ideas in conference with the Bonn Government and I talked to him on Friday the 17th, assuming that he would communicate his plans for approval by the Commandants in due course. At that time he was talking of starting the distribution two weeks later. He presented his plans to the Commandants on Tuesday the 21st and meantime speeded up his schedule so that the distribution would start on Monday the 27th. By the time the Commandants had seen this proposal, "newspaper leaks" had made their position difficult. I think Sir Ivone feels that if I had [not approved] the whole idea on the 17th, or warned Reuter not to process further until the Allied High Commission had a chance to review the matter, we would have been on safer and more consistent ground. Whatever may be the rights or wrongs of the procedure which I followed, the important point which I am calling to your attention is the reaction of the French and British in the Allied High Commission. The food episode does not stand alone. I am afraid my colleagues feel that the Americans have pushed them on the Ambassador title, more so on the war criminals, and I hear from direct sources that at least the lower members of both staffs are somewhat upset about the President's letter to the Chancellor--all of which adds up to the fact that I shall have to be more careful than ever in consulting my colleagues in the immediate future about any actions in which our vigorous psychological campaign in the East Zone must flow through Berlin, I feel that you should realize the situation which I face here. I am making no apologies for what I have done in the past, but feel that I must not be open to the charge of unilateral action in the immediate future. I hope you will not take it amiss if I conclude on a personal note by offering my heartfelt congratulations to you on the conclusion of the Korean truce and the highly successful outcome of the Three Ministers' Conference in Washington. With all good wishes, Sincerely, James B. Conant
The Honorable John Foster Dulles
Secretary of State,
Washington, D.C.

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