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Is This Trip Necessary?

The vigor of the Soviet reaction to today's scheduled one-day meeting in Berlin of the Bonn Bundestag should not have come as a surprise. It was precisely to avoid such a reaction that the Allies refused to countenance similar meetings for six successive years.

Moscow always has objected to political links between Bonn and West Berlin, which it seeks to isolate as a "Third Germany." Khrushchev publicly threatened war in 1959 over a proposed Bundestag session in Berlin. Moreover, Moscow now is on the spot within the Communist bloc on the subject of Vietnam. It was always clear that the Bundestag's trip to Berlin would present Moscow with a tempting opportunity to show toughness in a situation it could closely control.

For these reasons it was with great reluctance that Washington and London consented to the Berlin session today. The Bonn Government, approaching an election, insisted it had to demonstrate its conviction that Berlin again will be the capital of a united Germany.

Legally, the problem is confused, as are all aspects of Berlin's status. The East German Volkskammer meets in East Berlin, which has been illegally declared the capital of East Germany. But the Western Allies—perhaps because they lacked the physical means of enforcing a similar decision 110 miles inside of East Germany—vetoed the section of the Bonn Constitution that declared West Berlin a part of West Germany. The Berlin Deputies in the Bundestag, as a result, do not vote to this day. And it is generally agreed, even in Bonn, that the legal case for West Berlin's freedom hangs on its status as a city under Four-Power occupation pending a German peace settlement.

Yet prior to 1959 the Bundestag met in Berlin without major difficulty. Even last year, the Soviet Union made only verbal protestations over a one-day meeting in Berlin of the West Germany Federal Assembly—the Bundestag plus an equal number of state delegates—to elect the Federal President. For reasons known only to Moscow, this political act, perhaps because it takes place at five-year intervals, is considered less a challenge than annual one-day sessions of the Bundestag alone.

The current crisis calls attention once again to the extraordinary fact that twenty years after the war Germany, Berlin and Europe remain divided. Soviet pressure on the Berlin access routes has occurred so often that it has begun to resemble a ritual war dance in which spears are brandished but not hurled and in which no one ever gets hurt. But one day someone's foot may slip—in an area where the vital interests and the massive, nuclear-armed forces of the major powers are in continuous confrontation.