Monday is the 50th anniversary of a hinge date of history. On June 10, 1963, President John F. Kennedy helped move the world away from the nuclear precipice toward survival. J.F.K.’s act of leadership on that day is one of the greatest in modern history.

The Cold War is sometimes remembered as a stable “balance of terror,” in which Mutual Assured Destruction (appropriately nicknamed MAD) prevented nuclear war by guaranteeing annihilation for anyone who launched a nuclear strike. This is false. We survived not through a natural balance of forces but through the grace of leadership at a crucial moment of history.

For nearly 20 years, from the end of World War II to 1963, the two superpowers ricocheted from crisis to crisis.

Daily life was a litany of superpower confrontations and proxy wars: Berlin, Korea, Suez, Budapest, China, Laos, Vietnam, with each new flashpoint containing the potential threat of a nuclear exchange by accident, rash judgment or madness. In the meantime, the growing list of nuclear powers — the United States (1945), the Soviet Union (1949), Britain (1952), France (1960) and China (1964) — seemed likely to expand to dozens of countries. This worried Kennedy enormously; he was “haunted by the feeling that by 1970 ... there may be 10 nuclear powers instead of four, and by 1975, 15 or 20. ...” He saw this potential proliferation “as the greatest possible danger and hazard.”

Kennedy came to office determined to undo the Cold War, famously proclaiming in his first moments as president, “Let us never negotiate out of fear, but let us never fear to negotiate.”
And yet, despite these intentions, the distrust and bungling on both sides led to even greater destabilization. America’s failed Bay of Pigs invasion was followed by a renewed showdown in Berlin, arms buildups on both sides, more testing of megaton H-bombs, and then Nikita Khrushchev’s secret decision to put intermediate-range nuclear missiles in Cuba, just 90 miles from Florida, an act that moved the world closer to annihilation than at any moment before or since.

And then, 50 years ago this week, came acts of leadership and courage on both sides, the importance of which we should never forget. Kennedy and Khrushchev each realized that they had the unique position to lead the world away from a global death spiral.

From the depths of distrust following the Cuban missile crisis, Kennedy fashioned a new direction of hope. His speech at American University on June 10, 1963, was the pivot, a speech of such wisdom and eloquence that it speaks to us as powerfully today as it did half a century ago. In that speech Kennedy showed Americans, Russians and the world, that despite the chaos and crisis of the Cold War, if Americans would re-examine their attitudes toward the Cold War, peace was possible.

“Too many of us think it is impossible,” he said. “Too many think it is unreal. But that is a dangerous, defeatist belief. It leads to the conclusion that war is inevitable, that mankind is doomed, that we are gripped by forces we cannot control. We need not accept that view. Our problems are manmade; therefore, they can be solved by man.”

Kennedy called on Americans to recognize the virtue of their Russian counterparts, and thus the universal human interest in peace:

“So, let us not be blind to our differences, but let us also direct attention to our common interests and the means by which those differences can be resolved. And if we cannot end now our
differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children’s future. And we are all mortal.”

Kennedy set out a step-by-step approach, starting with a nuclear test ban treaty, to be followed by a nuclear nonproliferation treaty and acts of cooperation beyond. It is the measure of Kennedy’s greatness that in his final year in office he set the world on a new path to peace. The Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty was reached with Khrushchev just weeks after his speech, and ratified by an overwhelming majority in the Senate that September. This was followed five years later by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Kennedy proved that cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union was possible. He proved that soaring vision could be harnessed for on-the-ground effects. He dispelled once and for all the idea that a final battle between the United States and the Soviet Union was inevitable.

Kennedy’s method, which brought together vision, eloquence and practicality — idealism without illusion, as he called it — is also a method for our time. We have plenty of soaring speeches today, but alas, they are not usually directed toward practical measures, whether to make peace between Israel and Palestine, U.S.-Iran rapprochement, or true steps toward climate sanity by moving to low-carbon energy.

In his final address to the United Nations in September 1963, Kennedy quoted Archimedes, who, “in explaining the principles of the lever, was said to have declared to his friends: ‘Give me a place where I can stand — and I shall move the world.’” Fifty years on, it is our turn to move the world toward peace and sustainable development, drawing on John F. Kennedy’s inspiration and example.

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