

I. Textual Interpretation

My primary artifact is a photograph of Lt. Gail S. Halvorsen at Tempelhof Airfield in Berlin in 1948. The image shows an American pilot in uniform standing near a barbed-wire fence, facing a group of Berlin children gathered on the other side. The ground looks rough and unfinished, and the fence divides the frame into two spaces: military and civilian. Halvorsen's body leans toward the children rather than away from them, signaling interest instead of distance. The children watch him closely. They are composed and self-controlled, not scrambling or begging, even though the setting is marked by hunger, occupation, and uncertainty (Halvorsen & Williams, 2017). In this project, I argue that this photograph shows how small moral choices at the edges of state power can begin to repair relationships between former enemies.

The fence carries significant conceptual weight. It is a physical reminder of division, authority, and danger, yet it becomes the point of contact. The barbed wire frames the children's faces and hands, emphasizing their vulnerability and their dignity at the same time. On one side stands a representative of the occupying power; on the other stand children from a bombed and blockaded city. Their posture aligns with Halvorsen's later description in his memoir of them as children who refused to beg for candy because freedom itself mattered more to them than sweets (Halvorsen & Williams, 2017). The photograph, therefore, is not about desperation. It is about mutual noticing, caught in a brief still moment.

If this photograph were my only source, I would define the exhibit's central concept this way: small moral decisions at the edges of power can repair relationships between former enemies. There is no candy or parachute visible, yet this is the fence where Halvorsen would soon act on his father's teaching that "little things mean a lot" and choose to share two sticks of gum, then promise to return with more (Halvorsen & Williams, 2017). That decision changes how American presence in Berlin could be understood, pointing it toward peacemaking rather than occupation. In American Studies terms, the artifact shows how individual subjectivity, memory, and conscience can bend even large Cold War structures in a more human direction (Deloria & Olson, 2017). Everything that Operation Little Vittles became is already present, in potential form, at the fence.

II. Archive Building: Genre

I situate my artifact within a genre I call "Fence-Line Humanitarian Encounters." Fence-lines matter in American Studies because they mark boundaries between occupier and occupied, citizen and non-citizen, friend and enemy, while also becoming places where those boundaries can be quietly renegotiated. The first text in this genre is my primary artifact, the photograph of Halvorsen meeting Berlin children at the Tempelhof fence. The second is a set of thank-you letters written by Berlin children to "Uncle Wiggly Wings," the "Chocolate Pilot," or the "Candy Bomber," where they describe watching for his plane, catching the candy, and sharing it with siblings and friends (Halvorsen & Williams, 2017). The third is a group of images and descriptions of the early handkerchief parachutes created for Operation Little Vittles, preserved in collections such as the Hutchings Museum Institute, which show Halvorsen and others surrounded by candy, string, and parachutes prepared for the drops (Halvorsen & Williams, 2017; Hutchings Museum Institute). Together, these texts form a small, focused genre of repeated encounters between American airmen and Berlin children along literal and symbolic boundary lines.

A clear pattern unites this genre. Each text highlights small objects and gestures rather than formal ceremonies or public speeches. The children's letters dwell on single pieces of chocolate, sticks of gum, and tiny parachutes that they saved, shared, or kept as treasures long after the airlift ended (Halvorsen & Williams, 2017). The parachute photographs show airmen taking extra time, after their official duties, to cut cloth, tie a string, and prepare candy in ways that would be safe and visible when dropped from a moving aircraft. The fence-line photograph captures the earliest moment in this pattern: a pilot who takes time to speak with children, answer questions about the planes, and treat them as individuals, even though he speaks almost no German. Across all three types of texts, gratitude and mutual responsibility stand out. The children are grateful and disciplined; the pilots respond by treating them as partners in a shared effort to survive the blockade, not as a faceless, pitiful crowd.

At the same time, my artifact departs from the rest of the genre in an important way. The thank-you letters and parachute materials belong to an era when Operation Little Vittles already has a name, a structure, and attention from the press. They document an established practice that has become almost ceremonial. The Tempelhof fence-line photograph, by contrast, captures the fragile beginning before there is a program, a label, or even a plan. There are no visible parachutes, no candy bags, and no reporters. It shows Halvorsen at the moment when he has only his training, his father's teaching that "little things mean a lot," and his encounter with the children to guide him (Halvorsen & Williams, 2017). This departure

from the pattern gives the artifact special weight within the genre. It invites me to see the later letters and parachute images as the outgrowth of this first, quiet conversation at the fence, when one man chose to let a small moral feeling become action.

III. Archive Building: Formations

To understand the broader world in which my artifact was produced, distributed, and remembered, I assembled a formations archive that includes at least four kinds of sources. First, official histories of the Berlin Blockade and Airlift from the U.S. Department of State explain how the Soviets cut off land access to West Berlin in 1948 and how the Western Allies answered with an airlift that lasted almost a year, flying in food, fuel, and essentials for more than two million people (U.S. Department of State,). Second, U.S. Air Force historical materials describe the technical and logistical structure of the airlift: the C-54 aircraft, the flight corridors, the landing schedules at Tempelhof, tonnage requirements, and the relentless emphasis on safety and efficiency (U.S. Air Force). Third, accounts from Berlin civilians and airport workers describe rationing, damaged housing, runway repairs between landings, and the emotional experience of watching transport planes bring flour, coal, and hope. Fourth, Halvorsen's own memoir traces his personal trajectory: his early years on a Utah farm, the death of his friend Conrad in the war, his initial bitterness toward Germans, and the way the children at the fence became a turning point in his heart (Halvorsen & Williams, 2017).

Taken together, these sources reveal the social, political, and economic formations that structure this photograph. Socially, Berlin in 1948 was a city living in rubble, where families were crowded into damaged spaces and children learned to navigate hunger, loss, and uncertainty as daily realities. Politically, the Berlin Airlift was one of the first major confrontations of the Cold War. Every plane that landed in West Berlin announced that the Allies would not abandon the city to Soviet pressure (U.S. Department of State). Economically, the blockade meant that normal markets and trade routes had broken down. The city depended on air-delivered supplies, and every pound of cargo was weighed against strict priorities (U.S. Air Force). Candy and gum fell outside the category of "necessity," which made them both rare and symbolically charged.

These formations change how I interpret my artifact. When I look at the fence-line photograph with this context in mind, I see more than a touching scene. I see children who have every reason to be desperate but who show restraint and gratitude instead. I see a pilot who moves within a highly structured system and yet chooses to make room for conscience

and imagination. I see a Cold War crisis in which a personal promise at a barbed-wire fence becomes a different kind of message about American power. The social, political, and economic formations are real and powerful, but they are not absolute. Within them, there is still space for one pilot to respond to thirty children in a way that shifts the meaning of an entire operation. That is the layer of meaning this formation's archive helps me see: the photograph documents how a small moral act can humanize a large, impersonal system from the inside.

IV. Power / Social Theory

This artifact also points beyond its immediate historical context and helps me think about power, subjectivity, and the democratic state in generalizable ways. At its core, the photograph shows power operating through moral choice rather than force. Halvorsen stands as an agent of the American state during a tense Cold War standoff. The children stand inside the consequences of international decisions that they did not make. Yet at the fence, the usual flow of power is disrupted. Instead of acting from a distance and superiority, he listens and responds. Instead of appearing as passive victims, the children demonstrate discipline, dignity, and a clear sense of their own values (Halvorsen & Williams, 2017). In this moment, subjectivity is relational. Their behavior shapes his conscience, and his choice acknowledges their agency.

The artifact also suggests a way to think about identity and subjectivity over time. In his memoir, Halvorsen admits that he carried bitterness toward Germans because his friend had been killed in the war (Halvorsen & Williams, 2017). The children at Tempelhof do not fit that inherited image of the enemy. Their gratitude for freedom, their refusal to beg for candy, and their thoughtful questions about the airlift force him to reconsider who “the Germans” are. The photograph captures him at the threshold of a changed identity, one grounded in service and peacemaking rather than suspicion. In that sense, the image offers a small theory of subjectivity: people are not forever trapped inside the roles that war and politics assign to them. Encounters at literal and symbolic boundaries can open up new ways of being.

The photograph also speaks to a theory of the democratic state. The Berlin Airlift was a highly coordinated exercise of state power: fleets of aircraft, tight schedules, formal agreements about air corridors, and constant calculations about tonnage and risk (U.S. Air Force). Yet the most enduring symbol from that operation is not a chart or a map. It is a pilot who lets personal conscience and a father’s lesson about “little things” shape his actions within that system (Halvorsen & Williams, 2017). His choice to share gum and then organize candy drops

did not weaken the state's mission; it made that mission visible as an expression of care rather than only a strategy. In American Studies language, this suggests a theory of the democratic state in which power is at its best when it remains open to human-scale mercy.

Finally, the artifact answers the "why should we care" question that Deloria and Olson ask us to consider (Deloria & Olson, 2017). The photograph shows how meaning is produced in the space between official structures and personal responsibility. It shows how unexpected people, including children behind a fence and a young pilot haunted by loss, can bend the story of a conflict toward reconciliation. It demonstrates that even when systems feel huge and unchangeable, small moral decisions at the edges of power still matter. They can soften prejudice, rebuild trust, and open futures that once seemed impossible. For me, that is the lasting social and theoretical insight of this artifact: it reminds me that in my own time, and in my own small circles, "little things" can still change the path of a life, a relationship, or even a larger story.

References

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