4. Seeking America’s Escape from Vietnam

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The coincidence of the superpowers’ economic, political, and strategic needs that developed by the end of the 1960s was so extraordinary, and the simultaneity of the impact on both countries so unusual, that the situation itself became a crucial factor in Richard Nixon and Leonid Brezhnev’s surprising breakthrough from hostility to cooperation. One nation’s weakness without the other’s would almost certainly not have sufficed to generate this change, and in fact such one-sidedness might well have caused a serious intensification of the Cold War. But the combination of need and opportunity constituted a powerful inducement for creative, conservative statesmen to achieve a number of mutually beneficial arrangements and, in so doing, to transform the entire international mood.

Most assuredly, no individual statesman was indispensable to this process; other American presidents or other Soviet rulers, given these or somewhat similar conditions, might have done as much or more to improve the bilateral relation. Still, this should not minimize the contribution of either Nixon or Brezhnev. The nature of their leadership played an important role in defining the way in which the two nations responded to each other—and ultimately in the way their understandings unraveled.

The central problem for Nixon and his administration was how to extricate the United States from Vietnam without forfeiting its credibility as a great power, which he considered essential to the maintenance of peace. Indeed, almost every foreign policy move Nixon made during his first four years in office was related to his desire and need to get the country out of Vietnam. Yet, understandably, the way he went about accomplishing this was an outgrowth of his particular conservatism and of his conceptions regarding the domestic scene and international relations. Thus, in seeking solutions to Vietnam and related problems, he tended to explore those areas in which, according to his ideological predilections, he could
find additional resources. Since on this occasion he could not obtain the
required political and economic support either from domestic sources or
from foreign allies, he necessarily (in addition to scaling down the U.S.
military effort in South Vietnam) turned to America’s most powerful ene-
my in the hope of dividing, limiting, or exploiting its capacities for action.
This maneuver had the added advantage that, even if it did not bring about
a quick end to the Vietnam War, Nixon could at least garner credit with the
American electorate for having moved toward a reduction in the demands
and dangers that the international situation was generating for the United
States.

For Brezhnev and the Soviet government two problems in particular
were paramount: the slowdown of growth in domestic productivity and
the increasing tension between Russia and China. The latter in fact ren-
dered the former more serious because, at a time when the regime’s eco-
nomic reforms were proving inadequate, the Soviet leadership was con-
fronted with the drain upon its resources involved in maintaining an Asian
military presence (not to speak of the forces committed to pacifying East-
ern Europe). In addition, these demands arose when there was growing
danger of a renewed arms race with America and when, as Moscow was
increasingly aware, it had lost much ground to the West in terms of the new
technological revolution.

If the Soviet Union was to meet its internal and foreign commitments
and to retain the parity in strategic weaponry it had worked so hard to
achieve, radical changes were almost certainly necessary. Brezhnev and the
party leadership, however, though ideological Marxists, were politically
cautious men, unwilling to accept significant alterations in the centralized
structure of their economy and state. It is not surprising that an improved
relation with West Germany or the United States had its attractions for
them, since such a détente would enable them to reduce competition in
weapons and obtain Western credits and technology for Russia while at
the same time saving face and retaining the domestic status quo.

It may be helpful at this point to explain what is meant by ideology and
how the concept is relevant to the present story. As the term is used here, it
has no judgmental or derogatory connotation but refers simply to an
individual’s world-view, that is, to the values, assumptions, and hypotheses
that a person blends into a framework, or operational code for an inter-
pretation of reality. Moreover, although there are endless varieties of ideol-
ogy, it is clear that most Western versions fall into one or another of three
great and continuing ideological families, usually identified by historians
as the conservative, liberal, and radical traditions. The conservative tradi-
tion has its roots in medieval times and in a two-class, premodern society. It begins with pessimistic assumptions about human nature and proceeds from them to justify a belief in tradition, hierarchy, and community. The liberal tradition, on the other hand, has been the ideology of the middle class from the early modern era to the present. It is built on more optimistic foundations and emphasizes the extent to which human beings are rational and capable of functioning as free, self-sufficient individuals. The radical (or Marxist) worldview, the most recent of the great ideologies, arose with the industrial working class of the nineteenth century and maintains that humanity, though potentially capable of genuine rationality and community, can achieve this only after the destruction of liberal property rights and the class system that private property makes inevitable.  

Conventional usage of the words notwithstanding, Americans from the beginning of their history have tended to identify with the liberal ideological camp, and even today our political parties can most appropriately be described as “right liberal” (those who fear government) and “left liberal” (those who fear concentrated wealth). This does not mean, however, that individual American statesmen like Richard Nixon or Henry Kissinger cannot possess classic conservative attitudes, or a conservative-liberal mix, or that they cannot pursue conservative policies (i.e., policies that would be recognized as such by conservatives of another age, like Edmund Burke or Otto von Bismarck). Within a culture there is inevitably a spectrum of personality types and political tendencies, any one or several of which can be installed in authority by the shifting of public moods or the play of events, especially international events. Indeed, my hypothesis is that it was in part the genuinely conservative inclinations of Nixon and Kissinger (combined, to be sure, with a certain respect for liberal values) that made them sensitive to, and able to profit from, the opportunity for international bargaining that they encountered at the end of the 1960s. What is more, it seems clear that there was an element of conservatism in Brezhnev, which attracted him to the possibility of an agreement with the Americans.

Hence, the odd fact is that, in what was ostensibly an encounter between a liberal, “freedom-loving” American statesman (Nixon) and a radical, “Communist” Russian statesman (Brezhnev), it was the essential conservatism of both that was crucial to their making the kind of arrangement they did. In the same situation, LBJ too might have cut a deal with the other side, but (despite certain similarities of personality with Nixon) being somewhat more liberal than his successor, he would probably have done it without attempting so consciously to manipulate and then freeze (to America’s advantage) the international balance of power.
Not all of the shortfalls and necessities that came together for the Americans and the Soviets in 1969 were new. Some of them had been developing for a number of years, and some had played a role in the progress that had been achieved in East-West relations since the mid-fifties. Public and elite concern regarding the growing costs of the arms race and the increasing dangers of accidental war, for example, consistently helped offset and contain Cold War antagonisms and prodded statesmen to search for more rational alternatives. Such pressure was reinforced on occasion by popular anxiety regarding nuclear weapons testing and by troubled reactions on the part of decision makers to crises between the superpowers. A combination of strategic, political, and economic factors in 1962 resulted in the frightening confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union regarding Cuba and, subsequently, during a surge of relief and guilt, in the limited détente of the hot line and partial test ban agreements.

The years of Lyndon Johnson’s presidency saw a certain renewal of hostility but some movement toward cooperation as well. Though the momentum of the post-missile-crisis détente was quickly eroded as a consequence of deepening U.S. involvement in South Vietnam, it is also true that, as the president became more and more committed to intervention in that area, he strove to establish his peace credentials and to blunt the criticism of his Asian endeavors by pursuing a cooperative policy in his dealings with the Soviet Union. As early as February 1964 Johnson used America’s surplus of fissionable material to persuade Khrushchev of the wisdom of mutual cutbacks in the production of uranium for atomic weapons. By the middle of 1965 (prompted by the advent of the Chinese atomic bomb in 1964), he embarked upon a campaign that would lead within three years to the signing of a nuclear nonproliferation treaty with the U.S.S.R. Along the way, his administration renewed the Soviet-American cultural exchange agreement (February 1964), entered into a consular convention (July 1964; “the first bilateral treaty between the United States and the Soviet Union,” bragged the president, who was nevertheless unable to prevent the Senate from taking more than two years to ratify it), and began the negotiations that ultimately resulted in the inauguration of air service between New York and Moscow (July 1968).

Such agreements were part of an idealistic and continuing effort by the Johnson administration to open up contacts and trade with the Communist East, though economic self-interest and the desire to exploit the breakdown of authority within the Soviet alliance were also involved. The difficulties in the American economy were not as visible as they would become later, but business groups were pressing the government to lift Cold War restrictions on trade and to allow them to compete with foreign
companies that were taking advantage of the developing opportunities in Eastern Europe. LBJ, frustrated that presidential authority did not permit him to go as far as he wanted in "building bridges to the East," in February 1965 appointed a Special Committee on Trade Relations, under J. Irwin Miller, to study the commercial situation. Two months later the Miller committee produced what the president called "probably the most definitive report on East-West trade relations made up to that time," a report that recommended strongly that most-favored-nation status be extended to Eastern European countries. Opposition in Congress, reinforced now by the Vietnam War, gave Johnson pause for some time, but in January 1966 he spoke out for new trade arrangements in his State of the Union address, and the following May he asked for the power to dismantle all "special tariff restrictions" on trade with the Communist world. Though the president's request was ultimately denied by both the Eighty-ninth and Ninetieth Congresses, he continued to work toward his objective by removing commodities from the strategic control list that limited commerce with Eastern Europe.

In the area of arms control, the administration began in 1964 with a great show of activity but slipped gradually into a lethargy which it threw off only in 1967 and 1968. In his first year of incumbency, LBJ endorsed and at least briefly championed a number of proposals: a comprehensive test ban (which he subsequently hobbled with demands for rigorous on-site inspection); a verified freeze on offensive and defensive weapons (which, not surprisingly, the Russians rejected because it would have consigned them to permanent inferiority); the scrapping of medium-range bombers (which, in Moscow's view, amounted to little more than the destruction of obsolete weapons); and reductions in the defense budgets on both sides (which Khrushchev himself had suggested but which was rendered problematic by lack of clarity as to what the Soviet budget really was).

As American commitment in Vietnam became more massive, however, LBJ and his government seemed to lose interest in arms control—and faith in its very possibility. In 1966, the president told Glenn Seaborg, the chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, that he was not really convinced of the importance of a comprehensive test ban and in fact doubted the entire value of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. During the next two years the only significant accomplishment was a treaty in January 1967 outlawing the placing of nuclear weapons in outer space (an action that neither the United States nor the U.S.S.R. was seriously contemplating), though it is noteworthy that the two superpowers continued doggedly to maintain the negotiations that would one day produce a nonproliferation treaty.
At the very end of 1966, when it became apparent that the United States, by devoting itself so single-mindedly to war in Asia, was in danger of losing its lead to the Russians in the strategic arms race, Washington began to develop a new interest in arrangements to limit or preclude competition in ballistic weapons. Here the crucial person was Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, and the crucial factors were the uninterrupted Soviet buildup in ICBM strength (which was still somewhat underestimated) and Soviet deployment, beginning in 1964, of an antiballistic missile (ABM) system around Moscow and perhaps in other areas. McNamara was convinced that the point of diminishing returns had been reached in the expansion of American offensive forces, and he was also very opposed to an arms race in defensive weapons, but he was under increasing pressure from Congress in 1966 to match the Russian ABM deployment. LBJ, of course, was concerned about his pending campaign for reelection and so was sensitive to the political implications of such pressure. In desperation, McNamara turned to diplomacy, persuading LBJ in December 1966, against the wishes of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to hold off on ABM until there had been an opportunity to explore the possibility of an agreement with the Soviet Union on a limitation of strategic arms.

Subsequently, the president pushed the Russians hard (both publicly and at the Glassboro Conference with Kosygin in June 1967) to agree to bilateral discussions, but the response from Moscow was so ambivalent and slow that in September 1967 Johnson and McNamara felt compelled to proceed with the deployment of a “thin” ABM system (Sentinel), ostensibly designed to be nonprovocative to Russia and to protect American missile bases from Chinese attack. The truth is that the Soviet leadership did not display real enthusiasm for strategic arms limitation talks (SALT) until the spring of 1968. This was after the nonproliferation treaty had been agreed upon (and West Germany’s Brandt was hinting that he might endorse it); after Russia was approaching parity with the United States in ICBM strength; and after the Johnson administration had announced its intention to deploy Sentinel as well as its readiness to deploy a new offensive weapon, the multiple independently targeted reentry vehicle, or MIRV.

Unfortunately, and perhaps through no coincidence, Moscow’s confirmation of a specific beginning date for SALT did not arrive at the White House until August 19, 1968, hours before the Politburo’s decision to send Russian military forces into Czechoslovakia to crush the reform government in Prague. The invasion thus necessitated the postponement of the scheduled meetings, and by the time the two sides could renew contact after the presidential election in November, not even their apparent eagerness could compensate for the fact that Johnson was a lame duck and
Nixon was unwilling to proceed until he formally took the reins of power.24

The U.S. presidential campaign and election of 1968 had been an important factor in shaping the new Nixon administration. Long, violent, and exhausting, the campaign began almost a year before, when George Romney, the Republican governor of Michigan, announced his candidacy and Senator Eugene McCarthy (D-Minn.) stunned the country by announcing that he would oppose the president for the Democratic nomination, running on a peace platform. In ensuing months, Richard Nixon and Governor Nelson Rockefeller of New York surged past Romney in the Republican competition, while the Democratic picture became complicated and confused, first by Senator Robert Kennedy’s entry into the race, then by President Johnson’s withdrawal and Vice President Hubert Humphrey’s declaration of candidacy, and finally by the assassinations of Martin Luther King in April and Robert Kennedy in June.

Turbulence and dissension plagued the campaign continuously, particularly on the Democratic side, as antiwar protesters made clear their unhappiness with Humphrey’s loyalty to the Johnson administration. The nominations of Nixon and Humphrey by their respective parties in August left the antiwar movement leaderless and perplexed, while the nation at large was badly divided by the brutality that erupted when city police and national guardsmen battled protesters in the streets of Chicago during the Democratic convention. The candidacy of former Governor George Wallace of Alabama on the reactionary American Independent Party ticket only compounded the tension.25

As far as the international issues of the campaign were concerned, Nixon was somewhat more forthcoming than Humphrey. Though the Democratic candidate emphasized that “we must go far beyond where we’ve been—beyond containment to communication; beyond the emphasis of differences to dialogue,” and although he spoke out for the non-proliferation treaty and for “finding the . . . means to control and reduce offensive and defensive nuclear missile systems,” Humphrey was rather vague about the Soviet Union and about what he called “the necessity for peace in Vietnam.”26 Nixon, by contrast, spent a good deal of time spelling out his views on foreign affairs. Pledging to end the war in Southeast Asia by applying more diplomatic, economic, and political pressure, especially on the Soviet Union, Nixon also called for a change “from a relationship of conflict to one of cooperation” with the Russians. In any case, he contended, negotiations with Moscow would have to start with a policy of strength, since this is what the Soviets understand. What was required, he said, was not a weapon-by-weapon arms race with the Soviet Union but...
merely an improvement in the overall power of the United States aimed at ending the “security gap” that the Democrats had created. Such power would help to move us away from confrontation into a new era, “the era of negotiations.”

Immediately after the nominating conventions in August, Nixon jumped to a sizable lead in the polls, but as the race continued, his advantage narrowed, and when the election was held, it was one of the closest contests of the century. Nixon received 31.7 million votes, or 43.4 percent, Humphrey 31.2 million, or 42.7 percent, and Wallace 9.9 million, or 13.5 percent. These results—and the violence of the campaign—showed that the electorate was deeply and bitterly fragmented. The voters’ clearest message to the candidates was that they were extremely weary of the war.

During the three months between the election and the presidential inauguration, Richard Nixon proceeded to shape the structure, make the appointments, and establish the tone that would define the foreign policy of his administration. Basic to this endeavor was Nixon’s long-standing interest and involvement in foreign affairs and his determination to be a president who made his own policies, that is, who required that the essential strategic decisions be made in the White House. These attitudes reflected his deep and continuing distrust of the governmental bureaucracy, which he considered to be by its very nature hopelessly at odds with itself and, worse, in the hands of his political enemies. His attitude also reflected a distrust of people in general and especially those in the communications media, who “informed” the public of what they considered “news.” Nixon intended to be an innovative, even a reforming president, and he did not want to be hamstrung by the bureaucracy, the media, or the public.

To achieve his objectives, Nixon needed a person at his right hand who shared his perspectives and could accept his style, a person who could help him conceptualize and articulate the policies he envisaged. He found that individual in Henry Kissinger, the brilliant and unorthodox Harvard professor of political science whom he appointed national security adviser in early December 1968. At Nixon’s direction, Kissinger and his staff were able within a few weeks to develop procedures within the executive branch that centralized foreign policy authority, as never before, in the National Security Council (NSC) and the national security adviser. The new arrangement gave Kissinger the power to direct the State Department and other agencies to prepare and submit option papers (national security study memoranda, or NSSMs) to the NSC on specific subjects. It also allowed him to promulgate the president’s policy decisions, which were usually made in private after a meeting of the NSC and took the form of highly classified directives (national security decision memoranda, or
NSDMs). Thus Nixon and Kissinger between them controlled the policy-making apparatus of the government and could literally bypass even such highly placed officials as Secretary of State William P. Rogers, American ambassadors, and the chiefs of the intelligence gathering agencies.30

At its root this was very much a matter of personality and ideology. Nixon was a loner by history and by preference. A bright, serious, and sensitive man, he compensated for his insecurity with a preference for privacy, intense industriousness, and aggressive problem solving. Still, he remained essentially pessimistic, even cynical about the world around him and about his acceptability in it. Ideologically, his personality manifested itself in strong conservative tendencies, obscured and camouflaged to an extent in the clothing of the liberalism dominant in America. In other words, Nixon’s thought about the social scene was structured largely in terms of power and power leverage. His sense of international relations was of nation-states that were self-interested, competitive entities, perpetually condemned to amassing power and seeking advantage over each other. The most natural (and safest) international order, therefore, was explicitly hierarchical; or if necessary, hierarchical on each side of bipolarity; or failing that, organized with nation-states and alliance systems clearly ranked by power.31

Henry Kissinger was quite compatible with the president in terms of personality and ideology. Traumatized as a boy by his family’s flight from the persecutions of Jews in Nazi Germany, Kissinger grew up with a strong sense of the world being constantly on the edge of disaster, with order and disorder in continuing struggle. His responses have been described in terms of the depressive personality, typified by alternation between insecurity and arrogance and by self-doubt, extreme ambition, suspiciousness, industriousness, flexibility, and manipulative skill.32 His concern about chaos and his passion for order led him naturally into conservative thinking and into a high regard for statesmen who, as intelligent activists (like Bismarck, for example), utilize power effectively to regulate our species’ irrationality and propensity for violence.33

More specifically, however, what did the Nixon-Kissinger collaboration mean in terms of the nation’s foreign policy orientation? Kissinger has written more systematically than Nixon about the implications of his beliefs, but there is sufficient evidence of the president’s thinking from this period to demonstrate that the two men agreed on diagnosis and prescription. Kissinger suggested, for example, that a “durable structure of peace” requires nation-states that are “legitimate” (that is, nonrevolutionary) and leaders that are “statesmen” (as opposed to “prophets” or “conquerors”). Nixon argued that stability demands a substantial cooling of passions.

One is struck by the fact that both Nixon and Kissinger were con-
vinced that a new situation was developing with regard to the principal opponents of the United States—the Soviet Union and Communist China. Or to put it another way, both men, and especially the president, were persuaded that Russia and China, driven by their disagreements and mutual fear as well as the increasing cost of the Cold War, had ceased to be genuinely revolutionary powers and had reached a point where they would be prepared to deal. This was an especially hopeful sign for Nixon and Kissinger, because their belief system necessitated that the leading opponent be central to their foreign policy (in part because they assumed that the opposing side would tend to be organized hierarchically).

A second significant factor was Nixon and Kissinger's sense that the United States as a nation had been seriously weakened—that, as a result of Johnson's policies and the Vietnam War, the country had lost its strength and direction. With their sharp instinct for power, they felt keenly the lack of domestic consensus, that is to say, the absence of national unity, which in their opinion a statesman needs if he is to have a constructive impact on world history. They concluded that, as a result of the fragmentation of opinion, the United States was badly overextended internationally. Thus, if some remnant of America's former hegemonic role was to be preserved and if a durable peace was to be achieved, three things were essential: (1) the conflict in Vietnam needed to end, (2) the nation's involvement and potential involvement overseas needed to be cut back so that they matched the U.S.'s military, economic, and political power, and (3) understandings with America's principal opponents needed to be achieved so these opponents would identify their national interests with the existing international order (and as a result, reduce their threat to its arrangements).

Just how the Soviet Union—and for that matter, China—were to be fitted into the new international structure was not clear. It is tempting to conclude that Nixon and Kissinger simply decided to give the two Communist giants a stake in the system, first, by increasing the economic, political, and cultural ties of mutual interdependence and, second, by arranging the balance of power so as to impose costs on any state that attempted to destabilize the international order. At the time, however, the president and his adviser were not as explicit or as confident about this as they would later become. According to William Hyland, one of Kissinger's advisers, "initially at least neither [individual] saw much prospect for more than a narrow, limited accommodation with Moscow. . . . Eventually, they hoped, a broader and more general improvement might take shape, and it was to this end that they devised the tactic of linkage: making progress in some areas dependent on progress in others." But in the beginning there was hardly more to the new world structure than the
possibility of better relations with China and the promise of arms control negotiations with Russia.

At any rate, the first order of business for the new administration was getting America out of Vietnam, and this remained of central importance for Nixon’s entire first term. Though Nixon later denied that he had devised a “secret plan” to end the war (he had hinted at such a plan during the campaign), the truth is that he not only possessed fairly definite ideas about how this could be done but also was optimistic about the prospects for ending American participation quickly. His intention was to proceed on two tracks at once, (1) strengthening America’s ally in South Vietnam and withdrawing American troops from the region while (2) negotiating a settlement with North Vietnam that achieved a pullback of its forces and permitted only the National Liberation Front (the southern insurgency) to participate in a new southern government. He hoped to facilitate his efforts with the threat (and then the reality) of escalated air war and with increased pressure on Moscow and Beijing to persuade Hanoi to come to an agreement.

Nixon and Kissinger wasted no time in beginning. Only a few days after the inauguration, having devoted the first meetings of the National Security Council to the war in Southeast Asia, they transmitted a proposal to the North Vietnamese delegation in Paris calling for a mutual and simultaneous military withdrawal from South Vietnam. Soon thereafter, on March 18, 1969, they supplemented this with an unannounced “signal” to Hanoi—an intensive bombing of North Vietnamese staging areas in Cambodia and Laos—intended to emphasize American will and determination. Then, on April 14, Kissinger initiated what would become a series of attempts, utilizing the “back channel” that Nixon had directed him to set up with Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, to obtain Moscow’s support for a compromise solution to the Vietnam War. Informing Dobrynin that the administration was “prepared to make progress in U.S.-Soviet relations on a broad front” but that the Vietnam War was a “major obstacle,” he went on to ask for Soviet assistance in ending the conflict and hinted that, failing this, the president might have to escalate American military activity in Southeast Asia.

Meanwhile, in another overture, Nixon asked President Charles de Gaulle to convey to Chinese leaders not only that he desired friendlier ties with Beijing but also that he intended “to withdraw [U.S. forces] from Vietnam, come what may.” The American president was trying to establish a situation in which he could bring both Chinese and Russian influence to bear in Vietnam. Even though Beijing had mysteriously canceled the February Warsaw ambassadorial talks that it had requested after the Sovi-
et invasion of Czechoslovakia, the prospects for a Chinese-American rapprochement were encouraging, particularly in light of the armed clashes that flared up along the Sino-Soviet frontier beginning in March 1969.43

What all this meant, of course, was that for the time being Washington was putting aside its relation with Moscow. Though the Russians seemed eager to talk and even to compromise in a number of areas (regarding SALT, economic relations, and the Middle East, for example), Nixon and Kissinger were intentionally being nonresponsive.44 The reasons were clear. First, by dangling attractive possibilities before the Russians and then withholding them, they hoped to achieve the maximum leverage on the Soviet government (to them, the ultimately responsible party in Vietnam) to work for peace. Second, they realized that their bargaining position on other issues would be stronger if the Vietnam conflict was settled and American social divisions overcome before the two countries sat down to negotiate. Third, they wanted to buttress the American position vis-à-vis Moscow by achieving a prior understanding with China and by regaining the military advantage with MIRV and an ABM system. Fourth, they needed time to form a clearer picture of what they were prepared to offer the Soviets regarding such matters as SALT.

In the meantime, the administration proceeded with its efforts to bolster the South Vietnamese government and army and to begin extracting its own troops from the continuing conflict in Southeast Asia. As early as March 1969, Nixon borrowed the term Vietnamization from Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird to describe the buildup of South Vietnamese military forces that had been initiated at Washington’s request to “de-Americanize” the war.45 The word itself would not be in common usage until June, but the process was alluded to by the president on several occasions before then, and it was implicit in his television address of May 14, in which for the first time he openly spelled out his proposals for the simultaneous withdrawal of American and North Vietnamese armies and for internationally supervised elections.46

Three weeks later, acting ostensibly in response to increasing strength in Saigon, Nixon met with President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam on Midway Island and won his agreement to an immediate, public, and unilateral withdrawal of 25,000 American combat troops from the war zone, the first of a series of withdrawals that would stretch out over four years.47 Then in July, on the first leg of a trip around the world, the president utilized a stopover on Guam to fit Vietnamization into a larger and more general framework, announcing what in future months would become known as the Nixon Doctrine. The United States, Nixon declared, would no longer assume the primary responsibility for the defense of its allies around the world. America would honor its commitments and pro-
vide a nuclear shield, but from now on Washington would expect the
nation directly threatened to generate the essential manpower for its own
defense.48

Nevertheless, policies for the future did not accomplish peace in the
present. Though Nixon believed that he was buying time from (that is,
undermining support for) the peace movement at home with such policies
as Vietnamization, troop withdrawal, and the Nixon Doctrine, Kissinger
worried that the United States was also losing valuable international le­
verage and that the unilateral withdrawal of forces would become irrevers­
able.49 As the summer wore on, both men became more and more disap­
pointed with Hanoi’s lack of response to their May offer and with the
silence of the Soviet leadership and its tendency to inch closer to the North
Vietnamese as its relations with the Chinese deteriorated.50 In frustration,
Nixon and Kissinger began to seriously consider the advisability of em­
ploying increased violence against the North Vietnamese as a means of
compelling them to be more forthcoming.51

During these same months (the spring and summer of 1969) the presi­
dent was also vigorously engaged in trying to shore up what, in his view,
was a badly weakened American strategic position. Though in one of his
first presidential statements, Nixon had espoused “sufficiency” rather
than “superiority” as the proper criterion for judging the nation’s military
posture (thereby sending an encouraging signal to Moscow), the president
was by no means ready to stop competing with the Soviet Union in weap­
onry whenever he had the means to continue.52 This was particularly
evident with regard to two strategic systems that, as noted earlier, were at
the point of deployment when Nixon became president: the ABM and the
MIRV. In choosing to support versions of each weapon, he demonstrated
not only his anxiety about America’s place in the military balance of power
but also his strong belief that “bargaining chips” were needed for arms
control negotiations.

Of course, the MIRV had been looked upon in the Johnson years
primarily as a way of countering the Russian ABM, and Secretary
McNamara had used its potential existence as an argument against de­
ploying a “thick” American ABM coverage to balance out the Soviet
system.53 Unfortunately, however, as the U.S.S.R. strengthened its ABM
network and passed the United States in numbers of land-based offensive
missiles (1,200 to 1,054 by the end of 1969), the MIRV became steadily
more attractive to American military planners as a means of keeping the
United States ahead in overall strategic power. It was apparent that, given
the MIRV and a substantial ABM as well, American forces would once
again be much stronger than the Russian, at least until the Soviet Union
acquired the technology to “MIRV” the large missiles in its own arsenal.54
Moscow's recognition of this fact was undoubtedly one of the considerations driving it to take up arms control diplomacy.

Nonetheless, the Johnson (Sentinel) ABM was not a substantial system nor was it designed to fend off the Russians (oddly enough, it provided an anti-Chinese message at a time when Nixon was eager to woo Beijing), and for this reason the incoming Nixon administration felt compelled to reevaluate the situation and to develop a new approach. In March 1969, following an intensive review, Nixon decided to expand the Sentinel program (now called Safeguard), modifying it to protect the nation's capacity to retaliate after a Russian nuclear attack.\(^55\) This set the stage for a gigantic political battle in the Senate, where the mood had changed substantially from the days in which that body had urged McNamara to deploy an ABM and where a large minority, mainly Democrats, now saw such a program as needlessly provocative in the face of Soviet overtures to negotiate.\(^56\)

Nixon and Kissinger, however, unlike some in the administration, were not ones to forgo taking an advantage, especially when they persuaded themselves that Russia might go on building offensive missiles indefinitely. By pressing the Senate hard (to the point of Secretary Laird's exaggerating the threat from the Russian SS-9), they obtained authorization of the first funds for Safeguard by the narrowest of margins (one vote) on August 6.\(^57\)

In the interim, a somewhat quieter struggle was being waged over the MIRV. A maverick Republican, Senator Edward Brooke of Massachusetts, had urged the new president as early as April to end testing of the MIRV (testing begun in August 1968 and scheduled to resume in May 1969) in order to avoid triggering a new round in the arms race. Put off by Nixon, Brooke subsequently took his campaign to Congress and on June 17, together with forty other senators, introduced a resolution calling for an American MIRV moratorium.\(^58\) The point, of course, was that, once the United States successfully completed its testing, the Soviet Union could do no less than follow suit, hence the attempt to preclude testing.

But Nixon and Kissinger argued that things had gone too far to try to reverse course now. The administration therefore proceeded to test the MIRV and then, in June 1970, to deploy it, acting despite the Senate's having voted 72 to 6 on April 9, 1970, to ask the United States and the Soviet Union to stop testing and deploying such weapons while SALT was going on.\(^59\) During this period the president came under intense pressure from the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Melvin Laird to reject all constraints on the MIRV, their contention being that there was no means of verifying Soviet compliance with any ban.\(^60\) In response to this, and probably as a result of the closeness of the ABM vote and the doubts raised about that system by scientists who testified against it, Nixon and Kissinger apparently concluded that, in the context of arms control, the ABM was expend-
able but the MIRV was not. Though in April 1970 they instructed the American SALT delegation to offer the Russians a MIRV ban coupled with on-site inspection, it is clear from the record that the president and his adviser were only covering their political flanks and had actually designed this proposal to be unacceptable to Moscow.61

In any event, the peace movement and the proponents of arms control in the United States did not accept the policies of the government passively, and their protests had a crucial impact on its thinking. During the first few months of the new administration, there was a noticeable falling off of antiwar activity, but by summer dissatisfaction with the rate of troop withdrawal mounted to the point that massive protest demonstrations were being planned for Washington in October and November 1969.62 Moreover, Congress was now as hostile to military activism as at any time since its investigations of the munitions makers in the 1930s. In both the House and Senate new political coalitions were being formed to oppose the ABM and the MIRV and to resist and reduce the military budget as a whole.63 As Henry Kissinger recalls it, “the pervasive anti-military atmosphere” created “a cloud of uncertainty over defense planning and our long-term security.”64

But war protesters on the streets and antimilitarism in Congress were not the only things giving Nixon and Kissinger headaches. The president and his national security adviser were also concerned about the growing independence of America’s European allies and, in particular, about the developing tendency of the West Germans to work toward an understanding with the Russians. At the beginning of his presidency Nixon had traveled to Europe and achieved some success in ending Washington’s long-standing differences with Paris and Bonn, although at that point de Gaulle was within a few weeks of resigning his country’s presidency and the Bundesrepublik was on the verge of a bitterly contested electoral campaign.65 By autumn 1969, the situation was becoming unsettled again, since the new French leader, Georges Pompidou, was not easily predictable and Willy Brandt, elected West German chancellor in September, was making clear his intention to pursue an unusually active and accommodating Ostpolitik.

Indeed, in Brandt’s inaugural address of October 28, the chancellor offered to negotiate renunciation-of-force treaties with Eastern European states, including the German Democratic Republic, and within a month he had signed the nuclear nonproliferation treaty (much to Moscow’s delight) and agreed to hold talks with the Soviets about exchanging pledges of nonviolence.66 Moreover, in early October, even before Brandt’s government was formally installed, he sent his confidante, Egon Bahr, to Washington to inform the Americans of the course he planned to follow—
leaving, as Kissinger remarks, “little doubt that the policy itself was not subject to discussion.”

One result was that Kissinger became anxious and hostile, and though Nixon was less fearful than Kissinger of Brandt's initiatives, there can be little doubt that his first reaction was also one of suspicion. Neither the president nor Kissinger wanted to lose control or be preempted in dealing with the Russians. By December 1969, therefore, they persuaded the country's NATO allies (including the West Germans) to create explicit linkages among the Soviet-German negotiation, the Berlin issue, and the possible European security conference. These linkages would, they thought, enhance the bargaining position of West Germany but also “set limits beyond which it could not go without an allied consen­sus.”

Meanwhile, the combined impact of developments—the failure of Washington to induce Moscow to pressure North Vietnam, the return to life of the American peace movement, the increasing interest of West Germany in reaching out to Eastern Europe, and the continuing buildup of Soviet missile strength—made it impossible for the administration to continue putting off the beginning of the strategic arms limitation talks. As early as May, despite the fact that not all of Kissinger's national security study memoranda on arms control were complete, Secretary of State Rogers, Director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency Gerard Smith, and others in the administration (and outside it) began to press actively for a commitment to an opening date. In June Nixon authorized Rogers to suggest to the Soviet ambassador that SALT get under way on July 31, but this time it was the Soviets' turn to delay. Concerned about the implications of Nixon's ABM and MIRV policies, stung by the announcement that the president would visit Romania in August, and involved in stepped-up efforts to coerce the Red Chinese into border talks, Moscow allowed the American proposal to lie on the table for several weeks. It was not until October 20, the very day that formal Sino-Soviet consultations began in Beijing, that Dobrynin indicated to Kissinger and Nixon that his government was ready to initiate SALT.

Kissinger, ostensibly disappointed at the three-month wait, was in actuality delighted, for it allowed him time to study the issues further and to centralize authority for SALT preparations in a new NSC group, the Verification Panel, formed, with him as chairman, in July. Still, by autumn even Kissinger was eager for SALT negotiations, convinced that, under his guidance, they would provide an opportunity to stimulate Russian cooperation and to reduce pressure on the administration both at home and abroad. That Nixon and he were prepared to proceed slowly could be seen from the instructions issued to the SALT delegation for the
preliminary meeting: to conduct discussions and exchange views with the Soviet delegates, not to present proposals.\textsuperscript{73}

The first session of SALT took place in Helsinki, Finland, from November 17 to December 22, 1969, and was significant primarily because it demonstrated that both sides were serious about arms control. From the beginning both Gerard Smith, the head of the American delegation, and Vladimir Semyonov, the Soviet chairman, made it clear that they saw grave danger in an unrestricted arms race and mutual annihilation in any war between their two countries.\textsuperscript{74} According to Raymond Garthoff, the executive officer of the American team, “the most notable feature of the Soviet position was a strong endorsement of mutual deterrence and ... readiness to bolster [it] through strategic arms limitations.” Moreover, in a reversal of earlier policy, the Soviets emphasized their desire to limit, or even ban, ABM deployment.\textsuperscript{75}

With this in mind, the Nixon administration, during the three months before SALT reconvened in Vienna, Austria, in April 1970, undertook extensive exercises designed to work out its negotiating position. As late as March, however, according to Kissinger, “there was no consensus; there was [only] a babble of discordant voices.” In desperation, and “since the President had left the ordering of options on SALT to me,” he writes, “I issued a directive asking the agencies to reduce the chaos to four options.”\textsuperscript{76} When this was done, four alternatives were presented by their proponents to (in Kissinger’s words) a “President bored to distraction [by all the detail]” at the National Security Council meeting of April 8.

Option A, preferred by the Department of Defense and the Joint Chiefs, would have limited ICBMs and SLBMs to the current U.S. total (1,710) and frozen the number of bombers on both sides (527 American, 195 Soviet). In other words, it would have required a sizable reduction in the Soviet missile force while leaving the American ABM and MIRV programs untouched. Option B, ultimately Kissinger’s preference, offered the same offensive limits as option A but either restricted the ABM systems of both sides to the capital cities (called national command authorities, or NCAs) or else banned them altogether. Option C, the most radical proposal and the favorite of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency and the Department of State, included the same limitations as option B but added a ban on MIRVs. Option D, endorsed by the Department of Defense but not by the Joint Chiefs, proposed major reductions in ICBMs and SLBMs to a level of 1,000. It also banned the ABM or limited the system to national command authorities (NCAs), but it did not regulate the MIRV.\textsuperscript{77}

As Kissinger recalls the situation, “I knew that my recommendation would carry an unusual weight [because] Nixon simply would not learn
the technical details well enough to choose meaningfully.” So, “[swayed by] bureaucratic and political considerations” to a much greater degree than he normally allowed for, Kissinger recommended to the president that options C and D be selected as opening positions. “This would respond to Congressional and bureaucratic supporters of MIRV and ABM bans,” he notes; “it would give us the positive public posture of having favored comprehensive limitations, [and] if the Soviets rejected [the proposals], as I firmly expected, we could then put forward Option B from a much stronger domestic and bureaucratic position.”

Nixon accepted Kissinger’s recommendation but not before the two men further reduced the attractiveness of option C by attaching to the MIRV ban a requirement for on-site inspection not even requested by the Central Intelligence Agency, the primary monitoring authority. Option D was already loaded with features that would make it unacceptable to the Russians: it omitted from limitation, for example, American forces in Europe capable of striking the Soviet Union (the so-called forward-based systems), while it singled out for reduction an area of particular Soviet strength, land-based missile forces and, especially, large MIRVable missiles like the SS-9. The result in Vienna, as Nixon and Kissinger foresaw, was a quick rejection of both options by the Soviet delegation, though Semyonov at the same time surprised the Americans by accepting their proposal for an NCA-level limitation on ABM deployment.

In any case, the way was now cleared for the introduction of a new American initiative along the lines of option B, and this was presented in Vienna on August 4, 1970. Stipulating a ceiling of 1,710 on ICBM and SLBM launchers and a sublimit of 250 on large ICBMs (but no limit on MIRVs), the proposal went on to offer an ABM ban as an alternative to the NCA-level limit on ABMs that the Soviets had already accepted. As Kissinger later confessed, there was an ulterior motive. “[An ABM ban] was certain to be rejected, especially when linked to an offensive freeze, and would enable us to move from there to insisting that the existing [Safeguard] sites be continued.” In other words, Kissinger was still fighting to preserve at least a minimal nationwide ABM defense and the MIRV while achieving the limits on the Russian building program (and restrictions on their MIRVing capacity) that the Department of Defense was demanding. He viewed himself as “trying to preserve the sinews of our defense and to catch up [with the Soviet Union] numerically in the face of the stormy dissent produced by Vietnam.” But in reality he was striving to maintain an American military dominance that was slipping rapidly toward parity. It is not surprising that the negotiations remained deadlocked for the remainder of the year.

None of this could help but be influenced by what was transpiring
with regard to the Vietnam War. Neither Vietnamization nor unilateral reductions in force nor pressure on the Soviet Union had been successful in obtaining North Vietnam’s agreement to mutual withdrawal from the South, and during the summer of 1969 Nixon and Kissinger became increasingly frustrated and even desperate regarding the situation. Their immediate, if private, reaction was to think in terms of forcing North Vietnam to its knees with a “savage, decisive [military] blow”, but, though plans for such an operation (code named Duck Hook) were actually discussed, and though threats of escalation were secretly conveyed to Hanoi, Nixon’s experience with the Washington antiwar moratorium in mid-October led him to realize that any recourse to extreme violence would have a catastrophic effect on public opinion.85

With this in mind, Nixon decided to address an appeal on November 3 to “the great silent majority” of his fellow citizens, vowing to continue on the dual track of Vietnamization and negotiations until “peace with honor” had been achieved and asking for patience with his efforts to preserve America’s “free world leadership.”86 The response to the speech was more positive than even Nixon had dared hope. It succeeded in its immediate purpose, which was to buy the administration time and put its critics on the defensive.87 By the end of the winter, as the White House stepped up its surveillance of suspected radicals, replaced the military draft with a more acceptable lottery system, and announced the withdrawal of 50,000 more troops from Vietnam, the antiwar movement was dividing against itself and losing much of its momentum.88

The trouble was that Nixon could not leave well enough alone. In his desire to strengthen the Vietnamization process, achieve a foreign policy success (to counteract several domestic setbacks), and demonstrate his ability to act forcefully, he succumbed in future months to the temptation to go on the military offensive in regions bordering South Vietnam, with disastrous results. Thus in February 1970 his authorization of bombing raids by B-52s on North Vietnamese troops in northern Laos was quickly discovered and led to serious protests in the Senate and a questionable attempt on the part of the administration to justify this action as an aspect of Vietnamization.89 Even worse, at the end of April, six weeks after the neutralist regime of Prince Sihanouk in Cambodia had been overthrown by the reactionary General Lon Nol, Nixon’s decision to send South Vietnamese and American troops into the Communist “sanctuaries” of neutral Cambodia produced an explosively negative reaction on the part of the American public.

University campuses across the country erupted, as students and faculty, astonished and suspicious at what they saw as an unjustified expansion of the war, marched, picketed, and protested. The killing of students at
Kent State University and an angry antiwar demonstration in Washington the following week raised the level of outrage and emotion to unprecedented heights. In Congress Senators John Sherman Cooper (R-Ky.) and Frank Church (D-Idaho) introduced an amendment to a sales bill that prohibited American military activities in Cambodia after June 30, the date that Nixon quickly announced for the withdrawal of forces from that country. The Senate's approval of the Cooper-Church stipulation by a vote of 58 to 37 at the end of June was an indication of how impatient the country was becoming with the conflict in Southeast Asia.

For the Nixon administration, the second half of 1970 was a time of frustrations and troubles. Under the shock of the Cambodian affair, the president now accepted Kissinger's suggestion that in the Paris negotiations a proposal for a "cease-fire in place" be substituted for the previous American demand for mutual withdrawal. Yet when Kissinger offered this major concession to the North Vietnamese in secret meetings in September, the representatives of Hanoi were unimpressed. Equally disappointing was that Nixon's campaign to achieve reconciliation and leverage with Communist China appeared to have come to a grinding halt. Despite ambassadorial meetings in Warsaw during early 1970, and despite the administration's continued signaling of its interest in better relations, Beijing displayed a clearly pro-Soviet tilt in its foreign policy throughout the year and especially after Nixon's Cambodian incursion. Not until the none-too-public triumph of Jou Enlai's "moderate" faction at the Communist Party's Central Committee plenum of September 1970 were the alignments created for a Chinese opening to the United States, and it was December before Nixon and Kissinger became aware of new Chinese overtures.

Progress in dealing with the Russians was also elusive. In the spring of 1970, tortured by Vietnam and deeply concerned about the autumn congressional elections, Nixon dreamed of silencing his antiwar critics by arranging an early summit meeting with Brezhnev and Kosygin. Indeed, according to Kissinger, the president's desire for a summit in the post-Cambodian period "reached a point of near obsession," Nixon being so eager that he would have accepted an "ABM only" agreement in order to see the Russian leaders before November. Significantly for the future, however, Brezhnev was cautious enough about Nixon (or perhaps focused enough on Bonn and Beijing) to insist upon prior commitment not only to an ABM treaty but also to a European security conference and to a protocol on "accidental war" that the Americans believed (wrongly, it turned out) amounted to a de facto military alliance against China.

So no summit occurred, and during September Nixon showed his
irritation with the Russians, his hierarchical perspective, and his penchant for campaigning as an anti-Communist by the way he allowed such issues as hostilities between Syria and Jordan and crew stops by Soviet submarines in Cienfuegos (Cuba) to be magnified into ostensible crises involving the superpowers. During these same months, between May and August 1970, the West German and Soviet governments were proceeding with the negotiations that culminated in an unprecedented understanding between them on the renunciation of force. As Willy Brandt journeyed to Moscow in August to sign this treaty and to engage in extended talks with Brezhnev, it must have seemed to the American president as if the German chancellor had stolen his summit conference.

Back in February 1970 Richard Nixon had been the first president ever to submit an annual foreign policy report to the Congress. This volume, entitled *A New Strategy for Peace*, had been almost four months in preparation and was intended to highlight the ideas and achievements of the new American “realism.” Contending that, because of declining Communist unity and the resurgence of America’s allies, “the postwar period in international relations has ended,” the president made clear his intent to develop “a new approach to foreign policy to match a new era.” This approach was based, he asserted, on three principles: partnership with allies, strength at home, and a willingness to negotiate. Since the ideological “isms” had lost their vitality, according to Nixon, it was now possible to “regard our Communist adversaries first and foremost as nations pursuing their own interests.” We are willing “to negotiate our points of difference in a fair and business-like manner,” he insisted. “No nation need be our permanent enemy.”

But the reality of Nixon’s first year in office was more complex than the plan. In the first place, despite the ostensible strategy of negotiation (and manipulation) without regard to ideology, Nixon and Kissinger were still too deeply wedded to conservative notions of East-West polarity, political hierarchy, and American primacy to forgo the attempt to hold Soviet Communism responsible for most of the world’s instability and turmoil. Thus they attempted to ameliorate such trauma, and in particular the conflict in Vietnam, by bringing a none-too-subtle pressure on Moscow in addition to dealing directly with the areas involved. The trouble, of course, especially after the spring of 1969, was that none of the Communist powers—not Russia or North Vietnam or even China—was eager enough to negotiate with the capitalist superpower that it would run the risk within the Communist world of appearing to help Washington win a war it was well on the way to losing. In fact, the Soviet Union, sorely troubled by its competition with China, was moving during these months
to take advantage of the chance to practice what Kissinger called “selective détente,” improving its relations with West Germany rather than with the United States.99

Nevertheless, certain things were occurring within the major powers and beneath the diplomatic surface that would make 1971 and 1972 more eventful than the preceding years for bargaining and agreement. In the United States the resistance of a war-weary public and Congress to military appropriations and commitments was worrying the president greatly, while overseas the readiness of the Brandt government to negotiate with the Russians was troubling him as well. These anxieties, combined with frustration at the lack of progress on other fronts, drove Nixon to the point of near despair in the weeks immediately following Republican losses in the congressional elections of November 1970, a period that the president later described as the blackest of his entire first term.100

As fate would have it, however, and as we shall see, it was not only Richard Nixon who was in a serious dilemma. In Russia—and in China, too—trends were growing that would soon compel the leaders of these countries to seek new arrangements of power and relationship.