We have seen that similar dilemmas in the situations of both superpowers in the early 1970s made it possible and necessary for them to break through Cold War inertia to achieve a period of better relations. Though the leaders of each nation were confident that in the long run history was on their side, in the short term both ruling groups were facing shortages of the economic, political, and other resources they needed to maintain morale in their countries and to continue to compete successfully. Moreover, in a marvelous irony, it was for both of them the other superpower that held (or seemed to hold) the key to freeing up or creating these resources, the Soviet Union ostensibly possessing the power to help the United States extract itself from a damaging war, while America was thought to enjoy the skills and capital that would solve the Soviet problem of productivity. Thus an international bargain grew from the fit of need and capability. An added incentive was that even a modicum of cooperation could go a long way in reducing the nuclear risks that both powers confronted.

When we look closer, of course, we discover important differences in the desires and requirements of the Soviet Union and the United States during these years. If America had powerful economic reasons (not the least, an adverse balance of trade) to be interested in Soviet trade, it did not share the pressing need for technology and investment that drove the Soviet Union toward establishing commerce with the West. Similarly, though Washington was concerned about maintaining its alliances with states like France and West Germany (and therefore had to honor their movement toward détente), it was not experiencing the kind of challenge or danger that the Soviet Union faced in dealing with its estranged Chinese partner. On the other hand, while the U.S.S.R. was sorely troubled by ethnic tension, the alienation of the young, and other divisiveness, these
tribulations paled by comparison with the social polarization and political agony the United States was undergoing as a result of the war in Southeast Asia. The crucial missing ingredient among the resources Nixon required for an assertive foreign policy was public support.

In any case, one must recognize the caution and conservatism in both Nixon's and Brezhnev's approaches to détente. Neither statesman ever contemplated the possibility of abandoning his country's role as a dominating power, for example, or of actually bringing the Cold War to an end. Neither had the slightest interest in altering his nation's internal order (e.g., with democratization or with a disciplining of their defense industries) as a means to reducing the pressures that make for international conflict. Nixon and Kissinger may have talked “sufficiency” and placed caps on existing strategic vehicles, but behind the scenes they were MIRVing in order to retain a lead in warheads and moving as fast as they could to persuade Congress to support the creation of new weapons like the Trident, the B-1 bomber, and the MX missile. Brezhnev took his commitments to his own military with equal seriousness. Persuaded as he was that the Soviet Union's acceptance by the United States as an equal was largely a function of its increasing ability to match and project military force at any distance, he continued to appropriate the sums needed to create an army and navy ready for any eventuality. SALT may have saved him money, but it did not alter his course.

There is a paradox here, however, that must be examined lest I seem to be accusing Nixon and Kissinger of being reckless (soft on Russia) and cautious (hard on Russia) at the same time. Its resolution, I think, lies in a recognition of the self-interestedness and opportunism as well as the realism involved. This is not just a question of normal bargaining. These men were reckless on occasion in specific negotiations (as when Kissinger conceded excessively high limits on Soviet SLBMs), because they often were as interested in achieving the appearance of success as achieving success itself. They knew that in order for Nixon to be reelected in 1972 they needed to have a “peace cover,” especially if the war continued or if the only way they could end it was to bomb Vietnam back to the Stone Age. Thus they were eager for a SALT agreement and a summit—but for electoral as much as national reasons. They counted on a second term and new American weapons (as well as the China factor) to keep the United States ahead in the arms race and possibly to reinstitutionalize a favorable balance of power. As a result, they offered the Soviets an advantageous arrangement in the short term (that is, a relatively unconstraining treaty and enriching trade) but much less in the long term (a continuing Cold War, or if Moscow was ready, an opportunity to acquiesce in the status quo for the world at large).
Brezhnev, though his weakness was not so much political as economic, could play the same game. He was willing to offer much (e.g., Berlin, even East German instability) to obtain new technology and investment for his country. What it meant to him was productivity growth, personal political success, and the chance to keep shifting the correlation of forces in favor of the Soviet Union.\footnote{2}

The denouement was both sobering and provocative. The bargains struck in May 1972 ushered in approximately two years of substantial collaboration (the era of high détente), characterized on each side by a certain exuberance as well as wariness. Brezhnev came to Washington in the summer of 1973 for a second summit, a meeting in which he and Nixon signed a formal agreement to consult each other on any situation that might lead to nuclear war. The following year, though sorely burdened by the Watergate scandal, the president returned to Moscow, this time to approve an extension of the interim freeze on offensive weapons and a reduction in the number of ABM deployment sites. Later in 1974, in December, Brezhnev and the new president, Gerald Ford, met in Vladivostok, where they were able to establish a framework for SALT II that put equal (but high) limits on each nation’s launchers and bombers. In the interim, negotiations went forward regarding mutual and balanced force reductions in Europe and the Soviets’ much desired European security conference, the latter discussions leading in the summer of 1975 to the signing of accords at Helsinki. These protocols were an East-West compromise in the best sense of the word, ratifying the political and territorial status quo in Eastern Europe while offering pledges of human and personal rights throughout the thirty-five signatory nations.\footnote{3}

Even with such progress as this, however, it was clear by 1974 that the spirit and momentum of détente were beginning to falter. On the Soviet side the first negative shock occurred in September 1973, when Salvador Allende’s government was overthrown in Chile with the obvious connivance of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. Less than two months later the shoe was on the other foot, when Washington interpreted Moscow’s threatened intervention on behalf of the cease-fire in the Yom Kippur War as a gross violation of détente. Strengthened by public dismay, Senator Henry Jackson (D-Wash.) stepped up his efforts to tie the lifting of Soviet restrictions on Jewish emigration to the passage of the administration’s trade bill (which granted most-favored-nation status to the U.S.S.R.). When negotiations among Jackson, Kissinger, and the Soviet leadership during 1974 produced no lasting compromise, the Senate’s approval of the Jackson-Vanik Amendment to the Trade Act in December prompted Moscow to reject the entire trade package with the United States. In April 1975 Soviet-American collaboration was further undermined by the victory of
the Communist armies in South Vietnam. The end of the year brought added tension with the Soviet-Cuban intervention in Angola, the Senate’s passage of the Clark Amendment to the Defense Appropriations Act (prohibiting American involvement), and White House protests to Moscow. By the early months of 1976 détente was in such ill repute with the public that President Ford asked his own secretary of state to avoid using the term during the upcoming political campaign.  

Richard Nixon, understandably, blames Watergate and the weakening of the American presidency for much of the deterioration of détente during this period, and there is probably some truth in this. Certainly it is hard to imagine that the SALT II negotiations would have progressed so slowly or that the Jackson-Vanik Amendment would have become such an obstacle had the presidency been fully functioning. Yet, given the mood of the United States, not even a Nixon with “normal” powers could have saved South Vietnam from its enemies in 1975 or intervened to any real extent in Angola.

Moreover, neither party to détente had promised to stop “assisting” history or trying to head off what it considered to be unnatural developments in the Third World. SALT I (aside from the ABM Treaty) did not substantially limit the arms race, and Nixon not only knew this but had intentionally arranged that it work that way. The truth is that détente had been oversold to the American people from the very beginning (Kissinger, for example, in 1973 described as “a significant step toward the prevention of nuclear war” an agreement at the Washington summit he would characterize six years later as “a bland set of principles that had been systematically stripped of all implications harmful to our interests”). Small wonder that the public was confused and not a little disillusioned when the Soviets continued to behave as if they were competitors.

The 1970s was a turbulent decade, particularly in the Third World, and the resulting trauma was bound to put détente to a special test. The huge OPEC price increase of 1973–74 was even more painful and destabilizing for the poor countries than for the rich, and it left much of Africa and South Asia on the edge of chaos and desperation. The decolonization process had finally reached those nations that were least prepared to cope with it, impelling Angola and Mozambique, among others, into anarchic independence. The horn of Africa, southern Arabia, indeed the whole Middle East gave the appearance of being up for grabs. A major new factor, of course, was that, whereas in previous years it was the United States that had functioned as the world’s policeman, now the Soviet Union (due to its enhanced air and naval capabilities) also possessed the power to project itself into other countries’ business. To Moscow, this meant only
that it could behave as the other superpower had always behaved. Viewed from other quarters, Soviet actions did not seem so benign.

In the meantime, the Jackson-Vanik and Stevenson amendments to the Trade Act of January 1975 struck Brezhnev at his most vulnerable point and, by forcing him to renounce what he had most wanted and promised, dealt détente a stunning blow. Soviet-American trade, which had increased astonishingly in 1972 and more than doubled again in 1973, now fell by almost half. What is more, though the United States continued to sell agricultural products to Russia (especially after the renegotiated grain agreement of October 1975), by that date Soviet imports of machinery and equipment, financed by generous commercial credits, came almost entirely from Western Europe and Japan. The mutual dependency that Kissinger had hoped to build was being aborted and transformed.

The revolution in the price of oil turned out to play a major part in this, a role that in later years led Georgi Arbatov to conclude that “the main victim of OPEC was the Soviet Union.” What allowed Brezhnev to dispense with American credit, trade, and technology in the period after 1974 was not only assistance from and commerce with countries like France, Japan, and West Germany but also the quadrupled return he received on the steadily increasing quantities of oil the Soviet Union produced and sold. Soviet oil production rose from 353 million metric tons in 1970 to 489 million in 1975 and 604 million in 1980—an output second only to Saudi Arabia’s. By the 1970s the U.S.S.R. was exporting nearly one-quarter of its total oil production, with slightly less than half of its exports being shipped to the West. Profits from these sales paid the costs of Soviet military buildup and overseas involvement in the later 1970s, while the growth rate of the Soviet economy continued to decline.

The availability of resources plus instability abroad plus the wrangling over cruise missiles and Backfire bombers that followed Vladivostok combined to put Brezhnev in a position where it was difficult for him to resist the demands of hard-liners to stand firm on military issues and to support national liberation movements. Nor were Brezhnev’s inclinations to reject such advice strengthened by his health, which never fully recovered from the stroke he suffered the day after the Vladivostok meeting. As early as 1973–74 Brezhnev made peace with the Soviet defense industry (sacrificing a promised emphasis on consumer goods). At the Twenty-fifth Party Congress in February 1976 (in the wake of the terrible drought of 1975) he retreated from his 1971 commitments to light industry.

Jimmy Carter came to the presidency in January 1977 seeking radical reductions in the arms buildup but also demanding internal changes in the U.S.S.R. that made it difficult for the Soviet leadership to do anything but
hold fast to the Vladivostok accords as the basis for SALT negotiations. Meanwhile, the American public was becoming more irritable and less trusting as post-Vietnam isolationism faded, the Republican Right revived, and a series of Third World confrontations developed involving the superpowers or their proxies. Disillusionment grew as the struggle for power in Angola ended in 1977 with 20,000 Cubans occupying that country. It increased markedly as superpower clients realigned themselves in eastern Africa, Ethiopia obtained massive infusions of Cuban troops and Eastern bloc arms, and Soviet military advisers became involved in Yemen’s civil war.

If there remained any doubt in American minds about Moscow's intentions, it vanished with the Iranian Revolution of November 1979 and the subsequent Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (a “defensive” action, according to Moscow). Indeed, the impact of the latter event was such as virtually to preclude the possibility that the United States would ratify the SALT II treaty, signed by Carter and Brezhnev in June 1979 after painful bargaining on both sides (including promises by Brezhnev to the Soviet military that its new SS-20 IRBMs could be deployed in Eastern Europe to counter opposing “forward-based systems”). As the decade ended, American aggravation at these setbacks merged with a more general rage at national helplessness regarding OPEC price hikes, rapid monetary inflation, and Iranian hostage-taking to produce the election of Ronald Reagan and an administration dedicated to anti-Communism and a strengthening of the military.

Yet, strangely, the mid-1980s were to witness a kind of replay in Soviet-American relations of what had happened fifteen years before. On this occasion, it was the pressure of a struggling Soviet economy combined with the effects of the Afghanistan war and new military demands that produced the willingness in Moscow to reconsider long-accepted foreign policies. Reagan's pessimism about the “evil” Communist empire had led him in 1983 to seek the “perfect defense” (the strategic defense initiative) as a cover for his militarism (thus making strategic reductions impossible). But in 1987 Mikhail Gorbachev, a genuine reformer, was able to outflank the president by accepting an intentionally “unacceptable” offer that Reagan had made earlier, that is, by agreeing to remove existing SS-20s from Eastern Europe in return for a U.S. promise not to install cruise missiles and IRBMs in NATO Europe.

Reagan was hoisted with his own petard, and by this time he needed such an agreement as a way of helping to distract the American public from the shabby Iran-contra scandal. Gorbachev accompanied his shift with other radical changes designed to escape the arms race and de-demonize the Soviet Union: withdrawal from Afghanistan, large unilateral cuts in
Soviet forces, and a new emphasis on “defensive” defense and internal democratization. He was feeling his way toward 1989, the annus mirabilis in which Eastern Europe would transform itself and the Warsaw Pact would cease to exist.\textsuperscript{15}

In later years, some observers argued that the Reagan administration deserved credit for ending the Cold War because it forced the Soviet Union to spend itself into instability. The sad truth, however, is that the fifty-year struggle had physically exhausted both leading contestants.\textsuperscript{16} Only Gorbachev was wise enough to realize this and try to do something about it. Unfortunately, the Soviet leader did not have a clear picture of how the transition to a socialist-capitalist economy, limited government, and peace was to proceed, and his lack of clarity ultimately undid him as well as the Soviet Union. Today, one can only hope that the Soviet successor states will revive enough economically to reduce growing ethnic tension and political cynicism within their societies. One can also hope that the West will actively assist in rebuilding the region’s economy, not so much by sharing its high technology (as Brezhnev may have wished) as by offering experience, a market, and, especially, investment.

In view of what has happened since 1972 in Soviet-American relations, some may see it as a good thing that the Nixon-Brezhnev détente did not survive, since (they may argue) at least in Moscow’s case its success could hardly have done other than prop up a dying regime. To me, however, such an argument slides over too many historic connections and possibilities. Who is to say that, in the face of a perseveringly cooperative American foreign policy, the Soviet system could not have transformed itself into something less expansive and threatening? Would it not be better today to have that kind of integrated country than sixteen disunited successor states?

To my mind, there was both accomplishment and tragedy in détente. The new relation made an important, even indispensable, contribution to breaking down the logic and momentum of the Cold War. Though the leaders on both sides were not ready to give up national ambitions and illusions (not to speak of personal ambitions), they were, to an inspiring if limited extent, caught up in the process of building integrative institutions.

Yet, there was also an element of tragedy. Whether détente, given less conservative leadership, could have been enlarged upon and made into a safer, if slower, route to altering the participating societies is impossible to know. But the fact is that the attempt to enlarge it beyond a mere international balance was never really made by either side. The achievements and the mood were half-formed and were allowed to wither half-formed, with
the result that another generation was unnecessarily subjected to the risks and costs of continuing Cold War. In this sense, then, the détente of the 1970s represents one of the truly great missed opportunities for re-forming international relations in recent history. Circumstances conspired for peace, but the leaders on both sides, as creative as they were, were simply not creative enough.