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Detente and US domestic politics

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In primitive societies myths about the past fulfil important functions. They help to create a sense of identity and a sense of purpose. In contemporary societies, myths about foreign policy play a similar role—and are often vital in attempts to rationalize and to legitimize policies. This is not to suggest that they are cynically manipulated by those in power. The officials who promulgate the myths—based on a selective and often distorted interpretation of the past—are often their most fervent believers. This seems to be the case in the current Reagan administration. The President and other leading figures in the United States base their policies towards the Soviet Union on a series of myths about the superpower relationship of the 1970s. Detente is described by administration spokesmen as an experiment which failed, or as a synonym for appeasement. The 1970s are seen as a 'decade of neglect'. By opting out of the arms race and placing, or misplacing, its faith in the arms control process, it is argued, the United States enabled the Soviet Union not only to achieve strategic parity but, in certain respects at least, to attain a degree of superiority. Emboldened by this favourable shift in the correlation of forces, Moscow embarked upon a geopolitical offensive in the Third World which indicated that the aversion to high risk taking which had hitherto been a central feature of its policy was no longer dominant. The culmination of this policy was the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, which put the Soviet Union in a position from which it could threaten Western interests in the Persian Gulf. In other words, the Kremlin used detente to lull the United States and its allies into a false sense of security which it then ruthlessly exploited. In response to this, the United States had no choice but to abandon detente and return to hard-line policies. Anything else would have been the height of irresponsibility.

By advancing such an interpretation of the events of the 1970s, the Reagan administration is able to justify its current policies in terms of the lessons learned from the mistakes of the 1970s. Policies of weakness have been replaced by policies of strength, cooperation superceded by overt competition. Furthermore, this new approach is regarded as highly successful. The Soviet Union has been forced to refrain from adventurism in the Third World, while its decision to walk out of the arms control negotiations in Geneva in November 1983 has been followed by a return to the bargaining table—a return which is seen as an early vindication of President Reagan's strategic defence initiative (SDI).

For all this, it is arguable that the Reagan mythology does not stand up under close scrutiny. Although there are elements of truth in the current orthodoxy which claims that the Soviet Union destroyed detente, the issues are far less clear cut than is often suggested. The thesis to be presented in this article is that the United States' policy on detente was in many respects an aberration from the main thrust of American foreign

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policy from the late 1940s onwards, and, as such, was vulnerable to those forces in American political life which were inherently hostile towards Moscow. Consequently, this article will look first at the background to the United States' detente policy, suggesting that the opportunity for a sustained improvement in Soviet–American relations was the result of temporary circumstances. Secondly, it will examine the problems faced by Nixon and Kissinger in their attempts to establish a new domestic consensus around the idea of superpower detente. The third focus of attention is the Carter presidency under which the remnants of detente were finally eliminated and a consensus forged on the reversion to traditional policies of containment.

The argument that the demise of detente was primarily a result of American domestic politics is not intended to exonerate the Soviet Union. Consequently, the fourth and final part of the article will look at the Soviet contribution to the breakdown of detente. It will suggest that the Soviet role was more ambiguous than the prevailing orthodoxy in the United States assumes. Moscow behaved in ways which, given its commitment to maintaining detente, were both short-sighted and inept. As a result it gave credibility to the views of those who regarded detente as a dangerous hoax which a ruthless and devious adversary was attempting to perpetrate upon the United States. Such a view of detente would in any case have found considerable support in the United States, even if the evidence of Soviet actions had not been taken into account. Whether or not the detente policy was one based on dangerous illusions, it seems clear that it was a departure from the tradition of American relations with the Soviet Union.

Detente as aberration

To suggest that the Nixon–Kissinger detente policy was, in part at least, an aberration from the main stream of American foreign policy is to imply that the Reagan administration is far closer to the mainstream than is sometimes suggested. Indeed, a careful examination of the statements of President Reagan and other top officials reveals a world view which, in its simplicity and its appeal, can be traced back to the Truman administration of 1946–52. The notion of a Manichaean struggle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness has been a recurring theme in American foreign policy since the Truman doctrine of 1947. But that theme is currently being promulgated with a vigour and rigidity reminiscent of the approach adopted by Eisenhower's Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, from 1953 to 1959. In other ways the administration's stance has overtones of the Kennedy era of 1961–3, when the United States also embarked on a major build-up of American nuclear and conventional forces. Throughout these periods, as well as President Johnson's administration, 1963–9, the dominant theme was one of containing Soviet (and Chinese) expansionist tendencies through the development of countervailing power and a willingness to intervene militarily to uphold commitments challenged by communist aggression. The arguments of the period from 1947 to 1968 were arguments about means rather than ends. It was simply assumed that the objective of containment was both legitimate and viable.

Vietnam, of course, changed all that. It had a profound impact on the United States' approach to foreign policy. In the first place, it cast doubt on the efficacy of the chosen means: not only had American military power failed to bring political success in Vietnam, but the war proved costly in terms of American lives and resources. Secondly, certain aspects of the war called into question the moral self-righteousness that had served to sustain American policy throughout the period of the cold war.

Thirdly, and following on from this, the Vietnam experience destroyed the bipartisan consensus on foreign policy. Although there had been some intense battles between the two American parties in the early 1950s over foreign policy, particularly over the decision to send US troops to Europe, the dismissal of General Macarthur, and the Bricker amendment, the Eisenhower administration succeeded in weaning conservative Republicans away from isolationism and thereby made possible a more complete bipartisan consensus than had been achieved under Truman. There were continuing differences of emphasis between liberal and conservative internationalists during the latter half of the 1950s and the first half of the 1960s, but for the most part they were in broad agreement on the main strands of US foreign policy towards the Soviet bloc. This broad consensus disintegrated as a result of Vietnam. The war destroyed the crusading spirit of anti-communism which had hitherto been a key element in the liberal approach to foreign policy as manifested in John Kennedy's inaugural address. Indeed, it was the liberal Democrats, supported to some extent by the liberal Republicans, who became the most outspoken critics of American involvement in Vietnam. As well as calling for disengagement from Indochina, they demanded the de-militarization of US foreign policy and the diversion of resources away from the military sector to meet domestic needs.

Closely bound up with the revival of partisan and ideological debate in the United States in the aftermath of the Vietnam war was a split in the traditional foreign policy establishment, which had hitherto accepted the goals of United States foreign policy as beyond dispute. The defence of freedom, capitalism and liberal democracy had been seen by members of this elite as a duty which the United States must accept on grounds both of idealism and of self-interest. However, the fulfilling of this duty had resulted in a policy of undifferentiated globalism which had proved disastrous in the case of Vietnam. Furthermore, other developments in world politics in the 1960s undermined the image held by members of the establishment. The Sino–Soviet split and the Soviet Union's problems in maintaining cohesion in Eastern Europe seemed to imply that the adversary in the struggle was rather less formidable than had hitherto been believed. Predictably, there was a breakdown of consensus. Some of the members of the establishment continued to adhere to the old orthodoxies, others were more responsive to changed conditions. The result was that the sense of purpose and of confidence which had been so evident throughout the postwar period gave way to demoralization and disarray. Shock waves reverberated through all branches of government, and brought about a fluidity of approach and an opportunity for change which were rare.

In other words, by 1968, when Richard Nixon was elected President, there was a 'window of opportunity' for the reorientation of American foreign policy. There were precedents for an attempt to improve relations with the Soviet Union: Eisenhower had encouraged limited moves towards accommodation, while in the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis Kennedy had been willing to embrace arms control as an accompaniment to his more traditional cold war policies. Indeed, one analyst has argued that a dual approach towards the Soviet Union, embodying elements of competition and confrontation on the one hand and cooperation and mutual restraint on the other had become a political necessity by the 1960s.[1] This argument is persuasive. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to suggest that this process involved a

1. B. J. Firestone, *The quest for nuclear stability: John F. Kennedy and the Soviet Union* (London: Greenwood Press, 1982).

duality of equals. The adversary elements of the relationship were clearly dominant, and although presidents might seek limited accommodation with the Soviet Union they were expected to do this from a position of strength. Upholding American interests against Soviet expansionism was the first priority, and the one on which presidents would be judged. After all, a failure to achieve an arms control accord could always be attributed to Soviet intransigence; failure to compete effectively against Moscow, however, had no alibi. As a result the freedom of action of presidents to move towards Soviet–American detente had been severely circumscribed.

Richard Nixon was better placed in this connection than most of his predecessors. As a renowned hard-liner he had far more room for manoeuvre in dealing with Moscow than a more liberal president would have done. Furthermore, because of Vietnam, the conservatives in Congress and in the executive branch were temporarily on the defensive while the liberals, acutely aware of the costs of continued superpower competition, could hardly fail to welcome moves to improve Soviet–American relations.

For all this, the Nixon–Kissinger detente policy was a shift more of means than of ends in American foreign policy. If it was less revolutionary than is generally believed in terms of readjusting US objectives, it was *more* revolutionary than is often assumed in adjusting the means. Nixon did not abandon deeply entrenched concerns about the Soviet threat to American security, nor did he give up the traditional goal of containment. Whereas in the past containment had depended primarily on American power and Soviet caution, in the future it was to depend on Soviet restraint. As Stanley Hoffmann has noted, the Nixon–Kissinger approach was an attempt to get the Soviet Union to engage in 'self-containment'.[2] Earlier containment policies had been an expression of American power; the Nixon–Kissinger containment was an admission of American weakness.

There was an attempt to disguise the novelty of this situation in the rhetoric of strength. The President's foreign policy reports to Congress stressed that negotiation with adversaries was only one aspect of a three-pronged policy. The United States would maintain its military strength, while simultaneously encouraging its allies to share more of the burdens and responsibilities of Western security. Underneath the rhetoric, however, there was a major shift in the means of American foreign policy. In order to provide a substantial 'peace dividend', there were reductions in military spending beyond those made possible by the run-down of American involvement in Vietnam. The result was that self-reliance was replaced by reliance on others. Particularly important, the Soviet Union was being relied upon to observe restraint. Soviet restraint would enable the United States to engage in what one analyst has described as 'the orderly devolution of American power to incipient regional powers'.[3] Soviet restraint in the short term would make it possible for the United States to establish its allies in positions where they might offer some insurance in the future in the event that the Soviet Union and its clients did not go along with American preferences or continue to observe restraint in the longer term.

Of these ideas, reliance on the allies was the least innovative. The notion of a division of labour in which America's allies were to provide the local defence components of containment (backed up by American strategic power) had been a favourite theme of the Eisenhower administration, concerned as it was to minimize the economic costs of

2. S. Hoffmann, *Dead ends* (Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger, 1983), p. 90.
3. R. S. Litwak, *Detente and the Nixon doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 54.

military containment. The Nixon–Kissinger approach involved a similar attempt to maintain containment on the cheap.

The second method—the encouraging of Soviet self-restraint—was a much newer, more imaginative component of a strategy which was attempting to minimize the consequences of American weakness and loss of will. Unrestrained superpower competition had become militarily too expensive and politically too divisive for the United States. Now, instead of opting out of the competition, the Nixon administration attempted to co-opt the Soviet Union as a willing partner in regulating it. The more the military dimension was regulated, the easier it would be for the United States to compete successfully diplomatically and politically.

There were several elements in this regulatory process. The first was strategic arms control, which, it was hoped, would provide long-term stability at the core of the relationship. The second was an attempt to establish a code of conduct for operations in the Third World whereby the superpowers agreed to refrain from attempts to obtain unilateral advantage at each other's expense.[4] It was recognized, however, that such a set of rules was not self-enforcing. Consequently, a third element in the American strategy was designed to ensure that the rules were observed by Moscow. This component was known as linkage: Soviet restraint could be encouraged by a mixture of positive inducements such as trade, and negative sanctions.

If this approach was successful, the Soviet Union would refrain from taking advantage of American military retrenchment and the United States would succeed in establishing containment by proxy. But for the strategy to be successful there were several conditions to be met. Setting aside the serious question marks regarding the ability or willingness of lesser states to fall in with the Nixon–Kissinger grand design and thereby replace American commitment and power, there were two other problems. First, how receptive would the Soviet Union be to the idea? Secondly, how far would the administration be able to establish and maintain a consensus in favour of detente? These two dimensions of the problem interacted in complex but damaging ways: at crucial junctures Soviet actions influenced the domestic debate in the United States and strengthened the position of the critics of detente.

This situation compounded the difficulties which already faced the Nixon administration in its attempt to develop a domestic base sufficiently robust to sustain the detente policy—especially after the initial architects had disappeared from the scene. The reasons for this must now be examined.

Obstacles to consensus on detente

Political fragmentation

Although American domestic reaction against the Vietnam war had made the new detente policy both necessary and feasible, the war had also unleashed forces which could only jeopardize that policy. One of the most important developments was the resurgence of congressional rights and responsibilities. So long as there had been a national consensus, and so long as they were convinced that the executive knew best, members of Congress were content to acquiesce in the cold war policies of successive presidents. The Vietnam experience destroyed these preconditions and ended the

4. The best study of this is A. L. George, *Managing US–Soviet rivalry* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1983).

period of congressional abdication from foreign policy. The new assertiveness was directed in large part against traditional policies, with Congress cutting the defence budget well beyond the level the administration regarded as desirable. Once the genie was out of the bottle, moreover, it was impossible to control. The congressional challenge was not restricted to old policies. The impact of this factor on the administration's approach was devastating. A successful linkage strategy, for example, demanded strong centralized control and maximum discretion for the executive. During the cold war these conditions had been met; the very existence of detente, however, made them appear expendable. In the absence of the sense of permanent danger, the centrifugal forces in the American political system were allowed free rein. Consequently the management of detente became problematic. Indeed, political fragmentation exacerbated the difficulties of legitimizing the detente policy. It also encouraged the Nixon administration to adopt tactics of political salesmanship which brought short-term gains at the expense of more enduring benefits.

The overselling of detente

Although detente was facilitated by conservative hardliners in Congress and elsewhere fighting a rearguard action in support of the Vietnam war, it was still necessary for Kissinger and Nixon to attempt to rebuild the foreign policy consensus in support of the new policy. In the immediate and short term they had a reasonable degree of success in this task, partly through over-sell and partly through spectacle. Although there was always a certain caution in the rhetoric about detente, there was also, perhaps inevitably, a degree of hyperbole. Suggestions that the 'era of confrontation' was giving way to the 'era of negotiation' and references to a 'new structure of peace' created unrealistic expectations. In fact, Kissinger and Nixon saw detente simply as a way of managing an adversary relationship in unfavourable circumstances. Some of their rhetoric, however, implied that this relationship could be fundamentally improved. When this did not occur and there were abrasive clashes of interest between Moscow and Washington, the backlash was all the more intense. Nor was it eased by a second short-term tactic which emphasized style at the expense of substance.

Secret diplomacy and grand announcements simply 'substituted slick spectacle for the noisy free-for-all into which the old consensus had degenerated'.[5] Indeed, the very centralization of decision-making power which this style of diplomacy required was itself an obstacle to the mobilization of support. The larger the number of individuals and groups who feel they have a stake in the consensus, the easier consensus-building becomes. And if policy is to outlast its original architects, it must have institutional rather than simply personal bases. Nixon and Kissinger neglected to build such a base. As a result, even some of the supporters of the substance of the policy became uneasy about the secretive manner in which it was formulated and implemented. Yet the problem was not merely one of hyperbole or of style. Dan Caldwell has argued convincingly that a more fundamental problem was Kissinger's and Nixon's failure 'to relate the policy of detente to important American beliefs and values'.[6] Yet the sheer

5. S. Hoffmann, *Primacy or world order* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978), p. 89.
6. D. Caldwell, *American–Soviet relations from 1947 to the Nixon–Kissinger grand design* (London: Greenwood, 1982), p. 98.

difficulty of this task is almost certainly underestimated. American traditions and attitudes militated against the easy acceptance of the detente policy.

American attitudes

For a nation which had been steeped in anti-communism for the past twenty-five years, detente was a radical change. As Henry Kissinger observed, 'the proposition that to some extent we had to collaborate with our adversary while resisting him found a constituency only with great difficulty; the emotional bias was with the simpler verities of an earlier age'.[7] The United States had been involved in a clear-cut global conflict with the Soviet Union throughout most of the period since 1945. Although a respite in this conflict was welcome, the move towards a more ambivalent relationship was not easy for a nation which had an absolutist and moralistic approach to world affairs. Such a transformation became even harder to accept when it was initiated not out of magnanimity but out of weakness. The Soviet Union as supplicant might have been acceptable; the Soviet Union as equal was not. An approach which seemed to depend on Soviet good will did not rest easily with those whose experience and up-bringing had taught them that Moscow was not to be trusted and that it understood only strength. The Nixon rhetoric on detente could dent but could not destroy what is sometimes termed the 'inherent bad faith model' of the Soviet Union.[8]

It is sometimes implied that this bad faith model is somehow manufactured and manipulated for domestic political or economic reasons. This possibility cannot be dismissed. The Soviet threat has been used by policy-makers to mobilize support for undertakings they are anxious to embark on anyway. Furthermore, in the 1970s there obviously were groups and individuals in the United States who had a vested interest in the perpetuation of the cold war. Yet the question is more one of attitudes than interests. Anti-communism is deeply embedded among American values and traditions. It is sometimes argued, with some justification, that the United States has since 1947 elevated anti-communism into an ideology. In so far as this implies that the United States does not have its own 'ideology', however, it is misleading. The antipathy towards communism and to state control over the individual emerges naturally out of a society founded on the Protestant ethic, with its emphasis on competitive individualism and self-help. The concomitant of this, of course, is a deep mistrust of strong centralized government. Seen from this perspective, the Soviet political system by its very nature appears a threat to most of the values the United States holds dear. The threat is intensified because it is embodied in a state which often appears both powerful and ruthless.

While detente was welcomed as a relief from the burdens of containment, suspicion and even fear of the Soviet Union therefore remained powerful. They were reinforced by resentment at the loss of American pre-eminence in the world and concern about what that loss might imply for American security. It is in this connection that it is important to distinguish between the short-term and the long-term consequences of the withdrawal from Vietnam. In the short term, the dominant reaction was one of relief. After the fall of Saigon, however, the idea of 'peace with honor' appeared to be a hollow one. The Soviet Union and its proxies had won another victory.

Even before this, there were critics who were highly sceptical about detente and

7. H. Kissinger, *Years of upheavel* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), p. 981.

8. For a useful discussion of the implications of this kind of model see R. Jervis, *Perception and misperception in international politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 310–15.

about the change in Soviet behaviour implied in Nixon's references to a 'new structure of peace' and 'the era of negotiations'. These critics or 'non-trusters' were to pose formidable and at times overwhelming problems for the administration.

The critics of detente

The critics of the Nixon administration's approach to Moscow had two advantages which had been denied those who had dissented from the cold war policies of previous administrations. First, their arguments touched a responsive chord in American society. Secondly, the challenge to executive dominance, initiated primarily by the liberals, had led to the revival of Congress as a power centre from which it was possible to campaign against administration policy. In other words, the critics of detente not only had the incentives to mobilize opposition against the Nixon–Kissinger policy; they also had the opportunity. They were helped by events. Watergate, in particular, undermined the power and prestige of the presidency and facilitated the challenge to detente.

But if the administration was increasingly vulnerable, the inherent strength of the opposition it faced should not be underestimated. The key figure in this opposition was Henry Jackson, Democratic senator from the state of Washington, who combined liberalism on domestic matters with a fundamental conservatism on security issues. Jackson was inherently suspicious of the Soviet Union and was afraid that unless the United States continued to confront it directly, Washington would be out-manoeuvred. In his view, detente was a fraud perpetrated on the United States by a Machiavellian adversary and a misguided White House. Jackson was reinforced in these views and helped immensely in his campaign against detente by what Kissinger described as 'one of the ablest—and most ruthless—staffs' he ever encountered in Washington.[9] The most important figure on this staff was Richard Perle, who later became one of the key figures in the Reagan administration. Perle's anti-communism was, if anything, even more intense than that of Jackson. Together they proved a formidable combination. Not only did they initiate the campaign against detente in the early 1970s, but they were also there to ensure its final victory with the campaign against SALT 2 in 1979. By then, of course, the anti-detente coalition was much stronger. Yet this itself was in part a tribute to their effectiveness. When Richard Perle claims that detente was an experiment which failed, what he omits to say is that as a result of the campaign he and Senator Jackson waged during the 1970s, the experiment was never really given a proper chance.[10]

As leaders of the opposition to detente, Jackson and Perle started out from a strong position. Jackson was very close to George Meany, the president of the AFL-CIO, whose anti-communism was of the most visceral kind. Furthermore, the Jackson–Perle team had an impressive ability to choose issues and arguments which would have considerable appeal. The first challenge was the Jackson amendment to the SALT 1 treaty, specifying that in any future arms control agreement there must be equal ceilings on Soviet and American systems. Because the amendment simply put in position a marker for the future, it was not too disruptive. But it demonstrated the ability of Jackson and Perle to appeal to deeply cherished American beliefs and objectives. The amendment was presented as a way of ensuring that any future arms

9. Kissinger, *Years of upheaval*, p. 985.

10. For Perle's statement on detente, see his address to the Conference on Communism and Liberal Democracy held in London on 19 March 1985, p. 10.

control agreement did not concede superiority to the Soviet Union. For a nation which had long been used to pre-eminence and did not find it easy, psychologically, to accept the loss of superiority, the proposal had enormous appeal.

The second element in Jackson's campaign was to put the worst possible complexion on Soviet actions. The most successful example of this policy was at the time of the Soviet threat to intervene in the Middle East war of 1973. Although the threat of intervention was primarily a way of ensuring that the United States became sensitive to the position of the Egyptian third army and became more assertive in restraining the Israelis, it was presented by Jackson in a far less favourable light. The messages from Brezhnev over the hotline were described by the senator as 'brutal' and 'threatening', and the image of an implacable enemy ready to exploit any hint of American weakness was once again firmly established. Although Kissinger argued that the conduct of both superpowers during the war was, in most respects, consistent with detente, Jackson's interpretation found a ready audience, especially among the Jewish community, angry about Soviet support for the Arabs. The fact that Kissinger had felt compelled to order a major alert of nuclear and conventional forces also worked against the administration's more sanguine assessment. Furthermore, the episode appeared particularly disquieting when considered against the earlier over-selling of detente. The alert did not sit well with the extravagant rhetoric about the era of negotiation.

The importance of the Middle East war for the Jackson–Perle campaign against detente can hardly be overestimated. Editorials in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* echoed Jackson's criticism of Soviet actions. Detente now seemed illusory—just as the senator had been claiming. Furthermore, Soviet support for the Arab states alienated many members of the Jewish intellectual community. As a result, the Nixon administration lost the backing of a group which, given its traditional liberalism, might otherwise have provided strong support for the attempt to build a better relationship with Moscow. Jackson also won the support of the Jewish community for his attempt to make expanded trade between the superpowers conditional on the Soviet Union easing restrictions on Jewish emigration.

The Nixon administration saw the linkage strategy based on positive inducement and negative sanctions as a way of inducing restraint on Soviet foreign policy. But Jackson transformed linkage in three ways. First, whereas the administration was concerned with inducing restraint in Soviet *foreign* policy, Jackson wanted to use linkage to change Soviet *domestic* policies. As Stern has pointed out, his attempt at linkage 'touched the fundamental basis of the regime'.[11] Secondly, whereas the administration had used quiet diplomacy, Jackson's campaign was 'big, political and noisy'.[12] Thirdly, Jackson undermined the balance between positive and negative forms of linkage. The administration saw expanded trade as an inducement. 'Jackson used trade overtly and as a weapon, a stick, not as a carrot. He withheld something the Soviet leaders thought America had already pledged'.[13] Ultimately the campaign proved counterproductive, and Jewish emigration, which had increased as a result of Kissinger's quiet promptings, declined. As Stern argues, though, coercing the Soviet Union into a more liberal emigration policy was only one of several objectives Jackson was pursuing. Although obviously sincere about Jewish emigration, he also used the issue to hinder detente and to promote his own political interests. As a potential choice for the Democratic nomination for presidential candidate in 1976, Jackson needed the

11. P. Stern, *Water's edge* (London: Greenwood, 1979), p. 201.
12. Stern, *Water's edge*, p. 201.
13. Stern, *Water's edge*, p. 201.

support of organized labour and the Jewish community. His campaign against liberalized trade with the Soviet Union appealed to the former, and especially to George Meany, while the pressure for freer emigration appealed to the latter. Nor was it a case of the Jewish lobby manipulating the senator for its own ends. On the contrary, it was Jackson who mobilized and manipulated organized jewry rather than the other way around.[14]

The final important element in Jackson's campaign was that it appealed to liberals as well as conservatives. Although the liberals were sympathetic towards detente, they could hardly be oblivious to human rights violations. They had disavowed crusading anti-communism because it had resulted in Vietnam, but many of them were prepared to embrace it once again in a form which was less painful and less costly than military intervention but which enabled them to retrieve the moral high ground. In other words, Jackson was assisted in his attempts to sabotage detente by liberal ambivalence towards it. Indeed, there is a marked contrast between the strength of the opponents of detente and the weakness or reticence of those who were its natural supporters.

The supporters of detente

In many respects the liberals in Congress and elsewhere welcomed detente. They had long been advocates of arms control and of attempts to reduce tension. They also saw detente as providing an opportunity to shift American priorities from military spending to domestic concerns. Nevertheless, they faced several dilemmas. In the first place, they approved the policy but disapproved of its major architect, Richard Nixon. Consequently, their support for the president's policy was rarely unqualified. A second and not entirely unrelated dilemma concerned the dichotomy between style and substance. Although the liberals welcomed much of the substance of the American approach they disliked the secretive way in which policy was made, and the amorality of a policy which emphasized *Realpolitik* and relegated allies and adversaries to the position of undifferentiated pieces on a diplomatic chessboard. The third problem was connected to liberal support for the Jackson amendment. Although they wanted a better relationship between the superpowers, the liberals shared the antipathy of many conservatives to the Soviet regime. For detente to be made palatable, therefore, it had to be accompanied by a political offensive designed to ease the worst features of the Soviet system. The problem was that this offensive did enormous harm to detente. Although Kissinger may have exaggerated the liberal opposition to detente, his frustration is understandable.[15] One of the major constituencies favouring detente was at best half-hearted in its support.

This would have mattered less had there been other sources of support. Yet the second major pro-detente group—American business—was extremely cautious in its approach. Although American businessmen saw all sorts of advantages in accommodation with the Soviet Union they were reluctant to become too exposed on the issue.[16] The grain merchants were vulnerable after the 'great grain robbery' of 1972 when unregulated Soviet purchases of wheat pushed food prices up in the American market. And as detente began to turn sour their efforts were directed towards the

14. This is a consistent theme in Stern, *Water's edge*.

15. See Kissinger, *Years of upheaval*, p. 983.

16. The analysis here rests heavily on W. F. Kolarik Jr., 'A model for the study of international trade politics: the United States business community and Soviet–American relations, 1975–1976' (Ph.D. dissertation, Kent State University, 1981).

prevention of grain embargoes—punitive forms of linkage were double-edged in their effects. Other areas of business and commerce also felt vulnerable to charges that they were supplying the adversary with 'high technology' and to allegations that the Soviet Union, because of its centralized system, invariably got the better deal out of negotiations. By the mid-1970s business was clearly on the defensive and there was reluctance to press the case for expanded trade too strongly. Once detente was under pressure executives were concerned that, in the event of its collapse, firms trading extensively with the Soviet Union would be left vulnerable to attack by the labour unions, the press and the congressional critics of detente. In these circumstances a low profile seemed the most prudent policy. Indeed, one comprehensive analysis of the attitudes of the American business community in the mid-1970s has suggested that there was 'a total absence of any well defined sense of political direction. Despite their worry and frustrations over recent trends in the political atmosphere and US government policy, executives on the whole had no clear concept of a political role for individual companies or the United States business community in national debates over US–Soviet economic and political issues.'[17]

With the most obvious supporters of detente either ambivalent or passive, it is hardly surprising that the Nixon and subsequently the Ford administration was unable to forge a consensus in support of detente. Furthermore, by the end of the Ford administration the constellation of forces had become even less favourable. The right wing of the Republican Party had embarked on its own offensive against detente and, in his attempt to obtain the Republican nomination for the 1976 presidential election, Gerald Ford felt compelled to ban the word detente from his political vocabulary. Indeed, by 1976 the attempt to build a consensus in favour of detente and containment through linkage had failed. As a result of Soviet support for the MPLA in Angola (made relatively safe for Moscow because of congressional action which cut off covert American support for the other factions, UNITA and the FNLA), Kissinger himself became somewhat disillusioned. Linkage could not work when Congress, having earlier taken away the carrot by enacting the Jackson–Vanik amendment, now removed the stick.

The controversy over Angola was also indicative of the general disarray in American policy by 1975–6. Detente had been undermined by domestic critics, but it was still not clear what was to be put in its place. The Vietnam syndrome remained powerful and prevented an immediate return to traditional notions of containment. But if the conservative attack on detente had hitherto been a negative one, it was soon to change its character. During the rest of the 1970s the conservatives were to embark on a sustained offensive which by 1979—before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan—was to force the Carter administration to embrace traditional cold war policies.

Rebuilding the cold war consensus

President Carter arrived in office having attacked Kissinger's detente policy from a liberal rather than a conservative perspective. He was anxious to restore morality to American foreign policy and embarked on a major human rights campaign. The Carter administration also tried to rebuild consensus around ideas of world order. Whereas the Nixon and Ford administrations had attempted to pursue a containment policy through novel means, Carter attempted to transcend containment. He felt that many

17. Kolarik, 'A model for the study of international trade politics', p. 409.

issues, especially in the Third World, had little to do with the superpowers. In the president's view, it was essential for the United States not only to come to terms with this but also to recognize the complex interdependencies which had developed in the international system. From this perspective a preoccupation with the Soviet Union could only be stultifying.

Along with this new vision, Carter also set a high value on traditional American alliances. Although he is often accused of lacking any sense of priorities, Carter was clear on the need to revitalize NATO and was instrumental in getting the allies to accept the need for a three per cent per annum real increase in defence budgets. Carter carried on where Ford had left off in increasing the defence budget. The increases, however, were less than those projected by the out-going administration. Furthermore, because of a campaign pledge to cut defence spending, the president emphasized the cuts in projected expenditure more than the increases in real spending over the previous year. As a result, he appeared to be undermining American strength. Nixon had been able to get away with cutting the defence budget, partly because of his reputation as a hardliner, partly because he skilfully accompanied the cutting with much rhetoric about strength, and partly because of the general desire for a 'peace dividend' as the US disengaged from Vietnam. Carter lacked these advantages, and he became a target for the conservatives. He made himself even more vulnerable by his decision to cancel the B-1 bomber and his decision not to deploy the neutron bomb. After these decisions, there was almost nothing he could do to retrieve his reputation with the right.

Carter's standing was further eroded by his failure to develop a consistent policy towards the Soviet Union. Almost from the outset there were signs of a difference in attitude between the Secretary of State, Cyrus Vance, who wanted to explore all areas for accommodation with the Soviet Union, and the National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, who consistently pressed Carter to adopt a much tougher approach. The president's inability or unwillingness to choose between the two advocates was perhaps the single most debilitating feature of his administration, and one which contributed greatly to the general impression left by the administration of vacillation, weakness, and confusion.

As a result of what appeared to a combination of 'dovishness' and ineptitude the administration became increasingly alienated from opinion in Congress and in the country. There was an air of inevitability about this. The dominant trends in the middle and late 1970s were towards conservatism. The Carter administration's managerial incompetence and conceptual confusion almost certainly encouraged such a trend. Its roots, however, were much deeper and can be seen as a reaction against the Great Society programme of Lyndon Johnson and the permissive liberalism apparently advocated by George McGovern in 1972. Indeed, without Watergate—which appeared to symbolize the corruption in Washington—it is doubtful that a populist outsider like Carter would have become president. As it was, there was something anomalous if not anachronistic about his presidency.

Carter's vulnerability was underlined by the rise of the 'New Right' in the United States in the second half of the 1970s.[18] Closely related to religious fundamentalism, the New Right was concerned with domestic issues such as abortion and 'bussing' but it also pushed for a much tougher stance in foreign policy. It conducted a major campaign against the Panama Canal Treaties and though not successful in defeating

18. For a useful discussion of the impact of the 'New Right' see F. Halliday, *The making of the second cold war* (London: Verso, 1983), pp. 112–18.

them demonstrated the potential of its power. The massive mail campaign directed by Richard Viguerie was particularly impressive in showing that the conservative Political Action Committees were a force to be reckoned with by members of Congress. Consequently, a number of senators who had voted for a treaty which according to the right 'gave away the American canal at Panama' were reluctant to increase their vulnerability by voting for the SALT 2 treaty (on strategic arms limitation) which, by 1979, had become the touchstone of the controversy over America's relationship with the Soviet Union.

Whether or not SALT 2 would have been ratified if it had not been for the seizure of the American hostages in Iran in November 1979 and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December, it is impossible to say. But it is unlikely that it would have passed without serious modification and the attachment of 'killer amendments'. There are at least three reasons for this. In the first place, SALT was an issue on which the old right, represented most significantly by Perle and Jackson, combined with the New Right in a coalition which had considerable power both inside and outside the Senate. Indeed, Jackson and Perle played a major role in producing the report on SALT 2 by the Senate Committee on Armed Services. The report was very effective as a political weapon because it was relatively short and identified clearly what a majority of the committee members regarded as the main shortcomings of the treaty. In the second place, SALT became the symbol of an approach to national security that was widely believed to have failed: the opposition to SALT 2 was a vote of no confidence in the Carter administration, and in the remnants of the detente policy towards the Soviet Union. Thirdly, that symbolism had been cultivated from 1976 onwards by the Committee on the Present Danger, a body which one analyst has described as a 'group of dissident national security managers who had never accepted detente and who were prepared to use their expertise and experience to put the United States back on the track of the Cold War.'[19]

In the attempt to forge a new consensus, this group had a number of advantages over the administration. Most important of all, perhaps, the Committee appealed to the same basic values which had prevented the establishment of consensus on detente. Instinctive distrust of the Soviet Union was channelled into concerns over the Soviet strategic programme. This had already become an issue in the Ford administration and had led the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board to appoint a team of outsiders to provide what was presented as an independent evaluation of the Soviet military build-up. The Team B of outside experts (most of whom were known for their hard-line views on the Soviet Union) reached more pessimistic conclusions about Soviet intentions and capabilities than the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) home team. This ostensible exercise in competitive analysis was, with considerable justification, attacked by Senator Gary Hart as 'little more than a camouflage for a political effort to force the National Intelligence Estimate to take a more bleak view of the Soviet strategic threat'.[20] The activities of the Committee on the Present Danger continued that process, helped in its task by the prestige of leading members such as Paul Nitze, whose credentials on national security and the Soviet threat could be traced back to the Truman administration.

In the final analysis, though, the success of the Committee was as much a matter of

19. A. Wolfe, foreword in J. W. Sanders, *Peddlers of crisis* (Boston: South End Press, 1983).

20. See 'Separate views of Senator Gary Hart' in *The national intelligence estimates A–B Team episode concerning Soviet strategic capability and objectives—report of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 16 Feb. 1978), p. 7.

psychology as it was of politics. The 1970s were a traumatic period for the United States. The fall of Saigon in 1975 underlined the fact that, for the first time in history, it had lost a war. The internal convulsions of Watergate, the weakening of the presidency in relation to Congress, and the incumbency of a weak president all contributed to an American crisis of confidence, as did the Iranian seizure of the American diplomats. Coming as they did on top of the Soviet attainment of strategic parity and the emergence of Japan and Western Europe as serious economic competitors to the United States, these developments provoked a sense of resentment and frustration which, largely through the activities of the Committee on the Present Danger and its allies on the right, was channelled against the Soviet Union. What emerged from the ferment was a mood of intense nationalism. Not surprisingly, therefore, American policy reverted to the traditional notion of containment through strength. The two main symbols of this return were greatly increased defence spending and the creation of the Rapid Deployment Force. The victory of the right was also symbolized by the departure of Cyrus Vance from the Carter administration and the dominance throughout 1980 of Brzezinski's hard-line approach. It was underlined most emphatically of all by Ronald Reagan's election victory, which brought to power many of those who had been instrumental in destroying domestic support for detente and who had then worked diligently to create a new cold war consensus. In his last two years Carter had reinstated containment, albeit somewhat reluctantly until after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Reagan embraced it with a degree of fervour and enthusiasm which had been rare even before Vietnam. The Soviet Union was now faced with one of the most implacable and ideological American governments of the postwar period. But to what extent had it helped to bring this upon itself?

The Soviet Union and the demise of detente

According to the Reaganite mythology on the decline of detente, in returning to a policy of containment in the 1980s the United States was simply responding to the sustained drive for strategic superiority by Moscow. This explanation is far from convincing. Disclosures by the CIA over the last few years have revealed that the momentum of Soviet military programmes was far slower than had been portrayed by the Committee on the Present Danger and other critics of detente. It is rather ironic that at the very time the Committee was highlighting the threat to American security posed by the Soviet commitment to strategic superiority, the Soviet Union was actually cutting back on the rate of increase in its defence budget. Soviet defence spending had risen by three per cent a year from 1966 to 1976, but for the remainder of the 1970s this rate declined to two per cent per annum. Furthermore, the pace of Soviet weapons procurement slowed significantly, so much so that the CIA has described the strategic programme as a leisurely one.[21] If the Soviet Union was attempting to attain strategic superiority, it was hardly going about it the right way.

This is not to deny that members of the Soviet military establishment were keen to establish superiority over the United States. Indeed, the issue seems to have been a source of considerable controversy in the Soviet Union in the mid-1970s.[22] If such a faction fight did take place, however, those who were prepared to accept rough parity with the United States almost certainly prevailed over those who believed the Soviet

21. See R. Kaufman, 'Causes of the slowdown in Soviet defense', *Soviet Economy*, Jan./Mar. 1985, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 9–31.

22. I am grateful to Mike Bowker of Chatham House for this point.

Union could attain a strategic superiority that would be problematic at best. The Committee on the Present Danger, of course, did not consider the possibility that there were moderates on the Soviet side who were content to settle for parity. This was hardly surprising. Not only did the Committee members adhere to the 'inherent bad faith' model of the Soviet Union, but they also engaged in worst-case assessments. But to blame them for this is to miss the point: the Committee was not engaged in analysis. It was embarked upon an attempt to re-establish the cold war consensus and to mobilize congressional and public support for increased US defence spending and strategic force modernization.

It was helped in its task by Soviet activities in the Third World. The use of Cuban proxies by the Soviet Union in Angola and the Horn of Africa gave support to arguments which suggested that, as a result of changes in the strategic balance, the Soviet Union was not only embarked upon a long-term geopolitical offensive but was also prepared to take high risks to achieve its objectives. Another charge was that Moscow was violating the rules of detente which had been established during the early 1970s.

Although such allegations are not without foundation, they are considerably overstated. In the first place, the connection between developments at the strategic level and Soviet action in the Third World is tenuous at best. The main change in the 'correlation of forces' in the 1970s was political rather than strategic. As a result of domestic developments the United States was seriously inhibited in the perennial competition for power and influence in the Third World. It was Kissinger's recognition of this which had prompted him to emphasize linkage and the creation of a web of relationships which would be of benefit to the Soviet Union and would, therefore, give it a vested interest in restraint. To claim that this strategy failed is to overlook the important point that it was never properly tried out. The hoped-for increases in trade were limited by congressional action, and the only opportunities the Soviet Union saw were those that had stemmed from the paralysis of American will.

Yet Soviet actions in Africa were not undertaken out of a blatant disregard for the rules of detente. From the outset there had been differing conceptions of detente. Whereas Kissinger emphasized its function as a restraining mechanism, the Soviet Union saw it in terms of the attainment of equal status. The SALT process, in particular, was valued not only because it regularized the strategic competition with Washington, but also because it was a symbol of the Soviet Union's new-found status as America's equal. Soviet behaviour in the Third World can be understood, in part at least, as another expression of this superpower status. The United States had been able to engage in power projection to influence events in the Third World for much of the postwar period. In the 1970s the Soviet Union found itself in a position where, almost for the first time, it was able to do the same. And because of the internal constraints on US action there was little chance that Soviet action in the Third World would provoke a military confrontation between the two superpowers. The opportunities were enormous.

In grasping these opportunities the Soviet Union was not doing anything deceitful or underhand. On the contrary, it had consistently stressed that there was no incompatibility between detente and continued support for wars of national liberation. This was implicit in the Agreement on Basic Principles of Relations (BPA), signed at the Moscow summit in 1972. The first clause in the BPA acknowledged that relations would be conducted according to the precepts of peaceful coexistence. Kissinger and other officials such as Helmut Sonnenfeldt were very much aware of the

competitive nature of the peaceful coexistence doctrine and tried to establish limits on it by introducing into the BPA language which stated that the superpowers would avoid attempts to obtain unilateral advantage at the expense of each other. The problem was not only that the contradiction between the clauses on 'peaceful coexistence' and 'no unilateral advantage' was never hammered out, but that the 'no unilateral advantage' idea was itself ambiguous. Was it obtaining unilateral advantage if Moscow intervened in areas where the United States was not unequivocally involved and did not have major interests? In Moscow's view, advances in such areas were not incompatible with the maintenance of detente or with the Basic Principles. Difficulties arose, however, because the United States defined its own interests largely in response to Soviet activities. Consequently, even though the Soviet Union was extending its influence in places which were relatively peripheral, this very fact endowed these regions with a significance for Washington far beyond their intrinsic importance. The Soviet leadership almost certainly failed to appreciate this. Consequently, Moscow took actions which not only provided fuel for the conservative assault on the American commitment to detente, but also made it more difficult for the proponents of detente to respond effectively to their critics. As a result of Soviet action in Angola, in particular, even Kissinger became disenchanted with Moscow.

But if there were some occasions which should have called for more circumspection in the Soviet approach, there were others on which Moscow probably had little alternative but to take the actions that it did. During the Middle East war of 1973, for example, the Soviet Union could hardly have failed to support Egypt, especially when Israeli violations of the cease-fire put in jeopardy the survival of the Egyptian third army. Soviet threats to intervene in these circumstances can best be understood as a signal to the United States to exert greater restraint on its client, Israel. Moscow made no attempt at a *fait accompli* and made preparations for unilateral intervention only after the United States had rejected a Soviet proposal for a bilateral intervention to supervise and enforce the cease-fire. These considerations were generally ignored in the furore caused by the episode. Yet it is difficult to see what else the Soviet Union could have done. It was already being criticized by client nations for giving superpower detente a higher priority than relations with its allies and clients; to have done nothing, therefore, would have robbed it of all credibility in the eyes of those states.

If Moscow had little choice in 1973, there were other occasions when a fuller understanding of the American debate might have led to greater prudence, both in domestic and foreign policy. Kissinger, for example, has argued that when the Nixon administration was attempting to contain the threat posed by the Jackson–Vanik amendment, 'the Soviets complicated our problem with a series of characteristically heavy-handed blunders'.[23] A crack-down on dissidents which included the harassment of both Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Andrei Sakharov helped Jackson to mobilize liberal support for his amendment. Once again, it is possible that the Soviet government would have taken such action irrespective of the American response. This was an internal matter, after all, and one in which domestic considerations must have loomed much larger than any possible repercussions for foreign policy. Nevertheless, it seems likely that had there been greater awareness of how such actions would impinge on the American debate, Moscow might have adopted a more subtle approach. In retrospect the Soviet leadership may perhaps accept that mistakes were

23. Kissinger, *Years of upheaval*, p. 988.

made. Similarly, the current Soviet assessment of the possible gains and losses attendant on the African policy may now differ significantly from that which prevailed in the mid-1970s. Indeed, the Soviet Union may well have come to regret its actions in Africa. The benefits have been limited, if not ephemeral, while the cost, in terms of the subsequent rebuilding of American power and the reassertion of American interests, has been considerable.

It is possible, of course, that distrust of the Soviet Union was so deeply ingrained in American society that even a more restrained policy by Moscow would not have sufficed to prevent the resurgence of American cold war policies. But it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Soviet Union played into the hands of those groups and individuals in the United States who were unalterably opposed to detente and intent upon restoring America to its former pre-eminence. The implication is that the current mythology on detente of the Reagan administration is gravely in error. Moscow was serious rather than cynical about detente and was anxious to maintain it. Seen in this light, it was not far-sighted Soviet designs and Machiavellian strategies that led to the revival of the cold war; rather was it Soviet myopia, and in particular the failure of the Kremlin to understand the impact of its actions on the American domestic debate. The Soviet leadership was not sufficiently sensitive to the domestic fragility of America's commitment to detente. The result was that Moscow engaged in actions which were not only inept but contrary to its long-term interests. As it was, these actions simply helped to feed the myths which now dominate United States foreign policy.